

EULOGY FOR MY MOTHER

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When you still had your mother you often thought of the days when you would have her no longer. Now you will often think of days past when you had her. When you are used to this horrible thing that they will forever be cast into the past, then you will gently feel her revive, returning to take her place . . . beside you Let yourself be inert, wait till the incomprehensible power . . . that has broken you restores you a little, I say a little, for henceforth you will always keep something broken about you. Tell yourself this, too, for it is a kind of pleasure to know that you will never love less, that you will never be consoled —Marcel Proust

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20 My mother's name is Virginia. I called her Mom-O.

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As everyone who ever met her knows, she was a people person. She loved people. Although Miller Lite, menthol cigarettes, and nachos were close to her heart, people were more treasured by her than any possession.

25 If you are one of her many friends, she knew your birthday and your children's birthdays, and she would attend every graduation, funeral, and wedding. She would also go to see you in the hospital, drive you home, and visit you at your house until you were back on your feet.

30 On holidays, you would get a cake, a basket, or a poinsettia. At Christmas, she had someone dress up as Santa, and she would hold an all-night cookie-making party for all ages. Chris and Elaine would bring sacks of flour and sugar. The next day, every surface would have a crystal plate filled with cookies or fudge.

35 On Halloween, you were expected to stop by the house to show off your costume. She had spent untold hours putting together bags of candy for every trick-or-treater . . . children who were once driven across town for the annual event later drove their own children across town to see the house, the feast of treats, and the woman in the crazy costumes. People loved her.

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When I was younger, my stepfather Charlie, her second husband, and I used to beg her to create friendship flashcards so we could keep up with all of the people in her life. She was the original social network. I don't recall ever having a meal at our house that wasn't shared by at least two of her friends who had

stopped by. She would dash in with a bag of groceries and say, “Bill and Cheryl are on their way over, and I invited Chris.”

5 And I would say, “Oh, Chris. You mean, like, of Chris and Frank?”

“No,” she would reply. “Chris the dentist.”

“Who’s Chris the dentist?”

10 “He’s from San Angelo. He’s in for the weekend to look at a condo. I think I can sell him one of Ahn Lamb’s condos.”

“Ahn has a condo for sale?”

15 “Not yet, but she needs to unload it. I can get Chuck to help fix it up.”

“Which condo is that?”

“You know, the one next to Keith’s.”

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“Keith? Which Keith?”

25 “Prim, Keith Prim, the one who smokes the great briskets. That reminds me, I have to call him up. His birthday is Saturday. Now make yourself useful and go see if we have beer in the fridge in the garage.”

It didn’t matter who was at the table. Within the hour, they had a gourmet meal and were now best of friends. And Keith probably had a new neighbor and Anh had sold a condo.

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35 It’s hard to imagine that this force of nature began life in Amherst County, Virginia. Born at home with her grandmother serving as a midwife, she was the youngest of five children and the smallest by almost a foot. What she lacked in size, however, she made up for in energy and volume. After graduating from high school, she lived in Philadelphia briefly, where she met my father. When my father graduated from law school, the three of us moved to Dallas. My mother became an adopted Texan. In later years, she would tell newcomers, 40 “You will hate it here the first year and then you will never want to leave.” Our first house was on Wingate Drive near Love Field. A year later, we moved to Wateka in Greenway Parks.

Ever active, she earned a degree from college then began her career in real estate with Gion Gregg Realtors in Snider Plaza, while cheering on the rugby team during the weekends. In the mid-1970s, she formed Better Homes Realtors with a partner, Roy Leteer. Roy was the outgoing head of Secret Service in Dallas and Lyndon Johnson's main man. As a result, she began to meet everyone who surrounded each of the presidents. Many of these men—

5 they were all men—became some of her best friends:

10 Jim Delamore,
Frank Foster,
Jerry Tate,
Walt Coughlin,
and Steve Beauchamp,

15 to name a few. To this day, at least one of them sends her a holiday ornament from the White House each Christmas.

The first real estate agent to join Better Homes was a “Todora,” Pete Todora. Pete's family, one of the prominent families of Italian descent in the Dallas area (the producers of “The Sopranos” owe them royalty checks), adopted my

20 mother as one of their own. She fit right in. So, while she was selling houses to Secret Service agents during the week, she was spending her weekends at the horse races or casinos in Las Vegas or Shreveport with guys named Sammy the Bull or Vinnie the Nose. Parties at the house—of which there were many—

25 often had more Cadillacs and G-cars beached on the lawn than any mob funeral.

And anyone who ever bought a house from her became a friend for life. Years after a sale, if you called her and asked about a roofer, she would be over at

30 your house on top of the roof, lining up contractors, and then overseeing their work. And if she happened to notice your kid—who was probably in diapers at the time she sold you the house—bouncing a ball in the backyard, you would find a basketball hoop attached to that new roof on the back of the house. That is how she was.

35 To her last day, if you expressed interest in something in her house, it would be in your car before you finished your last beer. And if it wouldn't fit in your car, it would be delivered to your house the next week. One poor guy asked about the piano. I could only imagine his surprise when there was a knock on his

40 door the following week.

As a kid, I was bewildered to see furniture and furnishings routinely rotate out of the house. Only later, as an adult, could I see that it was because she cared so

much about others. She wasn't seeking popularity nor fulfilling a need to be needed. She genuinely just cared. And she had fun in the process. If she was not hosting the party, she was the life of the party. Her laughter was contagious, while her counsel was sought in all matters of human affairs.

5 She had some of the craziest friends. When you were with her, you never knew whom you were going to meet. To her, it didn't matter if a person was high society or down on their luck. She treated everyone the same—you got a cold Miller Lite in a can (no glass) and a good meal. Everyone was welcome in her home, and she loved people exactly the way they are. There is a famous Mother Teresa quote that starts off:

“People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered . . . forgive (love) them anyway”

15 While my mother did not attend church or subscribe to a particular religion, she did exemplify this way of being. Growing up in the South and even in Dallas in the 1970s, she didn't care about the color of someone's skin, whether they were straight or gay, or had any kind of “issues” in their life. It didn't matter. The only thing she wouldn't stand for was drugs. My mother did her fair share of beer drinking, but she hated drugs. That was the only thing that was a sure one-way ticket out of a party.

25 People often had the impression that she always had a beer in her hand. That was actually true; but make no mistake, she was always sharp and on top of her game. If someone in the entourage acted out of order, she would let them know. If you were the offender, you would feel this arm intertwine with yours out of nowhere. “Come here,” she would say, laughing, as she walked you away from the group. Before you realized what was happening, she would have you in a corner. There, she would sit you down so that she could see you eye to eye. Then, she would start in with, “Listen here, you little shit . . .” That is a sobering moment.

35 By the time she finished explaining to you exactly what you were doing wrong, you knew that (a) she was telling you something you actually needed to hear, and (b) if you didn't straighten up, you were going to be on her “shit list.” And that's a list no one wanted to be on. But make no mistake, she cared about you.

40 You see, my mother believed that the world is divided into three kinds of people: friends, idiots, and motherfuckers. Said another way, there are those who you fight, those who you fight for, and the idiots who need to pick a side. She was a natural fighter. You forget that about someone who is 5'2”. She

didn't just fight for the underdog, she was the underdog. She believed that when you fight, you fight until the bell rings.

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With that, I want to speak just now about the last year of her life. It is particularly important, as it separated her from what she loved most, her friends. She didn't want people to see her sick. She knew that her friends were struggling with seeing someone with so much life being ill. She could see it in
10 their eyes or hear it in their voices, so she kept everyone at bay.

At the end of last year, when the doctors discovered that the colon cancer she had been treated for in 2009 and 2010 had returned, the disease had already invaded the rest of her body, and the doctors began using such terms as Stage
15 4, inoperable, and metastatic. Regardless, she agreed to a biweekly cocktail of lethal drugs to try to reduce the size of the tumors or at least arrest their continued advance.

There is a quote in the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* that speaks to what she
20 signed up for:

“I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that
courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked
before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter
25 what.”

My mother lived with this kind of courage for the last year so that she could have the chance to spend more time with the people she loved.

30 While she didn't complain, the treatments were unpleasant, and her body did not react well. At the end of August, we met with her doctor, Dr. Arriaga—Dr. A she called him. She was hovering around 80 pounds, her face was broken out, skin cracking into open wounds, and she was wearing a wig. She looked like a little bird sitting on the exam table, her feet not touching the floor.

35 My mother was afraid of doctors. She had white-coat syndrome. Step into a doctor's office, and her blood pressure and heart rate would double. But she liked Dr. A. He was straight with her. And on that day in August, he was direct in the way she always was when she pulled you into the corner to give you a
40 “Listen here . . .” talk.

As the doctor broke the news that he was stopping the treatments, a flicker of fear ran through her—the first I had ever seen—and then her body relaxed. The doctor was clear: the bell had rung; she didn't need to fight anymore.

5 The truth was that she was tired of feeling sick. She wanted to eat again. She just wanted to sit down one more time with a Miller Lite and enjoy an afternoon on a patio with her friends. She didn't ask how long she had or even about the road ahead. She asked only if they would remove the tubes in her back (no), whether she could skip the upcoming colonoscopy (yes), and about
10 her friend Elaine's recent diagnosis—what was the best treatment for her? In other words, while the doctor and I were in tears, she was already thinking about the care of her friends.

15 Seeing the end coming closer into sight, I reached out to several of her friends to ask you a favor: please record a hello to my mother so that she could see your face and hear your voice on those days when she could not see and hear them in person. There were three questions that I asked people to consider as they made these videos:

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1. What was my mother, Virginia, put on this earth for?
 2. What is your favorite Virginia-ism or Virginia story?
 3. How has she influenced something in your life?

25 Many were kind enough to provide responses, and the responses were profound. They enhanced her life enormously. She would watch them and laugh or talk back to the video or start in on a story about some adventure that she and the person had had.

30 During the process of making these videos, some people asked me my answers. I shared them with her and will share them with you now.

1. What was my mother, Virginia, put on this earth for?

To connect people.

35 My mother was put on this earth to connect people.

You need a place to live . . . let me tell you who has a place that is available . . .

You need a painter . . . I know just the guy to call . . .

40 You new in town and single . . . have I got just the person for you . . .

Now as to the quality of the painter/plumber/roofer or even the potential significant other, let's not get into details. At least she knew someone to call.

5 She was uniquely equipped to do this. In addition to her tireless energy, she always saw the best in people, had a memory for the details about everyone, and had an infectious laugh and smile that let everyone know they are important. The fabric of people she created extends beyond any I have ever known.

10 Wonder if it is true? Just take a minute and look around you.
If you are here today, it is because of her.
If you have had your life improved by someone she knows who is here, then it is because of her.

15 2. What is your favorite Virginia-ism or Virginia story?

I have so many favorite stories about her:
the time in New Orleans when she was dancing on the bar
20 the time in Puerto Vallarta when she was dancing on the bar
the time during my 21st birthday at the strip club when she was dancing on the bar . . .

. . . But my favorite story about her is one I refer to as the "Flaming 7s."
25 When her friend Pat Biggs died, she left my mother not only a dog, Killer—pound-for-pound the meanest dog ever to live—but her ashes. Sensing an opportunity, my mother parlayed the memorial service into a trip. She; Pat's daughter, Annie; and another friend headed straight to Las Vegas. The ashes? Well, between games of slots, she walked around
30 and sprinkled ashes all over the casino. In particular, she placed a good portion of them around the machine known as the Flaming 7s. That, of course, was Pat's lucky machine.

35 3. How has she influenced something in your life?

Obviously, in more ways than I can express. I will pass on a few specific life lessons she shared. I refer to these as Life Lessons from Mom-O, and there are ten:

40 10 Always dress to impress and add some flair; the best flair is a Mercedes Benz in white.

- 9 Drugs are evil. Motorcycles and sports cars are *kind of* evil, but drugs are definitely evil.
- 5 8 When it comes to a fight, being right is important, but size doesn't matter.
- 7 Nachos and beer are the perfect meal. You get all five food groups: 1 bread (chips), 2 meat (chicken or beef), 3 dairy (cheese), 4 vegetable (jalapenos), and, of course, 5 beer.
- 10 6 The Republicans don't always get it right, but the Democrats definitely have it all wrong.
- 15 5 Wherever two or more people are gathered, there is the potential for a party.
- 4 What some people call "vices" (alcohol, tobacco, and gambling), are part of what make life worth living.
- 20 3 Speaking of alcohol, there is only one kind of beer: Miller Lite, and it should be consumed from a can only, a can insulated by a koozie.
- 2 Holidays are special days; pull out all the stops.
- 25 1 The number-one lesson in life: friends are more valuable than money.

Now, wherever I am, I can hear her saying these things, and if she were here she would tell you herself. She would also say thank you to so many people who cared for her. There are too many to name, but a few deserve special note, and I apologize for those I leave out. These names are not in any order:

35 Bob and Carisa
Charles Wade
Pete & Rose Todora
Chuck Armstrong
Mary McKay

40 There are also three special people who cared for her even when it was difficult and even when sometimes she didn't want them to:

Jan Plance
Chris Foster

Aunt Pat

While we are all destined to someday join her, these people have already earned their wings.

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Finally, I want to add something particularly personal.

10 I was with my mother the day Hospice first visited her. I had just taken Shirley to the airport. Chris, Pat, and I were with her; Jan appeared not long after. She was losing weight, as there was an obstruction that prevented her from eating. Her eyes were still bright, and three days before, she had driven herself to go along with Pat and Shirley to the casino in Oklahoma. But she was very ill.

15 As the Hospice coordinator did her best to cheerily describe what lay ahead, I put my arm around my mother and she leaned into me. We grasped hands and then interlocked fingers. We had grown much closer since her illness had begun—I do owe cancer for that. She appeared to be in good spirits, even as she
20 anticipated the weeks ahead. At this point, we were still measuring her time in weeks.

That evening, when she retired to her bedroom, I followed her. The lamp next to her bed was on, and the light was at face-level as she lay propped against the
25 headboard. She moved in a bit and made a place for me to sit on the edge of the bed next to her. And in that moment we shared what people both fear and long for from their parents. We visited about:

30 the many good times we shared together;
the lives of so many friends whom she cared about;
how her eyes were sometimes green or sometimes blue;
some of the challenges she had quietly faced;
the fullness of the life she had lived—she said, “I could not have done
more if I had lived another 30 years”;
35 and what she hoped for the future.

Finally, she said I would never be without her. She said, “All you have to do is talk to me. I will always be right there.”

40 Three days later, when she passed away, I had never imagined being so upset. You don’t understand seeing your mother dead. It is like the core of the earth has gone cool and gravity has stopped all at once. You feel a deep sense of cold aloneness just as you become untethered. I know others are feeling it too.

More than one person has said it feels like they lost a limb.
Others have said they lost their mother, sister, or best friend.
Many I have not spoken to, because it was too upsetting.

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The truth is, I don't want this to be happening. I miss her. I don't mind being frustrated with her or happy with her or worried about her or anything. Anything but this.

10 I think we all kept thinking that she was one of those rare few who are so fully alive each and every day that it seemed impossible that she could be gone, as if she were the one who would have found a way to cheat fate by virtue of the passion she had for every day. In fact, I keep thinking she is just late for the party now.

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It's all so strange without her, and I think of her all of the time.

I pick up the phone and think, "I can't call her."
I drive over to her house and think, "She's not here."

20 Or it's our weekly date night (the two of us kept a date night every week for that last year), and I realize I don't have anywhere to be.

But then I reflect on what she told me that last night: "All you have to do is talk to me. I will always be right there." So I know when she said that, it applied to
25 all of us.

They say that a person dies twice: the first time when their body gives in and the second when the last person speaks the person's name. Therefore, as long as each person remembers her and speaks to her, she will always live among
30 us.

And as you do speak to her, my request is, you remember the person who lived life to its fullest. Remember the person who lived all-out at 100 miles an hour, a life few of us could ever know. Remember the Virginia Mae Garrett (now
35 Burke) from Buena Vista, Virginia, who tried everything, laughed constantly, and touched many. So as you remember her, remember this person. That is who she was and always will be.

In closing, a friend of mine, Luke, shared this poem that I believe sums up her
40 life. It is entitled "Afterglow":

Afterglow

I'd like the memory of me to be a happy one.

I'd like to leave an afterglow of smiles when life is done.
I'd like to leave an echo whispering softly down the ways,
Of happy times and laughing times and bright and sunny days.
I'd like the tears of those who grieve, to dry before the sun;
5 Of happy memories that I leave when life is done.

—Author Unknown