

**Reflections on a Life Well-Lived:
A Tribute my Wife, Mary Alyce Pearson**

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On March 21, 2016 at 3:05 pm, with her two children at her side, she slipped away from us, passing through that veil defining our physical distinctions between life and death. At that moment, I lost the love of my life, and she lost her 6-year battle with Alzheimer's. Mary Alyce Carpenter was her birth name, and for 52 years of marriage and 4 prior years of a sometimes stormy courtship, we created a life together. We laughed together, we cried together, we learned together, we lived together, we loved together.

But mostly we laughed together—at life and all of its wonders and absurdities, *at* our children when they were younger and *with* our children as they grew into the wonderful friends you have heard here today. Mostly we laughed at ourselves, trying to keep one another's (mostly my) ego in check. I saw her laugh her last laugh and smile her last smile about a month ago.

Let me tell you about the first time I saw that smile. Judy Botsford Warren alluded to it in her comments earlier today.

Fall of 1959. We were both freshman at Cal. We were having our Dorm Formal in December, at the Claremont Hotel no less, and I had been successful in convincing a girl from the Church I was attending, Linda Smith I think her name was, to be my date. I'd rented a tux, bought the corsage, gotten a friend to loan me his car. We were double dating with my roommate Lance Wickman, and his girlfriend, Pat Farr, another Paly High Grad. The day of the formal, as fate would have it, Linda Smith came down with an awful cold, or so she told me by phone. I was crushed, but you know who was even more crushed? My roommate Lance. You see, the car I borrowed was a stick shift and Lance didn't know how to drive one. So he and Pat had a vested interest in getting a date for me, even if it was a blind date. Pat thought of Mary Alyce, and asked me if I was interested. Turns out that Mary Alyce and I had actually met in one of those chance campus meetings when a group of guys is walking east and a group of girls is walking west; in fact it was right out in front of Wheeler Auditorium. One guy knows one girl and everyone else gets casually introduced in about 10 seconds and then we go on. I did take notice of Mary Alyce at that time. You all of course know what it was that caught my eye don't you? That smile—the same one you see in the photo in your program. I guess that means that unlike Jerry McGuire, she had me even before hello. Sure, I said hopefully.

Pat asked her high school buddy, Mary Alyce if she would be my blind date for the Dorm Formal. You want to know Mary Alyce's first response? "I don't think so!" Turns out that Pat persevered and cajoled Mary Alyce into coming on the blind date—I guess that it wasn't a completely blind date, but probably one that required a strong lens correction. It turned out that we hit it off. We danced up a storm, laughed a lot, even went for a romantic walk in the lower gardens of the Claremont.

But my magical line of the night—the one that guaranteed a second date? It was when I told her that I was from Healdsburg, the Buckle of the Prune Belt. Yes, shi-shi wine destination Healdsburg was once the home of the Healdsburg Prune Packers American Legion Baseball Team. I guess she figured that any guy who would use

such a ridiculous metaphor (I didn't think it was a metaphor by the way) to describe his home town couldn't be all bad. So that was the beginning of an on-again-off-again courtship over the next two years. Then it got quite serious in our Junior year. But I did have to compete with Vic Willits, who is here with us today, for Mary Alyce's attention. But things worked out for all of us—for both Vic and Arlene and for me and Mary Alyce. Sometimes losing is winning.

That was our first adventure, but we had so many. Mary Alyce was an adventurous soul in so many ways. *Big adventures?* She never said no to a trip to some new or occasionally exotic place—South Africa, Botswana, New Zealand, Malaysia, China (in the 1980s). But it was the *little adventures* that revealed her true vagabond soul—moving site unseen with me, not once, not twice, but three times—

- to Porterville CA in 1964 where we both took jobs as teachers, *and Mary Alyce became friends with so many people in the community.*
- to Minneapolis in 1966 where I—and later she—went to grad school and she gave birth to the two children you just heard from, *and Mary Alyce became friends with so many people in the community.*
- to Urbana IL in 1978, where we raised our family *and Mary Alyce became friends with so many people in the community.*

She also moved *site seen* with me twice, to East Lansing for a six-year sojourn of sanity between two deanships and then back to Berkeley—a place that we had always imagined we would return to in our retirement years. That retirement thing seemed to work for Mary Alyce but not for me. And guess what happened amongst other things in both East Lansing and Berkeley? That's right: *Mary Alyce became friends with so many people in the community.*

What kept us going...

Ours was a marriage based upon some guiding principles, that while seldom discussed explicitly, were our implicit guideposts. I thought, indeed we both thought, they explained the longevity of our relationship. By the way, neither of us realized these principles at the time we were enacting them; they presented themselves to us upon reflection, years later. I want to share a few with you today.

1. To be a good partner, you first have to be a good person—and your own person.
 - ***But be in your partner's corner when it really matters.***
 - A marriage in which neither depends entirely or exclusively on the other to define his or her identity is likely to be stronger and more enduring than one in which one party is more dependent.
2. Don't take much for granted.
 - ***Except that the other person will be in your corner when it really matters.***
 - During our first year of marriage, Mary Alyce went to visit her mother, Alyce Mary to discuss the travails of marriage, and after sharing a litany of concerns, her mother said to her, *Well, you know what they say? The first year is always the hardest.* And in the second year, the same story. Mary Alyce told Alyce Mary of the ups and downs of married life, to which Alyce Mary said, *Well, you know what they say? The second year is always the hardest.* This got to be such a joke and ritual with us that every anniversary, we'd repeat the line, *Well, you know what they say, don't you Dear? The forty fourth year is always the hardest.*

- We didn't so much have a 52 year marriage as much as we had 52 one year renewable contracts. So that was part of the genius of our marriage

The great irony of that annual joke and ritual: we did not know that it was the 53rd year that always the hardest.

3. Find things you can both do together. You'll end up spending a lot more time together if you do.
 - Some of our favorite things to do together: Almost any sport (both as spectators and participants), gardening, cooking, eating (eating what we cooked!), entertaining, hiking, traveling. Theatre, dance, music, drama. But if you do things together, expect to lose from time to time.

Early in our Cal courtship, I decided, in the spirit of doing things together and displaying some of my male talents, I asked Mary Alyce if she wanted to shoot some pool with me at the then brand new Student Union on campus. She said sure. We arrived at the pool room, got a table, and I asked what game do you want to play, 8 ball or Rotation? To which she replied, No let's shoot straight pool, just like in the movies, where you call your shot. I broke. Didn't sink anything. She called the 10 ball in the corner pocket and ran the entire table, sinking 14 straight balls. Then she said, rack 'em up so we can keep going. Needless to say, my male ego was put in its place. What she had not fully disclosed is that she had grown up with a pool table and a father, a sometimes pool hustler, who cut down a cue stick for her when she was 8! I should have taken that as an omen. It was not the last time she put my testosterone in its place.

So that is a glimpse of how our relationship started and developed. I hope it helps you understand how and why it endured.

Special people

Before I close, I want to make sure today that I pay tribute to a few individuals who helped me and Matthew and Susan enormously with Mary Alyce's care particularly in the last years of her life.

Ellen Augustine. After the diagnosis of Alzheimer's in 2010, I knew I needed help in making sure that Mary Alyce could live as active a life as possible. So I got connected with a remarkable woman named Ellen Augustine, a free lance writer and a former candidate for Congress and a champion of many causes, some found and many lost. I hired her to make sure that Mary Alyce got to all the activities—Writer's workshop, Photo Group, Theology Book Club, Sunday Mass, Tennis—that mattered to her. Mary Alyce called Ellen her chauffeur at first. But later, she called Ellen her friend and knew that Ellen was her lifeline to all those activities that defined her as a person. Ellen was Mary Alyce's champion, and for that I am eternally grateful. Alas, we lost Ellen this last fall; but I know she is here in spirit. My favorite image—Ellen chasing down balls that Mary Alyce would normally be expected to pick up and put back in play so that Mary Alyce and her patient partners could continue to play the game.

The Berkshire Staff. Second, I must mention the staff at the Berkshire, where Mary Alyce spent the last 3 years of her life. Here's a story from the last day of her life.

Jenille, one of the most devoted caregivers, along with Cecelia and Teresa, knew that she had only a few hours to live. At 2:30 pm, Janille came into the room, changed Mary Alyce's garments, gave her a sponge bath, washed her face, freshened her lips with chap stick, and gave her a hug. 35 minutes later, Mary Alyce died. What a remarkable act of kindness. She didn't need to do anything; we all knew it was a matter of hours, perhaps minutes. But Janille knew it was important to take the time and the care to make sure that Mary Alyce was ready to die with dignity.

The Kaiser Hospice Crew. Third, I want to commend the Hospice Staff of Kaiser in Oakland, who began their hospice care for Mary Alyce on January 23, 2016. Mary Alyce was in hospice care for only 2 months and 2 days, but it was the best, most sensitive, most thorough care that I could ever have imagined. It was, and is, truly complete—with regular visits for Mary Alyce by an RN and a Nurse's Assistant and occasional, as-needed visits for Mary Alyce and the family by a social worker (Huldah Cannon) and a chaplain (Perry Pike). We used all of these services to the hilt. Especially important in experience was Gabriella, Mary Alyce's case nurse—a delightfully crusty, sensitive, and, perhaps most important, knowledgeable Brit with a career's worth of experience in hospice and, before that, emergency care. The team provided much needed information just when we needed it—on the dying process (stages, signs to look for, ways to respond to the signs), the grieving process, and the aftermath (the deluge of documents, forms, and decisions that must be made). Most important was their sensitivity to Mary Alyce's care and to our grief. Thanks to their presence in our lives, we managed this difficult journey with much greater understanding and confidence that we were doing the right thing.

The Roles Great Women Play

I'll close by characterizing the many roles that Mary Alyce played in our life together. Taken as a whole, they help you understand the special person whose life you have seen chronicled right before your eyes today.

Mary Alyce was a reader. In contrast to me (I am the prototypic professional reader who is obsessed with technical reports and articles and professional books), Mary Alyce was truly well-read. She read *everything* (novels, biographies, poetry, philosophical dispositions and theological treatises, *New York Review of Books*, the *New Yorker*—from cover to cover, the *Sunday Times*), and sometimes she read *anything*, including some of those pulp fiction titles most readily available at airports, drug stores, and even Costco. She even glanced at the *National Inquirer* near supermarket check out lines. Her breadth and depth as a reader is what made her such a knowledgeable and lively conversationalist.

Mary Alyce was a writer. We already heard Sue Austin's compelling account of her participation in the Writer's Workshop. And around this room, you see her published essays, on a range of topics, displayed. But I bet that many of you know Mary Alyce as a writer through the lens of the 1st or 2nd or 10th or 23rd or 27th ever Pearson Family Christmas letter, which she composed by herself, with a little help from Matthew, Susan and me, for 23 years. Creating that letter without her guiding hand and heart for the past four years has been difficult—and we find ourselves saying, "How would Mom have said this?"

Mary Alyce was a talker. How many of you have experienced an evening, particularly a late evening, of easy, engaged, and seemingly endless conversation with Mary Alyce. We've heard 5 testimonies to that today—from Judy, Laura, Pat, Gina, and Sue.

Here's a Facebook note from her daughter in law Margie that epitomizes Mary Alyce's gift of talk:

Marjorie Jolles summer 2001: MP and I are dating a few months. We visit his parents in Michigan and I meet these 2 amazing people for the first time.

Me: 'MP, what are your parents like?'

MP: 'Before the weekend is over you'll have spent at least one night talking until 2 am in the kitchen with my mom.'

...Sure enough!

Mary Alyce was a listener. Some people hear, but others listen. In fact, as many of you know, Mary Alyce did not hear very well (wore hearing aids from her early 40s on), but that did not prevent her from being the quintessential listener. Amy Spindler, a high school friend of Susan's said:

"She always had a smile for me. I still to this day remember how Mary Alyce was genuinely interested in what was going on in our lives... She not only chatted with us, she listened.

She really got it about Mary Alyce's amazing ability to make others matter. When you talked with Mary Alyce, you got the feeling that you were not only the most important person in the room but maybe the most important person in the world.

Mary Alyce was a teacher. We learned so much from her in every phase of her life, for all the reasons you have heard today. But her loss of memory and her loss of language did not diminish her capacity to teach. I cannot tell you how much we learned from Mary Alyce at every stage of the development of her Alzheimer's. We traversed all those stages of response to the Alzheimer's diagnosis—denial, disbelief, anger, outrage, hope, and finally acceptance. And it was when we accepted the reality of Alzheimer's that we were released from the strictures of our rational world views, so that we could learn how to look at the world through her eyes, not ours. We learned that life presents a continuous stream of "new normals" (markers, Mary Alyce might have called them). Mary DeMay, the UCSF doctor who diagnosed her Alzheimer's, told us:

You need to learn how to live and converse within the logic of her world rather than try to show her how (or compel her) to conform to the logic of yours.

Wise advice. Mark St. John, a friend of a friend, put it this way:

Every act of communication is transformed from an exchange of information into an expression of love and commitment.

More wise advice. But it was Mary Alyce who gave life to nuggets of wisdom—through her interactions with us with her ever present smile. Mary Alyce's smile—throughout her life—was a window into her soul.

Mary Alyce was a mother. You just heard from my daughter-in-law, my son, and my daughter—the verdict is in. Mary Alyce (Mom as she was known by Matthew and Susan) was

her children's constant cheerleader, occasional critic, and faithful friend. Her favorite saying about child rearing, which I heard on many occasions:

“All you can do is love ‘em, feed ‘em, and keep ‘em warm. The rest? Well, they have to figure that out on their own.”

Mary Alyce was a friend. In every sense Mary Alyce was the quintessential friend. She gave you the gift of her friendship without any expectation that you would be required to return it. That was the gift—it's unconditional character. It was precisely because she expected nothing in return that she got so much friendship and love in return. Two quick stories about the love she got in return.

One story comes from her friends in those various groups that were so important to her. Writer's Workshop, Photogroup, and Theology book club. Because Ellen Augustine was available to squire Mary Alyce around to these groups that were so important to her, she attended them long after her attention, memory, and language permitted conventional participation. But her friends in all of those groups not only tolerated but celebrated Mary Alyce's participation, silent though often it was. I regard their continued welcoming of Mary Alyce as the strongest witness to friendship that could be offered by anyone, anywhere.

The second is from Andrilla Stephens, the woman who runs the beauty salon at the Berkshire where Mary Alyce spent the last three years of her life. Andrilla is here today. She sent me this e-mail. I love it because it shows that Mary Alyce could still make friends long after her verbal abilities had been compromised by Alzheimer's. Andrilla wrote,

Mary Alyce was a very rare and beautiful person. I only knew her for a short time but it was an honor to have known her. I will truly miss having her come into the Salon at the Berkshire. Her smile just lit up the room and her very presence was warm and inviting. I want to thank you for sharing her with me in this special way. It is very difficult know what to say to family and friends at times like this but I just felt moved to say something. Mary Alyce touched my heart. She will truly be remembered with fondness. May you find comfort in knowing how much your dear wife was loved by others.

It is significant that Andrilla mentioned her smile because after her language began to fail her, her smile was her most important communication tool. And she used it to convey her love of us and her love of life.

Mary Alyce was a lover. She had a very romantic side (physically, emotionally, intellectually), and I was the lucky guy who benefited from all of those attributes. But Mary Alyce loved more than me. She loved so many others, many in this room today. Above all, she loved life in so many ways, large and small.

Mary Alyce was my soulmate

Mary Alyce was my wife

Mary Alyce was my life