

Crone Body

by Pat Hanson



SHIFT HAPPENS — LET IT BE

Let It Be

When I find myself
in times of trouble,
Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom,
let it be

And in my hour of darkness
she is standing right in front of me
Speaking words of wisdom,
let it be

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom,
let it be

— *Paul McCartney*

My mother died this past Valentines Day at 2:55 a.m. She was ninety-three. It took until February 20 for me to finally sit down and really cry. I wept for the full three minutes and 38 seconds of “Let it Be,” the song Paul McCartney wrote after his mother Mary — who had died when he was fourteen — came to him in a dream. I played a gospel version of the song at the end of the service of my mother, who was also named Mary.

There I was at Applewood Estates in New Jersey — wearing a black robe and my mother’s red-and-black scarf from her duplicate bridge days — officiating at her funeral. I had mentally rehearsed this moment many times. I looked out at the few friends of hers who were still alive and who had come to the chapel: among them I found three women whose names hadn’t been crossed off in her much-amended address book.

The comments I’d gotten from several long time Applewood residents echoed in my mind. One asked me sharply, “How’d you and your sisters get to be so bubbly, energetic? Your mother is one of the most toxic people I ever had to welcome to this place.”

“It wasn’t easy,” I had replied with a shrug. My mother — a former Latin and English teacher — often reacted when I shared my writing to her by covering my essays with red exclamation points. She responded to my hair-brained idea of publishing a book, with stern admonitions to “get a job.”

She never understood why I hadn't done what it takes — succumb, submit, censor my real self — to get tenure at some university and stay there forever. Once when I took her to hear the Applewood Residential Choir, she asked to leave early and commented, "That was terrible, they were so off-key that I don't think people over 80 should be allowed to sing."

"She sounds like a bitter old woman to me," my counselor once reflected. He cautioned me not to expect her dying to be of those Kubler-Ross 5th stage endings (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, then acceptance.) "At the end many people just get more like they were the rest of their lives."

But surprisingly, my therapist was wrong. Although my mother treated people appallingly for most of her life, during her final year something shifted and she became compassionate, even kind. That transformation was part of what clued me in that she was close to the end.

Fiercely independent, her physical condition deteriorated to the point that she had to move from her proud apartment in the independent living section to the "health care wing." There she became dependent on a team of

caretakers to move her from bed to her wheelchair to get to meals and rudimentary exercise classes and back to bed again.

But where previously she would have raged about her condition, now she was almost calm. Instead of bemoaning the time it would take for the aides to respond to her calls for assistance, my mother empathized with what a hard job they had. She made up nicknames — like Affable Arleen, Irascible Irma,

and Beatific Barbara — in order to remember the names of her caregivers. She told me that she felt sorry for the others on her wing who were worse off than she was, and that she prayed for them.

Towards the end,

she was grateful just to be able to use the remote and watch her favorite game shows.

The last few times I was with her, the doctor asked her for a number from 1-to-10 for her pain. Surprisingly, she responded by saying, "what pain?" She didn't remember her discomfort, just as she didn't remember the names of her friends.

When she was in the hospital for the last time bleeding from diverticulitis, the doctor, she and

Although my mother treated people appallingly for most of her life, during her final year something shifted and she became compassionate, even kind.



My mother, Mary. B. Wilkin (circa?)

I agreed to no more transfusions or heroic procedures. She wanted to go home to her own bed, with her own pictures of her family on the wall. She was happy and ready for the end.

After she returned to the care facility, she asked me to call her roommate (who was deaf and a wanderer) to tell her where she'd been, and asked me to thank the health care workers who had been caring for her. "I feel like I'm going out in such luxury," she said in one of our final conversations.

The Monday before she died I constructed a Valentine's Day card with doilies, lace and pictures of me and my sister emerging from behind hearts. I wrote "we love you" on the card in glittery ink and was sure to mailed it priority so it would reach

her in time. On Thursday I called the social worker to see if the card had arrived. It was nowhere to be found, so the social worker asked me to e-mail a picture of it to her so she could show it to my mother on her laptop. She told me that my mother reached up and touched each of our faces and weakly waved good-bye. I got the call only hours later that she was gone.

All of this was in my mind as I stood there in front of the small assembly of well-wishers at my mother's service. "Welcome," I said, thanking folks for being there. "While my mother wasn't easy to deal with some of the time, in this celebration of her life, can you share some good memories, positive stories?"

Gladys Simone Malarik, a friend of my mother from her college sorority days, was the first of several who stood up to share a good memory.

"I remember Mary on August 25, 1942. I was the limo driver and took her to her wedding. She was beaming! She was so in love."

I was shocked: in my memories my mother had often, and loudly, claimed that marrying my father was her biggest mistake. (They had separated, though never divorced, long before his death decades ago.) But it connected with another curious incident: a month previously, my mother had asked her

accountant to retrieve her wedding ring from the safe where it had languished for decades and bring it to her to wear in the nursing home. I guess she had wanted to remember being in love.

The service went on, with other stories surfacing about my mother. One of her previous caregivers pulled me aside after the service to share her own remembrance.

Days before she died, my mother had motioned her to sit beside her and whispered in her ear, "You have beautiful hair," my mother said, "never cut your hair!"

"Your mother was so smart," the aide added. "She was so proud of her daughters. And always kind. I will miss her."

"Chalk that up to another shift," I thought, flashing back to the time I'd cut my pony tail in the 6th grade. At the time, she had commented archly, "Pretty girls can wear their hair like that, but not you." Truly, my mother at the end of her life had softened her outlook and reined in her acerbic tongue.

Now I faced the task of cleaning out her room. I'd done much of the hard work previously, giving away

or selling her furniture and house wares during the previous year. Now what was left fit in three clear garbage bags. Among her belongings was a wide-band watch with big numbers that I'd never seen before. I sent it to my sister Joan. She called me a few days later and told me that she'd bought the watch for my mother last August when she visited because my mother had

wanted to know when her favorite game shows were on. The uncanny thing was that the watch was stopped at 2:54 — one minute before my mother's official time of death.

As I wrote this earlier this spring it had been three weeks since my mother died. But even now, months later, I still can't get "Let It Be" out of my head. My mind

has been flooded with gratitude for all the wise choices my mother made, choices that in the long run have affected me deeply.

Thank you, Mother Mary, for all you've done for me. Rest in peace. ©

PAT HANSON, 69, is a veteran health and sexuality educator, public speaker, and workshop leader. Find out more about her work at www.invisiblegrandparent.com and www.agingpositively.net.

***M**y mother claimed that marrying my father was the biggest mistake of her life. But shortly before her death she had started wearin her wedding ring. I guess she had wanted to remember being in love.*