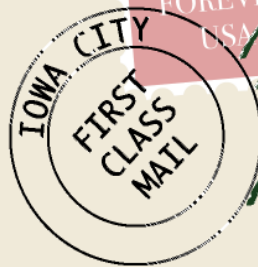


*Iowa City Hospice
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**Love Letters:
What Matters Most**



Love Letters: What Matters Most

In his book “The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book about Living,” Ira Byock, MD, stresses the importance of saying “I love you,” “Please forgive me,” “I forgive you” and “thank you” every day. As a palliative and hospice care physician, he has witnessed the power of healing and restored relationships when people choose to incorporate these sayings into their conversations.

How do we as a community incorporate the themes of love, forgiveness, and gratitude into our daily lives? In collaboration with the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature and Little Village, Honoring Your Wishes launched the project “Love Letters: What Matters Most.” Community members were invited to share stories about love, forgiveness, and gratitude using the following prompts:

- 1) Write a letter to an individual who has taught you something about these themes.
- 2) Write a reflection/story about a person who taught you to love, forgive, or express gratitude.
- 3) Write about how incorporating these themes allowed you to be able to say goodbye to a significant person in your life.

From February through July of 2018, writing circles were held throughout the community, and writings were submitted for prizes. The top three selected pieces were published in the Little Village magazine in September.

Dr. Byock was the closing speaker for the Iowa City Book Festival on October 7, 2018. Two hundred community members listened as Dr. Byock shared stories and insights from “The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book about Living.”

Honoring Your Wishes is grateful to the following community partners who helped make Dr. Byock’s visit possible, including University of Iowa Health Care, University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, Lensing Funeral and Cremation Service, Hills Bank and Trust, Mercy Iowa City, Oaknoll, US Bank, Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature, University of Iowa College of Pharmacy, University of Iowa College of Nursing, Coralville Center for the Performing Arts, Prairie Lights, the Senior Center, Iowa Writers’ House, and Little Village.

The messages in the “Love Letters” we received are both touching and universal. We were honored to read them, and hope you will enjoy the compilation of writings submitted for this special project.

Jane Dohrmann, LISW, ACHP-SW
Program Director, Honoring Your Wishes
Iowa City Hospice

Karla Kamal, RN, BSN
Executive Director
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Finding the Path to My Father

SUSAN DOLPHIN

FIRST PLACE

I accompanied my dad on his appointment with his cardiologist the day he was diagnosed with cancer. Dad was looking for a reason for his lethargy and pain, looking for a diagnosis that made sense. The year before, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. The doctor told us that within a year we would know if it would progress slowly or rapidly. But now that his kidneys had become implicated, the cardiologist could not help.

"Dad, I think he is saying that it is cancer," I said.

My dad turned and looked at me with a big smile on his face. "I have had such a wonderful life!"

Dad was called to serve his country in 1944. He joined a flight team on a B-17 after basic training, after the rest of the team had been assembled. There was one position left vacant: belly turret gunner. On his 19th mission, bombing the oil fields that supplied Hitler's army, he was shot down. He barely got his parachute fastened—he couldn't fit in the turret with the chute in place. Not enough room.

When he ejected from the plane and finally got the chute on and opened, it jerked him so hard he lost his boots. His plane was shot down near the Adriatic Sea. My father survived and was taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans. On May 21, 1945, after nine months of captivity, he was freed by Russian soldiers close to the Baltic Sea, and had to hike for miles to catch a train to safety. He referred to it as his "all-expense-paid tour of Europe."

I didn't hear this story until I was in my mid-40s, when a high school student interviewed my father about his career in WWII. My dad had started to attend annual bomb group meetings, and it seemed to make him more whole, like a puzzle piece of his life had fallen into place. I joined him at one reunion, where a keynote speaker talked about the hike across Europe Dad spoke about so glibly. Many soldiers died during that march; Dad had won an actual lottery for a ticket on the train, and still did not have a fear of death. In fact, he never reported feeling abject fear.

My dad was the disciplinarian. He assigned chores, and made charts to track when they were done. Dad inspected our work and made us do it over if it wasn't right. He worked hard, as

I recall from my childhood. He would take care of the house, the car, the yard. He did the jobs right. He used a blowtorch to remove old paint, peeling it down to the bare wood on the outside of the house before painting it. He did it to the old house; when we moved, he did it to the new house. He tore a whole car engine apart and put it back together.

He was tight about money. He taught me to discern the difference between “cheap” and “inexpensive.” I came to realize that he didn’t offer me the moon. If I wanted the moon, I had to figure out myself how to go about getting it. That was the way he loved me. He didn’t get into solving problems for me, he left me room to figure that out for myself. I think he would have given me most anything I wanted, but I had to want that thing enough to ask for it.

My older brother Steve wishes Dad had offered fewer pearls of wisdom and more life guidance. I could relate to my brother’s longing. I still have a picture that I found in a magazine of a grandpa and his two young grandchildren sitting on a dock in winter, all bundled up in wool hats and winter coats and mittens, dangling their feet over the edge. I had cut it out, matted and framed it with the thought of it being my imagined ideal of who I wish Dad could be towards us and his grandchildren.

I was in my mid-30s when I sat down to have a heart-to-heart with him. I needed to tell him the things I had wanted from him during my childhood, and the things that hurt and angered me. He listened attentively and with compassion. I didn’t get rebuffed. He didn’t stonewall. It seemed like he really heard me and understood. So I thought he would change, be more open, communicative, loving. But that didn’t happen. He kept on being himself.

I didn’t realize it that day, or that month, or even that year, but that talk changed me profoundly. I took the risk to tell my dad how I felt about how he parented me. In taking that risk, I seemed to have opened a path of acceptance within me to let Dad be himself, and become curious about this man as a person, not just my dad. It was a path that led me to seeing him as a fallible human being, rather than demanding that he be the image of my ideal father. I learned to love him and accept him as he was.

At Dad’s funeral, I shared what I knew about him. Steve came up to me afterwards in a state of wonder, saying, “I didn’t know that about Dad.” He hadn’t moved beyond hurt feeling yet, but has since released his resentments. “He is who he is,” Steve says.

That day, in that chapel, we picked the music, we told the stories, we laughed and cried and we felt the joy of having this man for our father. He was a hero, even though it took us all so long to find out.

Shortly before my dad passed, a job came through with Rock Hill outpatient mental health clinic in South Carolina, a VA contract clinic. Knowing that my father was a World War II hero helped my clients take a risk to open up and share their experiences in war with me. My father was a precious key to a door that is difficult for many veterans to unlock and open. For me, it was a treasured inheritance.

Sweet Dreams

AMY WALKER

SECOND PLACE

*Will you stay with me, he asks
Am so sorry, I keep falling asleep
Just close your eyes, his hand in mine grows cold
I won't leave you.*

*Please write this all down,
I want you to have my stories, he says
Just tell me and I will capture them, I promise
I will write every word.*

*Will you stay with me, the little child asks
I am afraid to close my eyes
Think of happy things, he kisses me goodnight
To chase away all the bad.*

*Will you stay with me, I plead
I am scared of thunder in the dark
I'm right here, he calmly says
This too shall pass.*

*I cannot stay with you, he whispers
I don't want you to be afraid
Will you still see the things that matter, I ask
He smiles, I will find you from the other side.*

Vignette

MARY POTTER KENYON

THIRD PLACE

It was an unseasonably warm October day. Mom and I had conversed comfortably in the car on the way to and from her doctor's appointment: about my recent blog posts that mentioned her, how much she liked the new LIVE sign I'd purchased to hang on my wall, her concern over her cat being attacked by some feral felines. I'd assumed if she'd wanted to discuss more serious topics, she'd have brought them up.

Back at her house, I helped her out of the car. She swayed a little as she stood, so I grabbed her arm to steady her. She clung to me as we made our way to the back door. When she expressed the desire to stay outside, I settled her in a chair before getting her coffee and cigarettes from the kitchen. There was no sense in arguing — it may have been those very vices that had caused Mom's cancer. It was too late for that, and pointless. On the contrary, my siblings and I seemed in agreement that she should have anything she wanted.

As I set the cup and cigarette package on the small white table in front of my mother, I asked if she'd be alright if I headed home to make supper for my husband and children. She nodded. I remember leaning down to kiss her cheek then, and while I'm certain I would have told her I loved her, I can't recall actually saying the words.

Once inside the car, I started the engine before glancing back at Mom. She was looking straight at me, a gentle smile on her face. She raised her hand slightly, giving a little wave. It was that one small gesture that undid me. My throat filled with tears, and I could barely breathe. I quickly looked away, not wanting her to see me cry. My mother is dying, I thought as I headed down the driveway. My mother is dying. I sobbed all the way home.

There is so much we didn't talk about that day. In fact, we hadn't mentioned the inevitability of her death in any of our conversations after her diagnosis. I'd been with her when the doctor informed her she had lung cancer, had heard her whisper, "I wondered what it would be." We never talked about death, or fear, or even faith, which surprised me, considering how important her religion was to her. There were no last-minute lessons, no pleas or after-death directives.

More than six years after Mom died, in the winter of 2017, unhappy with my job and searching for possible answers from the enigma that was my mother, I re-read letters she'd written me, a

memory book she'd filled out and the odd notebooks and partial journals I'd inherited. By then, I'd unexpectedly lost a husband and 8-year-old grandson as well. Still raw with cumulative grief, I needed a mother to turn to. And there she was, in the words she'd repeatedly written.

"Always be grateful for what you have."

Raising 10 children in poverty couldn't have been easy, but my mother had never complained. On the contrary, she'd managed to convey appreciation for even the smallest of things: sunshine for drying copious loads of laundry, plentiful fragrant flowers in the yard for decorating tables, a roaster pan filled with cookie dough or crispy chicken netted from Dad's weekend butchering.

"Follow your natural talents and utilize them for good."

There was never a question that each of us was born with an inherent talent; it was a matter of discovering that gift and following it. Our mother believed we children could believe it ourselves, even when bullying damaged our self-esteem. Her own gifts were apparent in the way she made our home a haven. Multi-talented, she could concoct delicious meals from garden produce, eggs, the chickens we raised and the government surplus supplies that preceded the food stamp program. She created colorful wall hangings, rag rugs and beautiful quilts from scraps of cloth, and drew pastel pictures of her children. She was the kind of woman who, at the age of 42, picked up a kitchen knife and a piece of wood and decided she'd carve a statue. She then honed her artistic talent to begin a home business that sold well over 500 pieces of her art.

"Love others."

This message varied in how it was conveyed, to the individual promise in our childhood that she loved us "as big as the sky," to her example as a woman who always put others first.

Reading Mom's words last winter, it occurred to me that she'd already said it all. There was nothing more she could have said that she hadn't already modeled in a life filled with creativity, integrity and faith. Her last lesson was in facing death with dignity, grace and the firm belief she would soon be joining both our father and Our Father.

That October day was the last time I was alone with Mom before she suffered what we assumed was a stroke from the brain radiation she'd endured. My next visit was to take my turn caring for a mother who struggled to walk or communicate. While her gentle smile remained, there was no more shared conversations. In the ensuing days, my siblings and I cared for her, watching her drift into unconsciousness and die on Nov. 3, my birthday.

In my mind's eye, I can still see my mother sitting outside at that little table, a cigarette in her hand, a cup of coffee in front of her. Her face is lit by a beatific smile, her eyes filled with love. She lifts her hand to wave.

"I love you, Mom," I reply this time, waving back.

About Our Prize Winners

SUSAN DOLPHIN

Susan P. Dolphin is a retired clinical social worker who specialized in working with people affected by trauma. She attended the Creative Writing Seminar at the University of Iowa School of Social Work and is an alumna of their program. She resides in Belmont, North Carolina.

Susan is pictured below with Dr. Ira Byock at the Iowa City Book Festival, Oct. 7, 2018.



AMY WALKER

Amy Walker (née West) has worked extensively across the international human rights, humanitarian and development sectors. Amy attended the Iowa Summer Writing Festival and was grateful for the opportunity to explore lyrical structure and prose more deeply in her current writing. She holds a Masters of Law & Diplomacy from The Fletcher School, Tufts University and lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.



MARY POTTER KENYON

Mary Potter Kenyon, program coordinator at the Shalom Spirituality Center in Dubuque, is a graduate of UNI and a certified grief counselor. She is widely published and the author of seven books, including the award-winning book “Refined By Fire: A Journey of Grief and Grace.”



Bamma: Pantoum for my grandmother

RAGA AYYAGARI

I.

On the delivery table, small brown fingers intersect.

Neela's dark eyes reflect the beautiful uncertainty of a new phase.

She looks at her son, who updates the birth certificate, with tongue-tied respect.

Her hope and curiosity speak wordlessly through her gaze.

Raga's dark eyes reflect the beautiful uncertainty of a new phase

As she emerges from the womb, a mosaic of faces surrounds her, grinning.

Her hope and curiosity speak wordlessly through her gaze.

Her sharp intake of breath pierces the silence, marking a new beginning.

II.

As Neela emerges from the classroom, a mosaic of faces surrounds her, grinning,

The school bell quells the students' lively gossip and conversation.

Her sharp intake of breath pierces the silence, marking a new beginning.

As her words bring biology to life, her students listen with concentration.

The school bell quells the students' lively gossip and conversation.

Raga fills the lined page in tiny letters with her deep blue pen.

As her teacher's words bring biology to life, she listens with concentration.

The ink exudes her devotion through the notes she writes again and again.

Neela fills the lined page in tiny letters with her deep blue pen,

Marveling at how words, like cells, encode meaning from intentions.

The ink exudes her devotion through the prayer she writes again and again.

Twenty-six basic structures fold into infinite dimensions.

III.

Marveling at how words, like cells, encode meaning from intentions
Raga stares at the Scrabble board, a landscape of hopeful vexations.
Twenty-six basic structures fold into infinite dimensions.
She molds the letters on her block in creative configurations.

Neela stares at the Scrabble board, a landscape of hopeful vexations.
She shakes her head, her lips curving into a thoughtful smile.
She molds the letters on her block in creative configurations.
And after much deliberation, she places down a tile.

Raga Neela shakes her head, her lips curving into a thoughtful smile,
She gazes at her namesake, who updates the scorecard, with tongue-tied respect.
And after much deliberation, she places down a tile.
On the kitchen table, the small wooden units of their worlds intersect.

What Is Cancer?

CLARITY BACKBONE

Sometimes my son's cancer brought out the worst of us and sometimes it brought out the best of us. It's brought up so many tears and fears for both of us. The tears come and go; they all will be shed in their own moments.

My own emotions and feelings have never felt so raw. My heart has felt broken several times through this all.

I watch you, the human being, disappearing... Other times I see the little boy of our past; sometimes I see the man and father you became while you were here.

God help us. God help me. I still do not know who we are. It feels like a part of me is dying with you, my son. What could dying be? Is it but a letting go of someone that we are not? I know we live on, without a body, but where do we go, and where are we now?

The mother part of me has shed many tears. The aching in my heart and soul feels like it runs on and on forever, into some vast ocean that is filled with all the mothers' tears for their earth children who left before them. Maybe that's what oceans hold within them. Maybe they are the mourning pot of all the the earth's children who have come and gone.

I am looking into tears' reflection – I see no one, no one at all. The quiet has come... Your Kingdom's Love be done.

And now I sit in the silence of my own recovery and the recovery of the memory of God's Sons who I thought was my son.

I sit here beside you praying that my crying does not disturb your rest. You are my son, my only child here on earth.

I try to hold onto you. And I try to let you go. I truly do not know how to do either so I let my tears flow. I can then be somewhere new inside. The quiet seems to come after the tears are allowed to flow. Then another round comes again and again and so on and so forth. I pray for the return of my own sanity! Where did you go my son? I do not see you anymore...quiet...sobbing.

What is cancer? Is it meant to open our hidden wounds, so they can be acknowledged, bared, and healed?

And now I come out fighting another time! I'm not letting death take me back down into that empty hole inside of me again! I say no! Be gone!

Cancer, would we choose this as a human being? No! But our Spirit, our Soul, the truth of who

we are knows we are greater than this. It knows only love's presence is real.

What is cancer? To me, it means I no longer have a son here on earth. I guess I never really did. He is still a Son of Yours, God, forever. And for this I do say Amen. Thank you God. Amen.

Yet, I am still weeping for my son, God. Amen.

You Have Been Here 47 Years

CLARITY BACKBONE

You have been here for 47 years, my earth son. What will it be like when it's your time to leave before I do? I cry as I write these words. I do not know what my world will look like with you no longer in it. I do know that just thinking about it triggers many tears in me. I wonder at times, "Will this deep sadness inside me ever leave?"

I know you love me and that I love you. I know that our loving one another is what reality really is.

The little spats, the unkind words we both have spoken at times to one another are not real; they are a manifestation of our own unattended pain.

That is why we needed a savior and that is why one came into our world over 2,000 years ago. He is always with us. All we need do is to call upon Him. Christ Jesus will take us into our own personal pain, which is our collective pain as well. He transforms rage into compassion. And what is left is the Spirit of Love; Who gave us all the gift of Its very own presence.

At any moment one of us may choose to leave our body. Tomorrow we many not be here, so let's give loving one another our best shot while we are here on earth.

My earth son, you are forever a holy creation of love's presence. We all are. And for this I am very thankful.

I have loved you always, and you have always loved me. There have been too many times while in this world we have not been able to love one another.

I know when you left your body, and thus this planet, that you partook in the celestial celebration that is so much grander than any celebration here on earth. I did not see the portal that opened above you in those last few moments. I knew you saw it. I only felt it. Your body lifted. You looked above at the portal of timelessness. You looked at me, but it did not seem like it was you who was looking, and then you were gone... Your body fell and that was the last breath you took.

What is left of us in death? The Holy Self, God's Holy Son. We are all this and it is sad that most of us do not even know this intellectually.

You had many friends who loved you while you were here. We who knew you as Eric will have our own moments of grieving and missing you. There will be no more birthdays to celebrate with you; no more Christmases to share. No more turkeys to burn... Sometimes, Eric, my heart misses and aches for you. I cry these tears as I do my best to let you go as my son, because you are now with our real heavenly parent. Amen.

Dearly Beloved

CLARITY BACKBONE

Dearly departed we are gathered here this day,
to recognize that you have not died.

We may weep, yet these tears are our own cleansing.

We are here to celebrate your transformation past
seconds, minutes, days, nights, months, years.

Your Spirit's flight has set you free.

We know you live among us still,
but we miss you; the human being that you was.

For now, we close the portal door of time.

In Love, we will remember you and the 47 years you were with us.

If your soul needs to return
we welcome your birth once again.

We say farewell to a friend.

And I say farewell to you Eric, my son,
as time spins us away from you...

You are Love
you are loved. Amen.

Life is Like a Raindrop

MICHAEL CHAN

I opened the front door of my brother-in-law's house at around midnight. A gust of wintry air came rushing at me. I did not feel anything. Sadness had formed a shield over me. I stood respectfully by the side of the door waiting for the funeral home managers to wheel the gurney onto the driveway. Moonlight flooded the driveway. On top of the gurney lay my brother-in-law's dead body. He was ninety-two years old. It was a full moon in late winter. In my mind, the song, "The Chariot is Coming to Carry Me Home" began to fill the night air. It seemed to flow with my brain waves. They are the distant echoes of my life. Sometimes my life seems to be the echoes of the song.

There was not a stir around us. All the surrounding lights, trees and buildings stood silently close by. The funeral managers had intuitively put a warm woolen blanket over my brother-in-law's body. Iowa winter is not for ordinary people. My brother-in-law had survived this challenging weather for almost a century. Now he had to face it for the very last time before his final migration to the everlasting kingdom of love and joy.

His life began as raindrops, migrating through cracks and rocks, rushing through streams, rivers, lakes and into the ocean. He was born not long after the Opium War in China, at a time when China had changed for the first time in its history from a monarchy to a republic. That was also the period of time that Chinese laborers were still under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, prohibiting them from immigrating to the United States. It was a time when most Chinese were either restaurant workers or laundry owners in many of the big cities in America. It was a time when "Coming to America" was not only a slogan, but also a passion of desire—the desire to strike it rich in the land of "opportunities and gold".

Little did he know that a harsh beginning was awaiting for him when he was a few miles from San Francisco. The ship on which he was traveling had to be quarantined, and he along with other Chinese newcomers were put into the immigration station on Angel Island. At the station, their political and health statuses were investigated. Tom was the name given to him by an immigration officer who had trouble reading Chinese names. He spent six long months there as a teenager. Unprepared for this kind of imprisonment, to say he was traumatized was an understatement.

Tom's life was like raindrops falling through rocks and cracks trying to find a bearing. Six months on the island was like a million years. He was thrilled and excited when the word came that he could leave the island for the mainland. The person who sold him the fictitious birth certificate was waiting for him on shore, wanting to collect the money. After spending six months on the island, Tom had nothing left except for a few pieces of ragged clothing. The valuables and money that he had brought had mysteriously disappeared while he was on the island. He had no money to pay, so he was forced to work long hours peeling potatoes, cleaning vegetables and doing custodial chores in the basement of a Chinese restaurant. Although life seemed to be hopeless, Tom told himself that this was only temporary.

An older American couple from a Christian church helped him get through high school. After high school graduation, he asked his uncles and relatives to lend him some money to go to college. His request drew cold shoulders from his relatives. They were restaurant and laundry owners who had established themselves without much education. Tom insisted on going to college. Finally, they offered him work in the restaurant for boarding and food in Ohio. To have something was better than to have nothing. He decided to migrate inland to the Midwest. He took classes during the day and worked in the restaurant at night. His bed was a makeshift, long table in the damp and dirty basement. His playmates at night were cockroaches and mice, which also provided him with a nightly serenade. His life had gone from rocks and cracks to the little streams. A large river was not far distant.

He graduated with high honors in fine arts. After college, he started a photo studio and went in partnership with one of his relatives in a restaurant business in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This time, his migration was a little more pleasant. He went back to Hong Kong and married my wife's sister. He was thirty-seven. Two years later, he started his own restaurant and still kept his studio. During this time, three beautiful daughters were precious additions to the family.

The dining room in his house was the favorite place for all the relatives. We spent many evenings exchanging life stories and jokes over the dining table. Now, life for Tom was calm like a lake. Reflections of life's good and not so good experiences nurtured his aging mind.

It was time for him to leave his dream home and embark on a new journey in the vastness of the ocean of space. The gurney kept rolling down the driveway. I was the only one who followed closely behind. It was midnight in winter. There was an untroubled silence. I watched as the gurney was folded and put in in the back of the white van. My hand waved slowly in the still air as the van pulled away from his once beloved home and disappeared into the emptiness of the night. Tom's life had taken its last journey.

A full moon in winter is always the brightest; reflections from the ocean of mind are still vividly clear. The images of the gurney and the silence of the air are forever unforgettable. Thanks, Tom, we are grateful for your example of love, forgiveness and persistence.

The Story of Mary and Me

MARGARET DONNELLY

I have wanted to write this story for the past three years since my friend Mary died. Our friendship was complicated, as you will see. I have ways within myself to love, to forgive, and to be grateful even when I did not think that would be possible.

Mary came into my life in 1977 when we worked together as a nurse and as a social worker. We quickly crossed the professional line, realizing that we had common backgrounds and values. We had both grown up in small, rural Iowa communities. We were both practicing Catholics. We were both strong Democrats. Mary, who was very bright, challenged me to think about things in new ways. She was interesting, stimulating, and giving. She once wrote a letter to me saying that she had never met anyone whom she admired so much professionally, yet whom she liked so much personally. What a compliment she had given to me.

Our friendship flourished over the following years. Suddenly, one day, she stopped returning my phone calls for unexplained reasons. She no longer valued my friendship. I was bewildered, puzzled, hurt. Most of all, I was concerned for her physical well being. She had told me that she had a heart condition which one day might require surgery. I felt helpless.

Over the course of many years, I would catch glimpses of her at the store, in a restaurant, or in a parking lot. As I approached her, she would turn her head away to avoid even eye contact. It was evident that she had rejected me.

As the years passed, I thought of her with such sadness. I had lost a close friend with whom I had shared so much. I thought that our friendship was sacred and lifelong.

Then, in 2009, I saw her in a coffee shop. She asked if we could meet for coffee. I was very nervous as I anticipated the meeting. Would she explain her absence from my life? Would I ask for forgiveness if I had somehow hurt her? She did not explain that day. I did indicate that I did not intend to have ever hurt her. She accepted this and agreed to meet again soon.

We continued to see one another often. We started a book club. We took some art classes. We went on long walks. Then, one day, she told me she had not been feeling well. She was certain that she was having heart problems. She would see the cardiologist.

Three days later, Mary died peacefully in her sleep.

I felt, as I am sure that she felt, that we had demonstrated our love, our forgiveness, and our gratitude for one another over these last years.

For this, I will be forever thankful.

A Letter of Grace

KATE DUDLEY

To my inner child,

I see you. I peer into the place where you live—my heart. It's the organ I now call your home. I gaze upon you like the sun greets the day—viewing the places where darkness still resides so that light may shine. Good morning, little one—the one who holds the essence of my soul. Do you know that I love you? Do you recognize the sound and vibrations of my voice? Yes, you do. I trust that you do. Did you know that you are the one who taught me to love? Not only to love, but to receive love. How could I not receive your love? How could I not reciprocate the adoration to the one within? Oh, to know what it feels like to be secure in love—to not have fear that one of us will leave the other or that we wouldn't find our way back.

I see you—the resemblance of my innocence, with soft golden locks that curl and dance upon your shoulders. You remind me of the leaves waltzing with the wind and gravity— stumbling with grace one leaf in front of the other. I see your green eyes lift and stare back at me. The true window of my soul. The preciousness of who I once was before darkness crept in. The beauty that drowned in the river of black. Can you forgive me for keeping you in solitude? Can you forgive me for not protecting you? Yes, you can. I believe that you can. You have taught me much about forgiveness—the weight that can be lifted when walls are broken down.

I see you shuffling through the curvatures of my veins—continuing to attempt to rid me of where shame has lived. You have the freedom to roam where my tension lies. You embrace each muscle, each nerve, and each bone with love and adoration.

“Be free,” you speak, encouragement flowing from your lips.

You kiss each joint, each blood vessel, and each particle within. You nourish the places where pain has resided, where shame has brewed, and where fear has remained. You work inch by inch to bring wholeness to the brokenness. How I celebrate your strength.

I see you. I look closer and detect a character of honor—a resurrection where I once saw death and despair. I see you alive and well—together with me and not alone. You look for guidance while you work your healing power over me. You are no longer isolated. You are no longer afraid.

I see you, little one. How strong and how brave. How can I ever thank you? How can the words ever be formed to show the appreciation of the service you have given me? You have listened to me and you have heard my cries. You have instructed me to wipe away my own tears. You have provided warmth by moving towards the light—when I was surrounded by the cold of night. You have led me into positivity when my sight fell short. You have anchored me on solid ground when I, too, wanted to float away. You have been a compass, a shield, and a guide when I was lost.

You, little one—you did those things. To say that I love you doesn't measure in length. To write that I am proud of you doesn't fill the space in every blank page.

I am proud.

I am proud.

I couldn't be prouder.

Keep going, little one. The adventures are just beginning. I have much to learn from you, to see from you, and to experience with you.

With Love,

Your Body

Times When I Think of You

CECILE GODING

*When I look up at the cedar and think it will not outlive me
When I look up at the oak and think it will outlive me*

*When I use the point of the iron to get deep into a dart
When I fold a sheet, dust crumbs from the table, sweep and sweep again*

When I add a column of figures or grasp a small knife

*When someone says "take a crack at it, have a go, try your hand"
When someone starts humming softly while walking down a hall*

*When I put a record on, when I peel my stockings off, take my meds, brush my hair, paint my
eyes, dive into the shallows, flirt*

Or take a gander in the mirror, see stars, eyes, my jaw, yours

*When I pick up the pace or the peeler the car keys the ice tray the toilet brush the phone the shovel
the tweezers the binoculars the Chlorox the Comet the Reynolds Wrap the Glade the Windex the
Ponds the Raid the checkbook the PAID stamp the hammer the corer the pinking shears the bis-
cuit cutter the train the trash the rhythm*

When I look down at my red painted toes when I open your Bible

When I look down at the red words of Jesus

When I turn to the place where "Jesus cried" because the sisters of Lazarus were crying

When I think of my sister crying and how her husband cried simply because she was crying

And when the big pressure cooker is yet still

Holding within it holding within it until its little hat begins to rock oh

so gently with the weight of all it can hold no more

The Story of Mary and Me

MARGARET DONNELLY

I have wanted to write this story for the past three years since my friend Mary died. Our friendship was complicated, as you will see. I have ways within myself to love, to forgive, and to be grateful even when I did not think that would be possible.

Mary came into my life in 1977 when we worked together as a nurse and as a social worker. We quickly crossed the professional line, realizing that we had common backgrounds and values. We had both grown up in small, rural Iowa communities. We were both practicing Catholics. We were both strong Democrats. Mary, who was very bright, challenged me to think about things in new ways. She was interesting, stimulating, and giving. She once wrote a letter to me saying that she had never met anyone whom she admired so much professionally, yet whom she liked so much personally. What a compliment she had given to me.

Our friendship flourished over the following years. Suddenly, one day, she stopped returning my phone calls for unexplained reasons. She no longer valued my friendship. I was bewildered, puzzled, hurt. Most of all, I was concerned for her physical well being. She had told me that she had a heart condition which one day might require surgery. I felt helpless.

Over the course of many years, I would catch glimpses of her at the store, in a restaurant, or in a parking lot. As I approached her, she would turn her head away to avoid even eye contact. It was evident that she had rejected me.

As the years passed, I thought of her with such sadness. I had lost a close friend with whom I had shared so much. I thought that our friendship was sacred and lifelong.

Then, in 2009, I saw her in a coffee shop. She asked if we could meet for coffee. I was very nervous as I anticipated the meeting. Would she explain her absence from my life? Would I ask for forgiveness if I had somehow hurt her? She did not explain that day. I did indicate that I did not intend to have ever hurt her. She accepted this and agreed to meet again soon.

We continued to see one another often. We started a book club. We took some art classes. We went on long walks. Then, one day, she told me she had not been feeling well. She was certain that she was having heart problems. She would see the cardiologist.

Three days later, Mary died peacefully in her sleep.

I felt, as I am sure that she felt, that we had demonstrated our love, our forgiveness, and our gratitude for one another over these last years.

For this, I will be forever thankful.

Grace: A Love Letter

MARY GRACE

Dear Ones,

I am writing this letter to you now, hopefully for a much later time, in order to reassure myself that my thoughts to you are preserved. It is a letter for you for the time I make my passage to another place of Spirit Life. When that time comes, may you read this nestled in a quiet space that you find nurturing. You might look for a small clearing under a Grandmother tree with sunshine peeking through her knotted branches. You might prefer instead to be near water reflecting dancing sparkles. Perhaps you will even feel a breeze whispering to you a comforting, billowy hug. I ask that you intentionally choose a place that reminds you that life has lightness and reverence to it. Wherever you are reading this, may you know that love surrounds you in any circumstance, and that I love you more than you can imagine.

When I think about our lives together, I think about the gifts of love, gratitude and forgiveness. It is a great bestowment to receive even one of these. They do not come neatly wrapped, nor with the clarity of defined edges, whether in the giving or receiving. Rather, they come with earnest intention of heart and may only be uncovered when we give them time, space and wisdom. Know that I have received these gifts from you and hope you have found openings to receive them from me.

Love. You taught me this. When I looked into your eyes for the first time, I saw a twinkle of the sun radiating from your soul. My heart swelled with such love that language was not large enough to articulate my feelings. I observed your curious nature, breathing in all you could from the movement of life around you. My love for you joined that day to a forever place, which I have since carried within me.

It has been an honor to witness your zest for life. You came walking toward me, arms outstretched, teetering at first. You were sometimes unsure of the newness of discovery or any

misstep of direction, but you were always steadfast with perseverance. You climbed through life's doors, growing strength as you confronted the intricacies of the interwoven tapestries of challenge. You most often persisted in syncopated beats or as smoothly as cool water flows over stones.

Yes, you taught me that love is not something that is automatic, but rather it is something that takes awareness, cultivating the seeds of a tender garden and nurturing it to growth. Love is the root that binds our stories with each other and the balm that heals. Its harvest is unwavering and continues in Spirit-- and Spirit has no end to its depth.

Gratitude. Lived gratitude can only expand, as it has with me. I am grateful that memories can live on beyond what we know in our Earth time. There are not better or worse ones, but all part of our woven fabric as Family. My calmest memories are ones we experienced together in nature. You might not recall these readily now, but I know they are etched somewhere in your heart. The hikes in the parks were great solace to me. Sometimes I called it Church. Remember hiking with our backpacks and bringing our lunches to picnics in grassy clearings? The time we rode horses up on the hill overlooking the river was freeing, with the wind moving us as if it carried us up hills that were too steep. I loved the times hiking on the cliffs while following the stream where the mini-waterfalls splashed along the trenched path and over the broken branches and fallen leaves. I also have gratitude for sharing in creativity. You willingly came with me to summer arts camps and participated in plays, musicals and murals even when it might not have been your first choice. You have often been my muses, inspiring me in my own gifts of art – writing, singing, dancing, and painting – all things that have been sustenance for me.

Forgiveness. I am humbled as I confront this last piece. It is the most difficult in some ways, but also an action that helps us release ego and embrace love. I ask that you forgive whatever hurt you might have experienced from my actions. Know that whenever you felt disappointment, I did too. I hope you know that I always wanted the best for you and did my best in learning and creating ways that would be for the greatest good. If you have any regrets or need my forgiveness, have no doubts, for I have already done so. Forgiveness can be a healing tonic for the soul and illuminate our life's narratives of joy.

My Dear Ones, even though you are now grown, you will always be my children. May you know we can keep learning from one another even though our Presence may be in different forms. Our spirits know no forms, as they live from and to beyond. May you know that the real entities of life cannot be forgotten, lost or taken from us. These gifts are the real teachings that are *forever* in the veins of Life's Spirit. I am grateful in eternity for you. I am grateful you were born to me and grateful for the gifts I receive from you. I am honored that I am your mother. As you end your time reading this letter, I hope your heart is full. I hope you feel clarity and much love and joy.

May you always be connected to wisdom and love, within you and in all you encounter. May

you be with those who nurture and love you, and may it be reciprocal.
May you grow with the calmness of wisdom and strength in gentleness.
May *we* always know the gracious power of our together-stories.
May you see the leaves, the sky, the water and
Know the gifts of Love, Gratitude and Forgiveness.

With all my love,

Mom

In the Company of Giants

MARISSA HAPP

Dearest loved one,

It barely seems possible that this is our tenth Christmas letter, but that is indeed the case. Though the face and size of our family has changed dramatically over time, our message to you remains the same ~ that you might share in the joyous reality of Christmas because of the divine birth.

Of course, this year as I write, I am as preoccupied with the Resurrection as I am the Nativity. This has been a year of many losses for us and we have found great comfort in the belief that the Resurrection makes each of these good byes only temporary.

One week before our Deborah was born, my dear dad died as he napped at home. Shortly before his death, an afternoon visit had enabled him to share his perspective on his failing health:

“I want you to know that if this is my time, I go with gratefulness.”

As I bent over him to rearrange his blankets before my departure, he reached from his bed and placed his hand on my immense belly to impart a blessing on his soon-to-arrive grandchild, praying specifically for a safe delivery and a bright healthy baby. With my due date so near, it did not occur to me that these would be his final words to me.

One month later, our dear friend and pastoral care minister Sr. Stace died as she slept; she had been such a support and had served dad with great kindness and compassion.

With Spring on its way, our precious friend Rose Ann died after a valiant crusade against cancer. Twelve years ago we had chosen Rose Ann to be the Godmother for our

first daughter; I hope that Sara will emulate the courage and generosity that Rose Ann demonstrated.

As summer approached, our neighbor Stuart died, one of the most delightful men we have ever known. Stu never paraded what he “did for a living”; divergent thinker that he was, he reversed the entire concept and instead “lived for a doing”. Plunging into life with unmatched zeal, I best remember Stu riding bikes down our shady avenue with his five children when most other dads were at work. Only after his death did I learn that he had studied at the finest universities in Europe, played three instruments and was fluent in four languages.

Then in July, we lost Orv, one of the first to welcome us when we moved to town fifteen years ago. A gifted musician, Orv used his talents city-wide until his unexpected death at the age of 74. A model of humility, Orv’s gentle smile and supportive nature were inspirational to all who knew him.

Amidst so much death, can I go on? Yes, I can go on, earthen vessel that I am. For I bear within, you see, great treasures. Each of these dear ones have placed generous offerings of themselves into my coffer before passing beyond me. I stand before you now, brimming with gifts from God and from man!

When I go into a store for thread but find myself dancing out the door with a charming doll for a birthday five months away, I smile to myself because I know where the prompt came from. It’s my dad, reminding me that when gift-giving is concerned, it is essential to exercise profound sensitivity and to plan ahead. When I am faced with important choices, his integrity guides me in the right direction. His unprecedented wit reminds me to not take life too seriously.

When I’ve had my feelings hurt and start sinking into that abysmal swamp of self-pity but discover a sudden surge of mercy to be washing away my pain, I know it’s Sr. Stace. She often told me that I was blessed among the blessed. Hurt rolls away when someone takes the time to love you like this.

When I find myself preparing a smashing meal for 14 with one pound of ground beef and assorted other make-shift ingredients, I thank Rose Ann, who taught me how. Never overwhelmed by large numbers or short notice, her motto was “...there’s *always* room for one more.” She spoke often about the One who fed the multitudes with two fish and five loaves.

In the twilight hours of hot summer nights, when I fasten a child into my bicycle carrier and head up the block in search of interesting lawn sprinklers to ride through, I go in honor of Stu. May I reflect the joie de vivre he showcased.

And amidst the ups and downs of family life ~ the bills, the demands and the occasional

set-backs, I see Orv on the sidelines, musing with the perspective that comes only with the years. Cheering me on, I believe I hear him coaching me with deep affection, to *go for the gold*... that raising children is sacred work. He should know, this father of 11, grandfather of 41 and great-grandfather of 5.

Though there may be only one coffee cup on my table mid-morning, it is clear that I am visited often by these dear saints now unseen. Can I go on? Yes, I can go on, and you can, too, fortified with gratefulness and joy. Every supply for the journey has been placed into our hands, and we are in the company of giants!

Merry Christmas with our deepest love, encouragement and support ~

Bob and Marissa, Benjamin, Sara, Becca, Rachel and Deborah

Grace Descends

MARISSA HAPP

I decided to take a “little” nap before dinner, but slept until the blare of my alarm clock awakened me the next morning at 4:30. Tempted to press the “snooze” button, I knew I must get moving; though I felt as though I could sleep for a week, the gym was waiting. I had been told that routines were important at times like these. I pulled on my jacket and headed north, my heart heavy.

I had just buried my brother.

Five days earlier, we received a 2:00 a.m. call, informing us that my healthy, active 59 year old brother had collapsed in his home from a massive heart attack. CPR efforts failed and the paramedics were not able to resuscitate him. As his wife and boys tried desperately to help, my brother died.

We arrived at his home around 3:30 a.m.; as my husband went upstairs to see our nephews, I took my place at the kitchen table and received the cup of coffee one never wants to sip. An in-law asked me “what I wanted in it” and when I replied “...just milk,” he smiled softly.

“Just like your brother,” he noted, as he handed me my mug.

Hours of talk and tears ensued. We shared our shock, our sadness, our fear. When we danced too close to despair, someone gracefully guided us away from the edge; we all took turns leading this effort.

Yes, Greg had his annual check-up. No, he had not been feeling ill. He loved his job at the Southtown Star; like any journalist, he had a penchant for detail and was ever exploring ideas for new feature stories.

But, he was gone, and I had never sat at his table without him.

At the wake and funeral, I met scores of his colleagues, members of his church and friends from his neighborhood and community. All marveled at his character, his integrity and his humility. Greg was the gentleman who deflected praise, the seasoned wordsmith who encouraged fledgling writers on his staff and the actor who relished even the “lesser parts” in the theatrical productions of his church. Golf buddies tearfully quaffed that Greg was the only one who never swore on the course, “not even during the fiercest competitions.” An avid Audubon enthusiast, Greg, it seems, would always direct the gaze of his entire foursome to an unusual bird in a nearby tree or to the spectacular but fleeting sunset.

As I stepped upon my favorite treadmill, I adjusted my iPod, staring into space. As the American Idol team sang “Shout to the Lord”, I lost myself in their voices and their faith. A myriad of images raced through my mind like soaring meteors: Greg, persuading my parents to let me keep that stray kitten when I was little; Greg, serenading me with his guitar the night I lay motionless on the couch, languishing from the bad sunburn I could have easily prevented. Greg, taking me to Old Town for my 16th birthday and helping me feel “cool”; Greg, presenting me with one of those nostalgic sock-monkeys when I turned 40... convinced I needed to re-connect with the transitional object of my toddlerhood.

Tormented that I had not had the opportunity to say goodbye to my brother and wishing that I could go back and do so many things differently, I suddenly realized that I was sobbing as I ran. I was now the only one left from my family of origin, and there was no one left on this planet who shared my history.

“Greg!” my heart screamed. “Do you remember when we went to the New York World’s Fair?”

“Our ’67 Ford Torino?”

“The time we both threw up trying to eat liver?”

“Can you hear me, Greg? Did you know that I loved you?”

The memories and questions were more than I could bear. Broken with grief, I tried to outrun them, but found I could not do so. As David Cook’s voice exhorted me to worship the God I could not see, I changed my direction and ran full force to the Comfort, the Shelter, the Tower of Refuge of whom he sang. As if mercy descended from heaven itself, all guilt, real or imagined, was suddenly lifted from my shoulders, and as I raised my arms, I was not

“stretching”, I was reaching for the entire universe...receiving and giving grace.

As the future unfolds, I am sure that I will catch many glimpses of my brother, and I am quite certain that I will meet him, in strange and unexpected ways, in the years to come.

Goodbye, Greg, and at the same time... hello.

Bones Without Skin

MARISSA HAPP

As I ponder the value of spirituality in clinical work, it occurs to me that on the basis of a recent interaction, I may have earned myself the official title of *spiritual heretic*.

My four year old grandson is Jack and I love him so much it actually hurts. His energy knows no bounds; if we were to transplant the Empire State Building into his neighborhood, I am quite certain he would try to climb it.

His personas change often; he has been Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Iron man, Hulk, Catboy, Bumblebee the Transformer and multiple Ninja Turtles.

Still, there was a phase when after bedtime snacks, stories and prayers, good-night cuddles would end with a promise whispered in the dark: “... And Jack Jack, there are *no monsters*. NO MONSTERS. *No monsters*.”

Curious beyond description, a recent trip to Phillips Park to see the mastodon display with Tappa was a cherished day filled with wonder and awe.

Jack described every detail about the bones without skin, their size, their age and the fact that these enormous mammoths are no longer around. He informed me that they are all dead; that only their bones are left.

All at once his voice took on a serious tone and ultimately trailed off. Clearly his little brain... and his heart... were struggling to accommodate the reality of death and its finality. It was more than he could bear.

“Namma,” he began, with a voice that sounded more like a plea, “... all the dinosaurs are in heaven, right?”

I looked into his little face and saw a mix of sadness, confusion and worry. I knew this was a fragile moment.

“Yes, Jack, yes,” I assured him, searching for some sort of reasonable explanation. Truth matters... but my little Jack is only four and didn’t need a lesson in doctrine. He needed something else, and this was no time to fumble. Exhaling, the emphatic words tumbled out with a degree of conviction that surprised me: “...All the dinosaurs are happy, Jack, *because our Creator loves and cares for every creature He has ever made!*” Relief flooded his little frame. It flooded mine as well.

I knew this discourse wasn’t actually about the dinosaurs; it was clear that our little Jack was beginning to grapple with, in his own pre-operational way of thinking, the concept of mortality. For him to imagine that any creature ends up a disconnected pile of bones without skin, scattered in the dirt, was unthinkable. Existential pain at any age is raw and real. There *had* to be more.

So I had absolutely no problem assuring him that there, in fact, IS more.

Bob, hearing this, entered the conversation, colluding with my religious perspective. “Jack, I’m pretty sure that God built a really great playground for the dinosaurs and that they can play there every day!”

Here’s the thing. I am not a theologian, but who says dinosaurs *aren’t* in heaven? I, for one, hope to see them.

And I want to be transported on angels’ wings to the summit of Everest. I want to see it being formed. I long to behold the galaxies up close and tread the ocean’s floor. Surely the Ruler Of

Our Universe can work outside the confines of physics, space and time.

One thing I know is true: Monsters aren’t real. Love, however, is. And love was here before the dinosaurs or we existed. Daily it carries us, whether we know it or not, preceding and following our every step. And it does not end with death; in fact, heaven might reveal surprises for us all... of mammoth proportion.

Untitled

SANDY KLEVER

I wish you could come back; I wasn't done talking to you. Sounds like a Country Western song, but it's just a message for my mother who died two days after Christmas.

About 10 years ago with declining health and money, Mom was considering a reverse mortgage. My brother moved in with her first, followed by my son, and finally me. We called it the Bed and Breakfast. We paid rent, worked, and slept. She cooked and cleaned.

She had a heart attack already, and that pesky COPD followed her everywhere. She was always short of breath and needed oxygen at night. She had a team of specialists keeping her alive.

I worried about her constantly, especially when she drove her friends to IHOP for breakfast. I feared her falling. I prayed God would take her in a humane way.

The doctors missed all the symptoms. She was losing weight, could not taste or smell, and complained of "feelers" in her vision. She now warned us she walked like "a drunken sailor." November 13, my brother took her to the clinic. When he came home alone, he brought the news. "Mom's gonna die. She has brain cancer. She has until Thanksgiving and maybe Christmas."

"I only want to make it 'til Christmas," she wished. We signed her up for hospice. On her last visit to Dr. Holm, he sent her off with, "See you in Heaven." The steroids, which she called her "rocket pills," caused more swelling in her legs. Using ACE bandages, I wrapped and unwrapped her legs. The increased lasix meant more trips to the bathroom. Her oxygen tubing often got tangled in her walker.

I heard the crash in the hallway. She fell again in the bathroom. We decided she needed a call light and found a string of jingle bells. She only remembered a few times, and then I became ever vigilant.

Mom told everyone, "She's my angel." She spent most of her days in the recliner, while I was busy planning, baking, cooking, shopping, and entertaining the many visitors for the last perfect Christmas. When she could not lift her leg into the tub and could not stand for a hair wash at the sink, I knew she was failing. I shopped for her last special gifts for her four grandkids-- engraved 2017 silver Christmas ornaments from Von Maur.

One night while I was wrapping presents in my room, she wondered, "Why don't you

come and talk to me? I'm all alone." I finally sat down, but we were both tired. Another time she wanted me to call her friend. I refused. "Iris is a good friend and has been so good to me!" I went for a walk in the dark. She managed to turn on the porch light as a signal. She was sorry; she didn't mean it. I called Iris. We were both hurting.

Mom was only 37 when her mother died. "I would give anything to have another minute with my mother," she confided to me on our shopping trips.

"I was mean to my mother, and I never had a chance to tell her I was sorry."

"It doesn't matter now," I reflected, but to her, it did. I was not waiting 52 years. We agreed our mistakes were in the past, and we did the best we could. We looked ahead. "I'm not sure I will make it to Heaven," she worried.

"Do you believe in Jesus?"

"Well, yes."

"Then you're fine," I reassured her.

I picked up my son, Sam, at the airport and we found her head on chin and gray. "Is she going to make it?" But she rallied and came alive. Christmas was her favorite holiday.

December 25 I noticed her lungs filling up and bloody sputum. I called hospice, but there would be no antibiotics. December 26 I helped mom to the bathroom. "I want an open casket, to be buried in Ellen's outfit, and I don't want to see anybody today." She went to bed. I turned up her oxygen, and the nurse inserted a foley. Sam went into her room for a final hug. She told him, "See you in Heaven!"

On the drive home, I remembered God collected all my tears in a bottle. How can I live without my mother? God answered. *You don't want her to be with me?* That evening, I let her go. We agreed to keep her home.

I was met at the door by my son. "Grandma needs you." She took our hands. "God is here. He's with Matt and you and me." I asked if she was happy, and she nodded. She mentioned New Year's Eve- Mom and Dad's anniversary. I gave her a small dose of morphine and a nebulizer treatment.

As a hospice nurse, we turn patients every 2-4 hours. At 11:45, she shared with us, "Jesus let me in." I questioned her, and she repeated, "I told you I saw Jesus last night!" She told us the story about the dogs and cats that couldn't come in. Someone was asking: Is there anyone here who likes dogs and cats? My mother said she liked dogs and cats. Well, they can come in then.

I turned her again at 3:30. Her hands were cold and her pulses weak. I found her lying in the same position at 6:44 the next morning. She died in her own house, in her own bed, in her sleep. I never believed my mother would leave me.

Mom was so proud she had mothered us into such decent human beings. We heard, "there aren't too many kids who would do what you did." The day of her funeral, January 3, I made a quick run to Dollar General for nylons. I came out and there was the sundog rainbow! It was seen all across Iowa. It was her message. She was still alive and on the other side. Love has no boundaries. Until we meet again, Mom.

Grateful Hearts

BILL LANDERS

Saying good-bye is very painful. The heart-strings over forty years of marriage evolved from simple strings into steel cables, filled with thousands of moments and memories. Our bond was strong: love, tears, joys, victories, losses, kids, and grandkids... Then, Boom: Death. Some books tell you to detach—let go—move on. Wise counsel preaches: grief is a process; recovery is a choice. So, what do I do now?

I paused and reflected. The answer was in an old saying: “the answer is on the tip of your nose.” WRITE! As a male caregiver, I had great difficulty expressing my feelings. I found it easier to write them down and reflect. I shared some of my poems with the Iowa City Hospice “Grieving Your Spouse” group. I learned that what I was feeling was what others were experiencing, too. (Maybe I am not crazy after all.)

What first lead me to writing? My dear wife, Rose, was courageously battling post-polio syndrome and the wicked monster, ALS. In the midst of this, Rose decided she would complete the only item on her Bucket List: to write her family story as her legacy for our children, grandchildren and relatives. She achieved the impossible: writing the true story of her family during September 1955. In a two week period eleven of the fourteen children contracted polio, with her two brothers dying from it. It is a story of courage, faith, hope, love and resilience; the ability of her family to come through one of life’s biggest storms. I was in awe, as Rose wrote on her iPad day after day from her wheelchair and hospital bed. Some days it was difficult for Rose to even hold her head up. Her lifelong dream was published in May, 2016: Triumph On Baker Road: How the Walsh Family Defeated Polio. Rose died from ALS in February, 2018.

Learning from Rose’s example of resilience and courage, I started putting my feelings down on paper. My first writing was in the form of a prayer: “Grateful Hearts.” We said this regularly during our crisis. It energized us and gave us strength to keep going. Even after that, I still found many of my feelings were clogged up inside me. After all, society says: males are to be strong and not wimps. I found out males feel and do so deeply.

I chose a poetic free-verse writing style, with a major focus on “mining myself,” to dig out buried feelings, without flash, or a focus on writing elegance. My goal was to simply unearth my feelings and look at them on paper. I realized my feelings ARE my feelings, and I have a right to them. The themes of love, forgiveness and gratitude are woven into my writings, just as they were throughout Rose’s life-tapestry.

As I recover and heal, I hope to follow Dr. Seuss’ sage advice: “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.” I plan to slowly walk down my life-path with memories, a pen, a smile, and a grateful heart.

Life’s Surprises

BILL LANDERS

No one asks for it.

*Disability—accident—illness—trauma—death—crisis,
Who wants to answer the door or accept the dealt card?
What sane person wants suffering, pain or loss?*

*You can ignore it, but denial is only a pretend game.
You can scream at it and wear yourself into a frazzle.
Anger—anxiety—depression deplete your soul.
Now what?*

*Tears have a purpose; each drop is important.
Silence allows you to process emotional pain.
Caring and supportive relationships energize.
Resilience can be learned. Humor has healing power.*

Lost

BILL LANDERS

*In the dark forest without a compass or map,
aimlessly wandering in circles, talking to myself.
Uncontrolled emotions smack me in the face.
Scared, sad, anxious, depressed, shitty,
lonely, numb, and pissed-off (sometimes all at the same time)
I am a mess. Have I lost my mind? Am I crazy?*

*I have never been lost before.
Why has this happened to me? I did not ask for this.
I catch my breath...I STOP asking: "Why?"*

*New question: "What am I going to do about it?"
I will get out of this maze. It will get better.
I will be OK. I will smile again. I will find me.*

Home A-L-O-N-E

BILL LANDERS

*Eerily quiet: misty stillness everywhere.
Smallest squeak echoes off the walls.
Kitchen clock marches to its ticking cadence.
I can hear my heart beating. I must be alive.*

*Feelings blast me: numb, sad, empty, abandoned
Aching loneliness seeps into my bones.
Tears leak from my eyeballs, coating my cheeks.
My loved one is imprinted in my memory and soul.*

*Mindless TV adds noise; computer distracts
Neither one gives hugs or laughs like my soul-mate.
I stop at the mirror. It says, "You sweet ole thing!"
I smile. I vow to bravely walk into my pain.*

Rebuilding Dreams

BILL LANDERS

*Building a “home” takes time—hammer—saw—LOVE.
Add to this perspiration—energy—a dream of how it will look.*

*One piece at a time the masterpiece evolves slowly and methodically.
It is built from nothing into beauty. Excitement reigns.*

*Sometimes there are unexpected quakes—bumps—detours.
Emotions explode: change and loss...painful suffering.*

*Acknowledge the loss. Go with the pain. Give it time. Hug tight.
Then grab the hammer—saw—LOVE. Rebuild a new dream.*

Grateful Hearts

BILL LANDERS

*—Gracious and wondrous God—
We come to you with grateful hearts.*

*Thank you for our many blessings and gifts.
Thank you for life’s real treasure: faith—family—friends.*

*Help us to share loving-kindness with others, and quietly scatter good.
Help us to be compassionate—caring—patient—forgiving.*

*Walk with us hand-in-hand through life’s changing seasons.
Remind us. Today could be better. Today could be worse. It is what it is.*

*Fill our spirits with energy and resilience to live peaceful moments.
Continue to bless and smile upon us, our loved ones and those in need.*

We come to you with grateful hearts. AMEN.

Spinning Souls

AMY MARTIN

Puerto Morales: a wood-pole palapa with thatched roof and packed-sand floor a few yards from the beach. A day before the December 12 is the feast day of the Virgin of Tepeyac (Guadalupe). I'm here to write about her. A low plywood platform is adorned with icons and statues of the Mexico divine feminine.

Cross-legged before the altar, my torso bends downward as if pressed by a cosmic hand. I am physically mute; my body is not under my control. I look up and find myself face to face with a diminutive statue of the Virgin Mary. It glows.

"We have to talk about your mother," the statue says.

I don't respond. A spiritual force has never spoken English to me before. My chin is yanked to the floor, forcing me over so far I can barely breathe.

"Oh no, not my mother!"

She'd been dead eight years. We split over my remembering on Winter Solstice when a confusing tsunami of painful memory fragments broke through. I told her these images made attending Christmas too uncomfortable. Her reply: "I knew there was incest. That's why I left. You kids were out of control and your father wouldn't do anything."

Years will be spent in therapy unpacking those three sentences.

I emerged from the abyss to discover my brother on his second grand-jury trial for sex crimes against his underage gymnastics students. My family told me nothing, though my father bought the gym and my mother managed it. The frangible memories were clear: his predation began with me. I never saw my parents again. I later learn their deaths were slow and agonizing and lonely.

The Virgin statue stares without pity. A phantom hand turns my head to the right. A presence, an orb, indiscernible yet with substance and luminosity, spins in space. It is my mother as a soul, not as a human with all the flaws a human can possess.

“You and her have a relationship you cannot escape,” reminds the Virgin. “She placed you in the web.”

She is the soul who created my soul and I love her completely. This spinning luminescence is not the twisted mother I knew. It seems impatient, as if she’s been waiting for me to figure all this out, as if my resentment had been holding her prisoner. All I can do is stare in wonder. Her energy swirls around me and she is gone.

I’d had a dream about my mother a few months after she passed. I knew she was dead only by seeing her obit in the newspaper; my name was not among the survivors. I paced down a long dark hall. At the end was a dimly lit room with my mother in a bed, looking frail. I leaned over and held her face in my hands. She said: “I love you.”

I was aghast. Not what I wanted to hear. Why didn’t she say she was sorry? So I responded with what I hoped to speak in response: “I forgive you.” The dream abruptly dissolved.

In this palapa on a Mexican beach, the Virgin makes it quite clear that I can’t write about mother goddesses when I’m not at peace with my own. I shriek from my soul: “I love you, I love you.” After eight years, I finally get the response to mom right. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, what I did was wrong. I promised I’d be there for you.”

Yes, I was weak and broken as she was dying, barely able to do laundry much less navigate the landmines of family relationships. And yes, the betrayals were unspeakably cruel. But also it was pride: I would not budge except for an apology, not even for death.

“I love you, I’m sorry.” I keen this phrase over and over for what seems like an hour. Great, loud sobs wrack my body. I cry until it feels like I’m drowning, then take a huge breath and sit up, only to crumble and wail again.

The weeping stills to a whimper. The hotel rooms nearby have open windows, but no one stirs.

Memories of Insook

GENE MATTHEWS

On Monday, July 17, we sat around Insook's bed at The Bird House watching her struggle to breathe. Suddenly she gasped and the struggle was over. My prayers in the final days had been for a peaceful departure and my prayers had finally been answered. Answered prayers do not deter a broken heart, however, and the loss of my beloved wife of 58 years who was, simultaneously, my best friend filled me with a grief so agonizing that at times, it seemed unbearable. The grief does not depart easily and it is a sneaky tormentor which can interrupt what seems like a normal interlude in my life and cause sudden agonizing sobbing.

But the grief is not all bad because it also brings rich floods of memories which tumble in so rapidly they threaten to obscure each other. On Saturday, July 22, we gathered at St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Iowa City for a beautiful service of farewell attended by many friends and relatives who have blessed our lives so richly. That evening, our family, including two lovely young Korean women who had adopted Insook and me as their grandparents, all gathered in my little living room to do the funny and sad things families do on such occasions. During a pause in the conversation, I found myself saying, "None of you would be here right now if I had not been so persistent. It took me three years to persuade Insook to marry me."

I met Insook my first week in Korea after surviving a long trip across the United States by train, a week long stay in San Francisco, a hazardous trip across the Pacific Ocean on a rusty old freighter which seemed to be battling storms the entire journey, a week long stay in Tokyo, and finally, a short plane flight from Tokyo to Seoul. Although I had been appointed to work in Taejon, a provincial capital south of Seoul, it was necessary to stay in Seoul for a few days to clear customs and take care of other details involved with entering a county with the intent of living and working there. One evening, a fellow new missionary named Jack Theis and I were invited to an evening meal at a home for single women missionaries on the campus of the Tai Wha Community Center. We arrived to find that Insook was living there also. I was captivated by her beauty, her charm, her openness, her frequent bursts of laughter and her gentle kindness to the naive new missionaries.

I soon left Seoul, and moved down to Taejon where I was to spend the next three years and where I began immersing myself in rural Korea, a process which was exciting beyond imagination and which so occupied my time that I quickly forgot about Insook...until I met her again during a trip to Seoul. I again found myself captivated by her beauty, her charm, her openness, her frequent bursts of laughter and her gentle kindness to the naive new missionaries. The trips to Seoul were few and far between but each encounter with Insook only strengthened my excitement. I began to feel that I had secretly fallen in love with her.

I kept the secret very well for my first two years in Korea, until one day when I was working on the farm which was a major project of Union Christian Service Center, a large ecumenical project featuring, in addition to the farm, a home for abandoned babies, a tuberculosis rest home, an amputee rehabilitation center, an orphanage run by the Salvation Army and a rural institute for training farmers. A taxi pulled onto the project and dispensed Jane Stuntz and Insook. Jane was, like me, a short term missionary who lived with Insook in Seoul, and was, in fact, the one who had invited Jack Theis and me to dinner that fateful evening. Insook would later become her Matron of Honor at her wedding in Chicago. Her time in Korea had come to an end and she was anxious to see parts of Korea outside of Seoul.

I borrowed an old mission-owned jeep and the three of us embarked on a trip which took us up mountain roads to temples and other places of scenic beauty. During the trip, I was so completely taken by Insook, I scrounged up my courage and wrote her a letter when she returned to Seoul. In the letter, I poured out all the emotion I had kept bottled up for two years. I described my great joy in getting to know her, even hinting that I had kind of fallen for her, which was the understatement of the year.

She wrote back, and we began an exchange of letters which probably made a bit of money for the Korean Postal Service. My work occasionally took me to Seoul and I usually managed to see Insook during each trip. She began introducing me to restaurants, art shops, antique stores, Korean drama, sports events, and long conversations.

I finally dared to bring up the subject of marriage. She said no. Her father, with whom I had been very friendly, had already criticized her for spending so much time with a foreigner as if there was nobody in Korea whom she could marry. On another visit to Seoul, I brought it up again and she said no. Her father had in mind that she should marry a Korean Army General (which she had no interest in doing.) On still another trip, I tried to persuade her that we could be happy together and she said no, she was four years older than I. All of this was, of course, greatly alien to the way marriages are traditionally arranged in Korea, but I was either too brave or too dumb to care. Finally one night, I borrowed a mission jeep and we drove up to the top of the mountain on the northern edge of Seoul. I asked her point blank if she would marry me. She said she would love to, but thought marrying a foreigner was so complicated that we would never be able to bring it off.

I felt then that I had it figured out, and I made a suggestions against which she was either

unable or unwilling to argue. "Let's begin the complicated process and see what happens. As we travel through all of the red tape, you can be free to drop out at any time if it seems too complicated." I'm certain it was not one of history's most romantic proposals, but it ranks among the most practical.

The next two months were chaotic as we spent long hours visiting various local, provincial, and national government offices and made numerous trips to the US Embassy. Along the way, we collected vast amounts of official looking papers bearing an array of colorful stamps and seals, some even bound in ribbon. On July 16, 1959, our schedule took us to the office of the Mayor of Seoul, where we displayed our various documents bearing the arrays, and in turn, received more documents bearing similar arrays. As we walked out of the office and began thumbing through the documents, I made an exhilarating discovery. One of the documents, stamped boldly with the name of the Mayor of Seoul, was our marriage certificate. We were officially, legally and bindingly married. When I showed it to Insook, her reaction was classically pragmatic. "We'd better hurry up and get engaged."

On August 14, we were properly married in the Tai Wha Community Center Chapel by the Bishop of the Korean Methodist Church who was a good friend of Insook's father. Her father, who would later gain fame as Korea's doctor of the year and as the oldest member of Korea's unicameral Nation Assembly, walked her down the aisle and gave her away.

Ten days later, we flew to San Francisco, took a train to Iowa and then went to Evanston, Illinois where I attended seminary for the next three years. In 1962, we returned to Korea as missionaries and served in various capacities until retirement in 1997.

Retirement was a joyful time. We found ourselves free to travel and our local bank's travel club made it affordable. Insook took up knitting, a skill she had picked up easily as a child and was able to whip out a vast assortment of baby caps, stocking caps, scarves and prayer shawls. She also became a great fan of television sports, especially tennis. Although she had trouble remembering American names and often resorted to making up nicknames (skinny guy, big guy, drum guy), she mastered both the names and ages of her beloved tennis champions. Roger Federer quickly became her favorite, which is important to remember.

About six or seven years ago, Insook began to complain of not feeling well. This was unusual because she had always been strong and athletic, often beating me in tennis and out-walking me on our daily hikes around Iowa City. I finally nagged her into seeing our doctor and, as soon as she walked into his office, he looked at her and said, "You have an infection and we need to get you to the hospital."

During her hospitalization, a routine CT scan revealed a growth on her pancreas. After her release from the hospital, a biopsy revealed a growth on her pancreas. The oncologist who studied the biopsy results was not concerned. He described it as treatable only by very radical surgery, which she would not be able to survive at her age. He went on to say the cancer was a

type which grew very slowly and she would almost certainly die of old age before the cancer caused problems. His parting words of advice were, "Don't worry about it."

But last year, following a delightful trip to Colorado with our bank, Insook began losing weight. I again persuaded her to go to our doctor who ordered tests, but said, "I am afraid the cancer has caught up with her." The tests revealed that the cancer had spread to her spleen and one kidney.

She continued with her knitting and writing to friends, but we could tell things were not right. She loved to plan meals and cook, and continued to do so, but then could not bring herself to eat them. Her weight dropped noticeably and finally, in December, shortly before Christmas, her doctor ordered tests which showed an alarmingly high blood sugar count, a low potassium count and severe anemia. He ordered her hospitalized again where blood transfusions, insulin and potassium infusions took care of the problems. However, it was discovered that she again had a massive blood infection. She was placed in hospice care and not expected to live much longer.

We cared for her at home for nearly a month until we admitted that we were not able to give her the kind of care she deserved. On January 23 of this year, we moved her to The Bird House, a beautiful home for hospice patients (they prefer the word "guests"), staffed by a remarkable group of caregivers and volunteers who quickly fell in love with Insook. A couple of months before her latest illness, Insook and I had visited The Bird House because she was curious about the home for which she had knitted so many prayer shawls. As we toured the beautiful home and visited with the compassionate caregivers and volunteers, Insook suddenly declared, "This is where I want to die." It was, but it took longer for Insook than anybody else who had ever entered the home.

Watching her die was heartbreaking, because although she was thankfully free of pain from the cancer, the loss of appetite and the inability to process what little food she was able to take meant she slowly starved to death until she was literally reduced to skin and bones. She brought great inspiration to the other guests, the staff at The Bird House and the hospice nurses who watched over her. On four different occasions during her last month, we kept vigil thinking she was going to die, only to have her rouse up to watch a tennis match on TV or give hugs to the staff and family members who came to see her.

I spent hours at her bedside during that time and an amazing thing happened. I found that as we talked about our years together, about how our life had been good and filled with love, about the children and grandchildren who had turned out so well, I found that I had fallen in love with her all over again.

As mentioned at the beginning, she breathed her last breath on Monday, July 17 surrounded by family. The day was significant. The day before, we had been officially and legally married for 58 years, and her hero, Roger Federer had won the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament for a

record eighth time.

During her time at The Bird House one of Insook's favorite occasions occurred when the weather permitted her to go outside. The cheerful staff, bundled her up, slipped on one of the beautiful robes son our son Paul had bought her for Christmas and one of her favorite white hats. They helped her into a wheelchair, and trundled her outside for a trek up the winding road in front of the house. The moment she was outside, Insook always lifted her arms in celebration, called out to the trees and birds, and spoke to them. She reminded the staff who had won the privilege of taking her outside that day that each tree had "treeality" just as people have personality. In the early weeks, the trees were dark and bereft of foliage, but she loved them anyway and greeted them by complimenting them on their appearance. In a short time spring arrived and the trees became dressed in the most vibrant greenery imaginable. She loved them even more.

Insook will soon become a tree! Her ashes now rest in our home in a beautiful wooden urn made of walnut and birds eye maple. At an appropriate, time she will be deposited in the ground and a tree planted in them. Our son Mark has decided that at least once per year during Chosuk, the Korean holiday combining Thanksgiving and Memorial Day, the family will gather beneath the branches of the tree, feast on Korean food, play Yute and celebrate the remarkable life our our dear wife, mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. We hope there will be birds nesting in the tree.

Wishes for My Last Days

BOBBIE PAXTON

Dear Jeanne, Julie and Kate,

Yesterday I finished reading Atul Gawande's new book, "Being Mortal...Medicine and What Happens at the End". It's an excellent book. I'd read a couple of his articles in the New York Times and when his book came out, it quickly went onto my list. This man is a physician, born in India, and works at the Cleveland Clinic, I think. On NPR, I've heard him talk about the often outrageous means doctors employ at end-of-life. Keeping people alive because of technology. He writes about the folly of this with the frail elderly, or people whose bodies are being ravaged with whatever the disorder is. This practice has become relentless. We know the reasons why this happens. One is that the medical community doesn't want to fail. Another huge one is that all too many people haven't had THE TALK with their children regarding end-of-life care. It's a blessing, I think, for the children to know ahead of time about our advanced directives. Made as clear as we can, so the final days can be better spent, hopefully at home. But if that isn't possible, make arrangements for in-house hospice care at the hospital. The third reason for my wishes to die without bells and whistles keeping me alive is that these are helping to bankrupt our country. And in the end, they're useless. Comfort care is what I want.

I want my final days to be better spent. I've told you before about what happened when Dad was dying. He was in pain and agitated, probably low on oxygen. This was long before the hospice movement hit our shores. When chemo was young and that gave doctors a tool to "save lives." Mother was persuaded to let Dad have a run of 5 FU. It did nothing but make him sicker and decrease his platelets. Dad had become obstructed from the tumor, experiencing severe nausea and vomiting, and I'd run out of Compazine and Demerol. I called the doctor for refills. He ordered me to pack Dad up and return him to the hospital. I told him I couldn't do that. Dad had made it very clear from the night he'd had surgery that he wanted to be at home, and asked if I'd see to it that he would be at home ASAP. I made that promise. The doctor got angry and told me I would be killing Art if I didn't bring him back for more chemo. I told him that it was the cancer killing my dad, and I would honor his wishes and my promise I'd made to him.

He had a few more choice words to say, and I repeated my request for the meds. He ordered them. I can't tell you how angry I was with this man for his accusation that I would be killing my father. He paid no attention to how sick Dad was...the surgeon had told us exactly how bad this cancer was, and I did not trust that man...this dude just wanted to shoot Dad up with more 5 FU that would make his last days worse. Dr. Gawande writes that no other developed nation does this, and the average length of life span isn't much different, whether extraordinary means are used, or with good palliative care. Sometimes good palliative care, in all of its guises, helps a person have more good days than the other way around.

All this has been a long-winded preamble to say how I want to spend my last days. I'm going out on a limb here and saying your dad wishes the same. I want to be at home, in my own bed, if that's possible. Call in Iowa City Hospice. I want to be anointed by Father Ed, Father Steve, or whoever is at the Newman Center when the time comes. If you girls can, I want you to be there with me. If you can't, I'll understand. I wasn't there for Gonny's last days—sometimes it's just not doable. You know why. I was so immune—compromised with the PMR and she had shingles. I couldn't even touch her. That was very hard, but we figured out a way to say our good-byes that last day I saw her.

Please bring lots of flowers. Put music on the CD player. Make it Alfred Brendel's piano concertos. All five of them. Neil Diamond, too, and you have to include the soundtrack to "Jonathan Livingston Seagull." Here are more: The anniversary CD of the "Les Miserables" concert recorded at Royal Albert Hall in London. I think one of the most beautiful songs is when Jean sings, "...on this page I write my last confession. Read it well, when I, at last, am sleeping. It's the story of those who always loved you..." He goes on to sing that to love another person is to see the face of God. What could be better than that? I'd also like to hear some John Denver and Josh Groban and any of Joe Mattingly's CDs of the Newman Singers. I would like for you to sing to me and to have some fun retelling your stories of my follies. I absolutely want you to take turns climbing into bed and cuddling up with me. When I had my spinning episode and wound up in the hospital, the best thing that happened was after I'd been transferred from the ER to a room. I thought I saw Jeanne come into the room. I didn't know if I was dreaming or hallucinating from all the drugs I'd received through that long night. But Jeanne being there seemed impossible, because I knew that she'd been working a long stretch of nights in the ER. Was she real? Then she said, "Ma, move over, you bed hog! I worked last night then drove down here, and I'm tired." So I did as I was told! Nothing much was clicking inside my noggin, but I do know that the best feeling in the world was when you wrapped her arms around me and we both dozed off. By the way, it's OK if you have to tell me I'm a bed hog. I've heard it before and it would be music to my ears. Or...whatever you choose to say. If you want to tell me the things I've done and said that have made you crazy, tell me that, too. Maybe that would count as part of my "last confession." And maybe help me ace that test to gain entry into heaven. I'll be happy to take all the help I can get!

If I can, I want to eat ice cream. I really don't care what flavor, as long as there's some chocolate in there. Have some "bobbie water" on hand. Be sure to tell me if the sun is shining, what kinds

of birds are feasting at the feeders and if you saw the sun rise and the sun set. If you could take me outside on the bright, clear night to see the stars, that would be wonderful. If you can't, go out and look up at all those heavenly bodies, then come back and tell me about them. I've loved the night sky every since I can remember. And if it's rained and the sun has come out, please go out and splash through a puddle or two. Go out to look for a rainbow. Share it with me...the pot's golden contents, probably marigold petals just may be what's going through my mind, even if you think I am sleeping. Make up a story. Make it fun. My cousin Sheila told me as she was nearing her death, "Always look up because that's where the rainbows are." I love that quote. And if it's a hot day when you're chasing the rainbow and you're splashing through puddles, remember that wet feet are better than missing the rainbow.

Read to me, please. Especially Psalms 23, 91 and 239. John 6, verses 30 through 41. Ecclesiastes, chapter 3, verses 1 through 8. Read chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel...St. Matthew's Beatitudes...to me. They're so beautiful and very meaningful and have hopefully taught me to think of how we treat everyone. Also, read Dr. Seuss stories, "Alison's Zinnia" and the "Happy Hippopotimi." They're cheerful and beautiful and just fun. Whatever makes us laugh is good, so they're a win-win. And when all that reading has made you thirsty, have a glass of wine and say, "Here's to you and here's to me..."

After that, I think about all that would be left is the transfer of the leftover me to the Deeded Body Program at UIHC. I'll be sure that Kate has my card for that. As for a memorial service, I would like for it to be private. If I change my mind about that, I'll let you know, but I think that a Mass at the Newman Center should just about do it. Some of that is planned, but we do need to finish it up. We must get that done. I hope you don't find this sad...rather I hope that it's helpful to all of you. And remember the most important very last thing. I have loved all of you as much as I possibly could.

Love always,

Bobbie/AKA Ma

Gratitude

BOBBIE PAXTON

A few days ago, one of the Iowa City Hospice workers sent an e-mail about a couple of things. It's all related to Atul Gwande's book about thinking about what people need to realize for their end of life care. One of the exercises was to write a letter to someone who really made a great difference in my life. That good man is Brother Terence, FSC, a retired teacher and author who lives in Memphis, TN. We've known each other since the late '50's. Brother Terence and five other brothers lived in Vincennes, IN, when I met him. He was teaching at Central Catholic High School then, and he and the other Brothers in the house, would come to our house out in the country for horseshoe pitching contests and serious grudge Scrabble contests with whoever wanted to play. My mother would always end those Sunday afternoons with a wiener roast or a hamburger fry and whatever goodies we could throw together at the last minute. A salad of some sort, maybe some baked beans and always homemade cookies or pies. These afternoons were always fun. Often after the meal was over, there would be a songfest around the piano, with either my sister Judy or I being the accompanist. Everyone always had a good time.

On Sunday afternoon, though, Brother Terence shared the news that he'd been reassigned...he would be going to Memphis, TN to teach at the Christian Brothers College. I was very close to being on my way to start nursing school at St. Mary's Hospital in Evansville, IN. When it was time to say our goodbyes, I felt so sad, knowing that Ter would be a long ways away. We'd taken a walk down the lane to just talk a little and for me to say that hard goodbye. Brother Terence told me this, "If you don't know the pain of saying good-bye, you'll never know the joy of saying hello." How very true that is, as we go through our lives with all the comings and goings that occur.

Because of Al's job, we got a lot of practice at saying good-bye when we'd be transferred and then there was always a new person we'd meet who shared the joy of saying hello. With our first transfer to Kansas City, I said good-bye to my folks and very shortly after we got moved in, I had the great joy of saying hello to one of my forever friends, Barbara. She, her husband Chuck, and their four kids did a great job of making us feel welcome and a part of the community. Both of us were at-home moms and we worked together on some Church

projects, or collecting donations for whatever organization had a drive going...such as the cancer crusade. Barbara was the one who came to my aid when I had back surgery and got an infection. She would come down and change my bandages and take the old packing out of that wound and repack it. Day after day she did that for me...sometimes twice a day if Al was out of town with his job. The order was for a twice-a-day bandage change with the packing. Barbara said, "How did you get me into this? I NEVER wanted to be a nurse!" I told her that nonetheless, she was a good one! That was certainly a time when Brother Ter's advice was so helpful. And without Barbara's fine help, I don't know whether or not I'd have the outcome from this surgery that I ultimately did.

Another instance when I needed help was when my dad was dying of cancer. Without my cousin, Brenda, taking care of Jeanne and Julie, along with her own daughter, Michele, I could not have been free to care for my dad the way I did without Brenda's generosity and her support when I needed to cry. Or, so many little things that the workers who worked at Dad's elevator did to help me, too. One day, Dad told me he wanted a gooseberry pie. He would often want something, take a bite and say that it tasted rotten. And where could I find gooseberries, anyway? I told Chet, one of Dad's great helpers, my dilemma. In no time, he came into the kitchen carrying a pail of gooseberries for Dad's pie. Where he knew to find them, I never knew. I'd never baked a gooseberry pie before, either, but I figured it had to be about the same as making cherry pie. It worked, because Dad ate the whole pie!

Still another time when Chet came to my rescue was on a very windy, stormy day. Mother had taken Jeanne and Julie with her to the bridge to collect tolls from people crossing. The wind was fierce and I was worried sick about Mom and my girls. I tried to get to them and couldn't...downed trees blocked the road. Dad was sleeping and all of a sudden, there were voices at the back door. Chet and Frosty had rescued Mom and my babies. I've never felt so grateful to anyone for such a gift as that was, my babies and my mom, brought safely home.

I feel that no matter what, the one thing that gets us through is the love of family, my dear husband and very good friends. And, God.

Words

MADELEINE MURPHY RABB

“What’s today?”

”It’s Friday, June 3rd.”

My husband was constantly asking me because June 4th would be our anniversary and I’d told him, “Maurice, don’t you dare leave me before we celebrate our 39th wedding anniversary!”

“I’ll do my best,” he rasped

As his body began shrinking, he insisted, “Do not tell anyone how ill I am. And no more calls or visitors.” Being a physician, he would brook no pity parties, lugubrious faces, or vapid medical advice. Yet, there was one exception, my sister, Laura, who had flown in from DC a week earlier to spend a few days with her doting brother in law.

The isolation Maurice imposed on family and friends deprived everyone from providing succor. Explaining his wishes, we sent a mass email urging everyone to communicate with him via email. Although pleased and staggered by the abounding messages, his sole preoccupation and mission were staying alive to celebrate our last wedding anniversary.

“Mad, get the cards, ” he wheezed.

“Huh? What cards?”

“Three cards. In my night stand.”

I found three colored envelopes, numbered 1, 2 and 3, in his handwriting. I knew they were anniversary cards. For 38 years Maurice had always selected cards expressing feelings he could never articulate.

Snuggling next to him, I read the first card.

The day we met will always hold a place in my heart, the day we married will forever be cherished as we joined our hands, heart and lives together in love, above all, the days we spend together, day after day...are what truly mean the most to me. You fill my days with

joy, my life with meaning...my heart with love; today and forever, I love you. Happy Anniversary. He annotated at the bottom of the card, This is absolutely true! Maurice.

Laughing, I read the second one,

*If I hadn't found you, I'd probably be driving somebody else nuts. Happy Anniversary!
Love, Maurice.*

Crying, I read the third,

*On the road of life it's not where you go but who you're with that makes the difference.
Happy Anniversary. Again he annotated, There is no question about this! Your lover and
friend, Maurice.*

His brown eyes twinkled as I kissed his drawn face. Looking at our older son, he croaked, "Get the letter."

"Dad, I don't have it!"

"Get your Aunt Laura on the phone!"

I'm thinking, *What's the deal? Why is he leaving the room to call my sister?*

He dashed to the kitchen to call Laura in DC. "My father wants the letter," he hissed into his cellphone.

"Damn it, their anniversary isn't until tomorrow. I haven't transcribed my notes!"

"Well, you'd better! My father's demanding it now!" "Okay, okay! I'll rush home and fax it as soon as I'm done."

"Laura's at the mall. She's going home and will fax it." He didn't dare confess Laura hadn't yet transcribed the letter.

Waiting, laughing and talking, none of us wanted to be apart. Maurice's illness had brought us closer than we'd ever been. Hospice caregivers had freed us to engage in wrenching and irreverent conversations about his illness, impending death, and last wishes.

Maurice had told me, "I'm not angry or sad about dying. We've tried every possible treatment, and I don't want to live this way. And I know you are strong." His clarity and honesty unnerved me, forcing me to contemplate a life without my mate of almost 39 years and living alone—for the first time.

Maurice whispered to his son, "Where's the letter?"

He called Laura again. "Stop bugging me! I'm spell checking. I'll fax it in a minute!" Moments later, he brought the letter to his father, who nodded toward me.

Oh my God! It's the love letter I'd insisted he write me. I'd given up hope. So that's why he and Laura had spent her entire visit ensconced in the bedroom!

As I began to savor his words, I paused, "Do you want me to read it aloud?"

“No, I already know what it says. I wrote it.”

Dear Madeline,

From the moment we first met I was struck by your wonderful green eyes. In the beginning I had a feeling that this was “it.” I don’t know why I just did. As you know it was a famous blind date that was supposed to be a short meeting and introduction, which became much more than that. Hours later I was still there. Shortly after our meeting a great chase ensued. No matter what obstacles you put before me, none of them impeded me. During the following summer we continued to date and it was obvious that I was more interested in a relationship than you...”

My husband had pursued me for 2 1/2 years, and I’d shocked him by proposing marriage to him. He had demonstrated how much he loved me, without ever saying the words.

“...I also want you to know how very proud I am of your career... I could have articulated all this much sooner but it has never been my style. We have two wonderful sons whom I am very, very proud of... Please remind them how much I love them.

You always were and will remain beautiful to me. I always have and always will love you.

With respect, admiration, gratitude and most of all love, Your husband, Maurice

Taking his face in my hands, I kiss his parched lips. Our emotions are palpable as our sons slip back into the bedroom. Then, suddenly, clasping his letter, I extend my left hand and point to my ring finger, “But honey, what about the rock? You never bought me the big rock!”

“Mom! How could you?”

Not missing a beat, Maurice rasps, “Maybe next time.”

It’s Monday, June 6th. Maurice’s sunken eyes move back and forth. Devouring my face. Then our sons. Back and forth. Memorizing us.

39 years and three days. Maurice had exceeded his mission.

Given

BOB SESSIONS

*Everything that happens
is a gift. Every being, every event,
every molecule or burst of energy.*

*To lose sight of the countless gifts
we are given every moment
is to condemn ourselves
to a colorless existence.*

*To forget,
or to never realize,
the ineffable giftedness
of our lives
means we will never stand
with tears streaming down
our faces as a hundred thousand
Sandhill cranes rise from the Platte early
one spring morning.*

*Or to not feel grateful
when that first flower of spring
pokes its delicate head through
the last snow of winter.*

*We will never know the enchantment
of a baby's small hand
grasping our finger
or the burst of sun through
thick clouds after
a cold autumn rain.*

*Most of all, to ignore the grace
that gives us life
means that we will never know the joy
of our connectedness to everything,
which is the source of whom we are.*

The Nerd Who Visited New Hampshire Avenue

ROSSANA SISSO

Dear Nerd,

I first need to apologize for my rudeness in calling you a nerd, but I am in the dark and don't know your name. All I know is that you are a frequent visitor to Apartment 1, New Hampshire Avenue. The other relevant piece of information that I have is that "we" are not interested in you simply because you are a nerd.

Just to be completely sure of what I am calling you, I did some research on the word *nerd*. "An unstylish, unattractive, or socially inept person". That means either you're not so wise or very ugly, or even worse you might be both. Then I did some more research and I found out that although with some controversy the word "*nerd*" comes from a Dr. Seuss Character in "If I Ran the Zoo", a nerd was a *nerd* ("comically unpleasant creature"). I already like you a little bit more, just because you might come from a Dr. Seuss book.

So far, I don't know what to call you. I know that I might like you because somehow you are connected to Dr. Seuss. I know you like baseball (because you left a bat behind in your last visit), but the most puzzling piece of information is that you are roaming around the area of apartment 1 on New Hampshire Avenue. Why? What are your intentions?

As I know so little about you, let me tell you what I hope you to be. It is ok if you are not attractive. Unwise is unacceptable. Maybe before I line up my expectations, I should explain why I am so interested in you. Apartment 1 on New Hampshire Avenue is where my daughter Ilanit lives. Ever since she moved to Washington, DC to study law, I knew the day would come when a complete stranger might be prowling around her apartment with unclear intentions. To make the situation even more worrisome, last night when she mentioned you just in passing she said that she is not interested in you at all because you are a "nerd". I heard that comment, and worry even more. After 23 years of knowing my baby, when she says she is not interested in someone, in a very twisted way it means she is very interested. So, dear mysterious Nerd, suddenly I am also very interested in you.

Let's get back to my expectations. Since my little baby was born I have always dreamed of this prince charming, with his shiny armor, riding the most stunning horse, coming to take my daughter from my arms and running together towards the sunset. Well, let's be truthful. I don't care at all if you are a prince, just because I honestly do not understand the point of royalty. So forget about that part. Charming is different, you still need to be charming. You know in the likable sense, because it already has been established that attractive is not a requirement. The shiny armor you can keep, not to rescue my Ilanit, but to protect yourself from her. Keep it handy for tough days. See, dear Nerd, my daughter was raised to be strong and independent. She knows exactly what she wants and will fight for it. Don't be fooled by her sweetness and innocent smile.

I am sorry for taking too much of your time, but I think you will appreciate this story. When Ilanit was in fourth grade, she had trouble learning the multiplication facts (math is definitely not her thing. Reading on the other hand is her inspiration). She was always the shy type, and did not know how to deal with her relentless teacher. I told her, actually promised her, that she would succeed in life without learning how to multiply. "Just find ways around it", was my advice. "What about the teacher?" She immediately replied. "She will embarrass me in front of everybody". At that moment, I gave her the best advice ever. "Just give her the bird, but with your hand inside your desk, without being seen". I even added, "if you ever get caught, I will deny that I ever told you to do so". Guess what, dear Nerd? She did it. It was liberating, it gave her a sense of freedom and it helped put things in perspective. You see, Ilanit was raised to know the difference between the important things and the essential ones, how not to care about criticism, and even to be sneaky about it. Thinking back, that childhood episode laid the foundations for a great lawyer, but most importantly prepared her to fight for herself and to be passionate. As you can see, she is in no need of rescuing. She needs a partner in life to conquer the world with. Are you up to the challenge, Mr. Nerd?

I mentioned passionate. Allow me to bother you with another childhood story. Alberto, her dad, was a heavy smoker. More than two packs a day. She hated it, she needed to do something about it. It all started as a powerful advertising campaign, with imaginative posters and notes all over the house. Her efforts showed no positive results, but she never gave up. The next step was a commanding announcement: she would refuse to give a kiss to her dad until he stopped his awful vice. For over a year, she greeted him every morning with a handshake. And said good night with a hand wave. Maybe this doesn't sound like a big deal to you, but where we come from showing affection is essential. We kiss, we hug, personal space has little meaning for us. Alberto was hurt but could not stop smoking. The habit was more controlling than his need for love. Ilanit felt disappointment but never gave up. She recruited the help of her little brother, Eitan, who under her guidance joined the fight. "No contact until you stop" was the slogan. She wasn't going to lose, she really hates losing. It was heartbreaking to see her stand her ground with no results. She had always been her daddy's girl. She knew the muscle of her love, and she used it. It was time for a final thrust. She wrote him a powerful letter packed with guilt and love. Alberto stopped smoking. You see, dear Nerd, when Ilanit strongly believes in something, she will make it happen. She is tough, passionate and willful.

While writing these words I came to the clear understanding that I have one simple demand of you. Make my baby smile. It's not too much to ask. Make sure she smiles each and every day. When times are rough, she will need you the most. So again, remember she has to smile, and you need to make that happen. The rest she can manage herself.

With the urgency of my plea, I forgot to thank you for your kindness. Yesterday, Ilanit also mentioned that she wasn't feeling well, some sort of cold was kind of floating around. Thank you for comforting her with a homemade matzo ball soup. Over the years I have had to learn to read between the lines, because if I ask too many questions I can clearly picture her middle finger rising up through the phone line. Matzo ball soup is about childhood memories, and family traditions. It is what my grandma used to do, show love through the kitchen. That simple gesture says a lot about you and your upbringing. You might even be Jewish. We are too, but more importantly you can cook. I wasn't expecting that. I think I like you a little bit more, dear Mr. Nerd. My little girl also comes from a place where family traditions are cherished, and by family I mean parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins; a huge circle of people. Maybe it is too early in our relationship to scare you with the particulars of our clan, so I will just stop here. The only thing that I can add is that my precious daughter definitely will not show care through the kitchen (I take the blame for that). She will make you feel her presence for sure, but in her own particular way. It is hard to put into words, but she has this special talent to read into your soul. She will be able to predict when you are going to feel sad, even before you start getting the terrible sense that the world is going to end, and in that infinite wisdom she will know exactly what to do. She will know to stand by you in silence. I have no idea how she learned that, but she clearly understands that sometimes words are not needed, and that they can even make matters worse. Her use of silence is masterful, and then she will surprise you with the wit of a sarcastic comment. Not too early, not too late, but just in time to drag you out of the hole with the precision of a neurosurgeon. You will understand it better, once you have experienced it. And I can assure you, you will appreciate it.

Friendship is something that she also holds very high. She doesn't need too many friends, but she will keep them forever and be loyal even when distance is between them. For this I do take credit. I have instilled in all of my kids the importance of friendship, and I call this a mission accomplished. As far as love, I will let her share her intimate stories with you. I can only add that her willingness and passion are a big part of who she is. Do not dare to try to change it. Big mistake.

As I don't know you, I have no idea how passionate you are about life. If you are not, you better fasten your seat belt because you are in for a wonderful surprise. Again, don't be fooled by Ilanit's sweet smile and cute face. Her motto is: "Celebrate we will because life is short but sweet for certain". I am sure you have heard that phrase before because it is part of a popular song. When she was in art class in high school, she made this colorful collage with pictures of friends and these words prominently in the middle. It still hangs in her bedroom, here at home. Let me translate those words, she doesn't need fancy, but she definitely needs happy. She appreciates life and wants to share the ride with loved ones. Let me remind you of my original request, make her smile.

Now, back to you. What are your dreams? What are your goals? Are you father of my grand-child material? There are so many things I would like to ask you. Stop lurking around, come on in. Let's have a chat, let me run your profile through the FBI database.

Someday, some other nerd might go visiting some whatever address, and that day this whole story might make sense to you. That baseball bat might even come in handy, who knows?

So dear Nerd, this is your lucky day. It seems like my baby chose you, and if she did I choose you too.

Untitled

LYNNE STAMUS

My mother died in April of 2002 from cancer. I was her daughter and caregiver, for which I am forever grateful. In the short period that she was ill with terminal cancer we were to share many laughs, tears, jokes, likes and dislikes. It was a time I went back to calling her mother instead of Lorraine.

When she came home from the local hospital, I had her room all set up for her, what would be the place of her final breath. It was as comfortable as I could make it and orderly with her meds, oxygen machine, CDs and poetry books to see us on the journey of “living with dying.” Oh, how she did live!

We started by having clear ground rules for what I could do, whether it be photographs, tape recordings, or helping her decide what would be at her living memorial. We carried on many heartfelt discussions of poetry, music, cremation, bagpipers—and by the way, she said she didn’t want a bagpiper—but I did and I think she secretly would have approved.

I remember always saying I was the lucky one that she was one of my best friends and my dearest mother.

It was a time of deep gratitude for the love of all her friends, and neighbors spending time with her. She made gifts of pairs of her earrings to go to all the ladies that came by. To her friend, the Catholic nun, she gave her cashmere coat and scarf that matched, along with a stadium blanket for the nun’s trip home to Minneapolis.

One night, she asked if I would lay by her, and I said, “I’ll just lay on the floor...” to which she said, “but then I can’t see you.” So I crawled up beside her and cried. She looked at me and said, “They’re going to think you’re Jewish. You’ve been to the wailing wall too many times.

I can assure you she made her peace and continued to live with grace and dignity for a while longer. During that time, we developed all of her living memorial. We had John Lennon’s “Imagine,” “Oh Danny Boy,” and more Irish music. “You Were Loved” from *Touched by an*

Angel, the poem "Crossing the Bar." We had a bagpiper play "Amazing Grace" and we lifted off purple and pink balloons...as they floated skyward they formed an "L". Her first name was Lorraine- so that was a sign me that she truly is at peace.

She is in the urn in the reading/tv room. It's a piece of art so everyone can be comfortable with it. It perfectly reflects her beauty and grace.

By the way, just months before she passed she asked me to write her autobiography, which I did. That became her obituary and it was a shared, loving journey. I did have to apologize once during the journey of living with dying. She wanted her hair washed and I was afraid to, thinking she might get chilled-so I did her hair like Pebbles Flintstone. Forgive me, mother. But you will always be beautiful in my eyes. At her living memorial, I came home and discovered a partially eaten popsicle. I didn't really know if I should eat it or not. I finally acquiesced and at it, celebrating the life of a loving, forgiving individual and for all the joy and love and kindness you gave this world, mother. I say thank you-for a spirit that still resides in me and with me. For all these precious moments in time. I am forever grateful. Thank you again, mother. Thank you, neighbors, for praying around her bed that last night before she took her last ride.

Your daughter,

Lynne

A Super-Man To Remember

LORI TENOLD

Every year, this time of March brings back memories of Mom and our Dr. Kealey. In 1976 as spring was just starting, my Mom had two ulcers perforate in her stomach. Of course we didn't know what it was at first, just excruciating pain. Dad, thankfully, made the decision to go to the hospital even though our church at the time greatly preached against medical care, equating it with a lack of faith in God. I was terrified, and literally said a prayer that we weren't making the wrong choice that would "kill" her in the process. I couldn't live without Mom. THAT is faith in God! So we went to UIHC, and a fifth year surgical resident came to our aid. A man around 30, who we found out rode his bike to work. He was with us daily, through surgery and recovery. He was down to earth, and chatted with Dad about the fact that his own Dad bought oil for the farm from the company Dad worked for. I was 13, was quite enamored with this man who swooped in and saved Mom's life. "Just doing his job", but certainly at the right place at the right time. After Mom went home 10 days later, with a foot-long vertical scar on her belly, we of course went our separate ways. I think I remember him saying "I don't want to have to see you back here again", with a twinkle in his voice, when we left. We knew what he meant.

I never forgot this man, his humanity and sincerity, and calm, no-nonsense bedside manner. He saw Dad trembling after the surgery (not knowing it was Parkinson's) and told him to take his kids home for the night. We were back that next day, and every day after. So was he. So, on the 20th anniversary of the surgery, I put pen to paper. I had to let him know I'd never forgotten him, quite the opposite. My letter wafted onto his desk, and I really didn't think he'd remember us. Can you imagine how many patients he had in 20 years! But he did remember, and two months later a letter comes to me, proving he'd never forgotten our family name, how ill Mom was, and the day of the week she came in. On a bitterly cold February day, my words warmed his heart. I was overwhelmed, and proceeded to make him a calligraphy gift, a poem called "Be Alive". To my knowledge, my calligraphy is still on his office wall.

Through the years I would write him a note now and then. Mom and I also ran into him a couple times in Iowa City, as he was still at the U. The last time, ironically, was the last day of

Mom's life. She was dying, and Dr. Kealey was called into the SICU to visit another patient. I couldn't believe it when I saw him, having not seen him in years. I was so thrilled to see him, even amidst our grief, that I whispered in Mom's ear that "Dr. Kealey was here!" Here he was, not able to help this time, but it still was a comfort to me for him to be there. She passed away not even an hour later. 34 years of time had come full circle. I am convinced our impromptu, total chance meeting those last hours was no coincidence.

Doctors never know the far reaching effects of their "talents". I set out on a course years ago to make sure one did. Thanks to Dr. Gerald "Pat" Kealey for being our lifesaver, and a super-man when we needed one. My life would be totally different without Mom. Everything I am is because of her. I will always be thankful for those 34 extra years.

Grace

MAELEEN V. THORIUS

At the door, in her flowered housecoat with those little wire frames perched on her nose, her eyes twinkling, holding the screen open, beckoning me inside. Oxygen whistling stuck in her nose. Come in. Been in this house sixty years. Grant Wood lived down the street, historical now. The whole neighborhood. Chuckling. Chicken casserole? How lovely! You are so kind. Don't leave. I have cherry pie in the fridge.

Sit.

Grace.

Four sons. Live all over. South Carolina. Baltimore. New Jersey. Very successful. Professor. Doctor. Dentist. One dead. Died in 1967. Art student at the U. Came down those stairs in a blue, you know, work shirt. Chambray? Whatever they call it. I said, "You shouldn't wear that to a party. Why don't you wear something nicer?" I should've never said that. Didn't come home. Found him at the lake with the gun. A tear slips. Still smiling. Shaking head. Terrible time. Minister said he wasn't sure he would go to heaven.

Grace?

Delivery boy with groceries. Check book. Batteries dead. Can't forget the walker. Keep falling. Son says to stop asking people for help. Do things yourself. Says I might not be able to stay in this house. Can you get me new batteries? Do I tip that boy? Where's that check book? I can't remember. About the tip, I mean.

Grace.

Just last year I asked Pastor, about the whole heaven thing. He says to me, "Oh Grace, of course your son went to heaven." Such a relief. All the years worrying and praying. Smiling. Tears. Sigh. Battery singing. Oxygen whistling.

Grace.

Barry

CAROL TYX

Dear Barry,

I woke up early this morning with a song thrumming through my head. Maybe it's what the birds are singing, too: Wake at dawn with a winged heart, wake at dawn with a winged heart. Give thanks, give thanks, for another day of loving. While I wish you were here in bed beside me on this delightfully cool summer morning (don't worry, it will heat up, you heat-loving creature), I have the pleasure of anticipation: you will be here tonight. We'll work on the mountain of mulch, then take a swing by the Friday night music—dancing, I hope. It's one of the things I love about you, your willingness to dance even if no one else is dancing. Afterwards, we'll savor a stir fry I've got cooked up for us. It's more than 5 ingredients and not quite 11, your favorite numbers. I'll list the ingredients because you always want to know what you are eating—carrots, beets, eggplant, kale, chard, snap peas, peppers, broccoli, chicken. All from local sources, all organic—also important to you.

This letter just about got sidetracked by the food. Your deep delight and gratitude for food—every day, at every meal—has taught me a lot about how to live in gratitude. At first, when I met you a little over three years ago, I was disappointed that you were not a person who said grace at meals, but I quickly discovered that's not true—you just don't use more traditional wording to express your gratitude. You always—and I mean always—pause before eating, lift up a Thank you, universe, and then continue your litany of thanks: thank you chickens, thank you kale, thank you chard, thank you carrots, thank you beets; thank you sun, thank you rain, thank you earth; thank you farmers, thank you co-op. If we're not together, you often text me what you've had for breakfast—eggs, collards, kale, and chard in green chile tortilla—yum. Occasionally I get a little Charlie Brownish about your food exuberance—isn't this a bit much?—but when I'm back to being myself, I see that such tireless, extravagant gratitude nourishes my life.

While food is one of your primary litanies of thanks, you don't end there. Having grown up on a farm without indoor plumbing, the bathroom becomes another place of gratitude for you:

thank you toilet, thank you hot water, thank you soap, thank you shampoo. You may be the only person I've heard say thank you toilet, which points to my privileged life of taking toilets for granted.

You don't wait for something extraordinary to happen to give thanks. It's the every day that you appreciate, day in and day out. Like a well-tended garden, you nurture thankfulness. I've been blessed with the bounty of this garden of gratitude. Thank you for bringing me into the beauty of every day blessing.

With love and gratitude,

Carol

Shells

ERIN CASEY

*You could crack pecan shells
with a single hand.*

*You didn't keep a morsel
but gave them to me instead.*

*Tiny, smooth hands in
a wrinkled one with a line
that told the story of your
life... a line much too short.*

*You tried to leave me once
when I was very young.
The pastor took my hand
and promised you peace in heaven.*

I didn't believe him.

*I wanted to baptize you with
tap water in a cartoon mug.*

But how could God not want you?

*You held on for me and
cracked shells for ten more years
until cancer made you a
shell of your powerful self.
Those same hands, wrinkles so fine,
could barely grasp a bar to rise.*

*I was whole before you left:
innocent, devoid of real death.
The last time I saw you,
you called me College Girl,
your head as smooth as a shell.
You hid it beneath baseball caps
and smiled behind the pain.*

*But I still remember your fear
when your mother spoke
the dreaded word that sentenced you.*

Chemotherapy

*It wasn't fear for yourself, no.
Who would crack the shells for me now
and protect me as others couldn't?
Who would hover at my shoulder
and rearrange Rook cards in my hand?
They lied about your illness
to spare me my graduation day.
But your mother knew better.*

*I slept with my phone that night
when you took your last breath.
Forever I regret not being there.
But in the midst of my tears,
I felt your hand, wrinkled,
against my tear-stained palm.
My shell broke and exposed
the delicate heart within.
I didn't know if I should hide
or break free to survive.*

*Nothing was the same after.
Our family crumbled, toppled,
leaving fragments scattered
with bitter shards embedded
in the wake of your death.
You held us all together,
offering us all that you were,
never leaving anything for yourself.*

*Even now when I look at the pecan
bucket, filled with feathered memories,
I remember those summer nights
of fireflies and lemonade,
when you'd crack those shells,
and all was right with the world.*

Untitled

ANONYMOUS

After false starts and sad endings, I learned to have faith in love and commitment. My husband taught with such love and adoration; I had no idea he was preparing me to live without him; and for him to gently let go of me.

When I met my husband, my sister and I were getting wild at the Coralville 4th of July party. We had made a cooler full of Margaritas and brought the only thing I had left in my house to serve it with: a soup ladle. We were serving anyone in arm's reach "one scoop or two" of our Margaritas. Don was sitting at the end of a row of mutual friends. A non-drinker, he eagerly accepted a couple of drinks during the evening. When the concert was over, he was instantly by my side grabbing my lawn chair, cooler, and soup ladle. He listened with rapt attention as I chatted on the way to my house. He may have said something about seeing me again, but I don't really remember.

The short story is that he most definitely did want to see me again. After the first car ride on Sunday afternoon, we were never apart for more than a day or two. We married a year later. After that, we remodeled the house he had built with his first love. I came to love his grown children. We traveled aimlessly across Switzerland, France, and Italy. We marveled at the cemetery and beaches in Normandy. We swam in the ocean in Hawaii. Most of all, we lived and worked, and loved. He was a patient, proud step-father to my two teenage sons, who loved him. He did not always agree with my decisions. However, he did always support me once I made up my mind. I was never afraid to tell him something. For that I was rewarded with his love and trust.

Love and trust.

For many years, I had not allowed myself to be vulnerable enough to love completely or to trust at all. Within the boundaries of our marriage, I learned to need Don. He made it safe for me to be vulnerable. He made me strong enough to trust another person. And it was that strength that saw me through his illness and long, painful road to the end of his life.

My sweet husband was kind, intelligent, hard-working, and wise. He knew immediately that the tumor found on my 45th birthday was very bad. He loved his life, and he did what he could to stay with me as long as possible. His cancer was caught too late. Six months after surgery and treatment, it was back. He decided right then that he wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with his family, doing only what he wanted. More radiation, more chemo, more surgery, were not for him. His only real regret in life was that he would make me a young widow.

I did become a widow. I was lonely, sad, bereft, and missed him bitterly. However, he left me so much better than he found me. From him I learned that it's OK to love without reserve. I learned that it's okay to need other people. I remember telling him that I didn't need anything from anyone and I was only with him because I wanted his company. His reply was, "That seems like a pretty empty relationship. Of course you need something from me. I need things from you." It was so simple.

After he died, I went to school. I worked hard. I traveled. I cared for my pets. I mowed the lawn and weeded the flowers. Eventually, I felt good enough to spend time with someone other than my siblings or my children or parents.

And along came my new love! And I was able to love again because Don taught me how to do it.

July 30, 2018

Dear Samirji,

Having crossed the age of 80, I do not know what tomorrow has in store for me. Therefore, while traversing my life, I found that the times spent in association with you over 15 years were the most productive and memorable ones. And I wanted to convey my heartfelt gratitude for all that you did.

How do I describe all those events which made it that way, and in what sequence or order? Let me first recount the emotional support you gave which matters most to every human being. At every turn, you always saw to my comfort level whatever may have been the situation. I remember when I had felt upset about some incidents and made you come to Calcutta Club to pour over my heart to you. And I felt extremely relieved after that.

The marriage of my daughter during the early 1980s was a matter of great importance to me and my wife. You accompanied all of us to Madras and New Delhi for this purpose in addition to extending support wherever and whenever needed 'til she got married.

Likewise, for the education of my son. You encouraged me to send him to Doon boarding school and helped in that process. Several years later when Ashokji couldn't join in his marriage, you came over to Calcutta along with Nandita though you rarely attended such events even for your close family members. And all of us felt extremely happy and honoured by that.

Your interest and support in starting the computer software business in 1986 and then of encouraging me in planning to make it parallel to the group's media business was a great boost to my self-confidence. It's a different matter that this couldn't happen because of the lack of comprehension on the part of Ashokji. And whatever was started had to be finally shut down despite making profits. The guy we brought in has been a billionaire for a long time with worldwide operations in this business including at Bangalore, headquartered in the Valley. And, I am certain we would have made it the largest software business in India (he was a

classmate and has been a close friend of Nandan Nilekani, present chairman of INFOSYS) as you have done to the media business.

What could be achieved by turning around all the enterprises and businesses put under my charge is another important part of the happenings during this period. Your contribution was as important here as anywhere else. Rohtas, the mother of all enterprises in the group, is a saga where you were most closely associated. My visits to the complex at Dalmianagar along with you in the initial period had laid the foundation for my taking its charge subsequently. Those not aware of the inner workings will never know why it finally closed. Well, the primary reason was non-contribution of promoters share by Ashokji on the grounds of your alleged lack of interest in manufacturing industries and his own ill-health--he shared this with me in a casual discussion. Anyway, dealing with the entire gamut of management issues and in finally making it a profitable enterprise too will always rank as a matter of my greatest achievement.

Except for few people, some are still around, others gone, even after Dalmianagar's closure, there were some takers for it. And every one of them had approached me to take its charge. Gouri Goenka, younger brother of late RPG, was one of them. I met Ashokji to get his permission for this as I had decided to not get involved with anything in which the group had interest. Ashokji told me that he would be unhappy if I took its charge. For me, that was the end of the matter. Rest is history.

What to say about the changes you brought about in the transformation of the Times group despite constant criticism, discouragement and negative approach of the other board members, including the chairman, at the initial stages? Well, I still remember the rebukes and the beatings I had from Ashokji, particularly at the breakfast table at the Jain House, New Delhi, during this period for assisting you and supporting your endeavors.

I could have never gone or completed the advanced management program at the Harvard Business School but for you. This was a matter of great mental satisfaction to me. Both Alka & Amit even now fondly remember your visit to the HBS campus giving them a gift which they used while there.

Asha, my wife, still remembers and recounts the loving care you took of her while escorting her with you to Patna during my trying times in Bihar.

And, I cannot but feel extremely obliged for the legal help you took lead in organising for the criminal case against me which finally got dismissed; even going from door to door to the leading lawyers, including the visit to their homes and to New Delhi.

I cannot but remember when we travelled together to New Delhi for my election as the president of the All India Management Association (AIMA). You encouraged me to fight for it to succeed which I did despite Dr Tarneja's absence though he represented Dalmianagar Management Association on the AIMA Council.

Also, of your help and guidance in varieties of matters. When I was going to Venice for the first time, you drew sketches and showed me how the warships used to come there for wars. I have

a very fond memory of our travel together by train from Mughalsarai to Delhi when you drew sketches to explain several concepts relating to life and work.

I tell people that I had learnt marketing from Samir Jain who had imbibed clear concepts at an early stage in life.

And, for all the above and many more things—difficult to recount in a letter, I would like to convey my gratitude to you.

With warm regards and all the best wishes,

Atmaram