

**Friendship and the Moral
Life: A Letter to My Dying
Mother**

October, 1999

Dear Mom,

I know you will never read this letter, but I want to write it anyway.

The other day I was doing some reading on friendship and the moral life, and it struck me how our relationship is really a wonderful experience of a “friendship of character” and even a “spiritual friendship.” The point the author was making is that we can’t become morally good without our friends. How grateful I am that not only are you my biological mother, but over these forty-eight years we have become best friends.

I make my living teaching ethics, thinking, reading, and writing—rather like you did. You were a teacher for about twenty years in the Lutheran elementary school system, an administrative assistant to an admiral during WWII, a proofreader for a small rural Minnesota county newspaper, and a foster grandparent to several physically handicapped children.

More importantly, you loved music—singing alto in the church choir, playing the piano, listening to Dad’s violin or to your stereo. Some of our greatest “family times” were Sunday afternoons when we made music together—you on piano, Dad on violin, Joan on clarinet, and me on cornet. Along with music, you treasured hybrid roses that you loved into prize-winning life each Spring. And yet, it was incomprehensible to you that people killed dandelions!

You *savored* being outside! If one can walk somewhere, even in the sub-zero Minnesota winters, why would one bother to ride? I remember so clearly how you showed me a reverence for all of creation as we gardened or hiked—especially the trails in Superior National Forests, the Colorado Rockies, the Olympic Crest trail, the paths around Niagara Falls, and the rural country roads of Minnesota. You never ceased to amaze and delight me with your childlike wonder and the delicate caress your gaze presented to everything and everyone. In the light of your smile, there was never a doubt that I (and others) were unconditionally valued and accepted.

Today, your creative vitality that defied any child not to learn, your sharp eye that spotted the misspelled word or the wrongly placed semicolon, and your strong legs that walked hundreds of miles are still and silent. Articulate linguistic expression has given way to the babbling of aphasia. Your childlike wonder is lost in lonely cries of confusion, and your flurried engagement with life in all of its forms has been replaced by dependence on others—including bowel and bladder care. You are a victim of Alzheimer's Disease.

How vividly I remember eight years ago when I heard for the first time that my Mom, my best friend, really had Alzheimer's! I will never forget the horror in your pale blue eyes when those dreaded words were uttered. Reflecting back on what followed, I now am beginning to see what a gift our friendship has been and how love has enabled us to sustain that friendship through this "long good-bye."

There you stood before me, my best friend, my Mom . . . horrified like a little child. I instinctively reassured you: "Mom, you taught me that 'we love, no matter what,' and I will always love you, no matter what. I will make sure you are always safe and cared for, and I will stick with you all the way." With that, only hugs and tears could communicate anything meaningful. Miraculously, I can't really say I've ever blamed or hated God for our predicament. Rather, I have often recalled a Pauline statement you taught me to cherish: "My strength is made perfect in weakness" and *that* has proven to be a marvelous gift during the subsequent years.

Our relationship deepened as we anticipated the diminishment your illness would bring. We established little routines that provided a means of recognition and familiarity for you. What fun we had on those walks in the park and "thieving" one red rose from the public rose garden every June! We'd read, and later, just look at beautiful nature pictures. We'd listen and dance to classical music tapes in the privacy of your room at the nursing home. In short, together, we maximized the abilities you had. The moments of real bonding came when we sat and cried together, grieving what had been lost, and comforting one another over the fears of losses to come.

Our communication has become quite basic: the tone of my voice, the way I hug you, and our little routines now tell you: "I love you, no matter what!" Instead of walks in the park, we take wheelchair rides around the hospice grounds. Buying red carnations at the hospice gift shop has replaced "thieving" red roses. We sometimes "dance" by rolling the wheelchair to the rhythm of the music. Occasionally, we "sing" hymns—especially your favorite one, "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." Though the words are lost to you, the melodies are still there. Most of the time, however, we just sit and hold hands. I will give you a gentle back rub and watch your face light up with a huge smile.

Increasingly though, you gradually drift off into sleep and doze away until it's time to eat or use the bathroom.

Early on, together, we made the decision that your medical chart should read, "Do Not Resuscitate." You also made it clear that you do not want to have a feeding tube. You believe that "Jesus would not want me to suffer." Though it will be hard, I plan to honor your wishes in this regard.

During one of our last verbal conversations, you expressed your fear that you might "forget Jesus." Providentially prompted, I began to sing a song I had taught you—Carey Landry's "I will never forget you. . . ." You, with tears welling up in your eyes, "sang" it with me and then relaxed into a deep sleep. Well, Mom, I have no doubt that you have "re-membered Jesus." In fact, whenever I see you, you truly re-present in the flesh, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to me. Of anyone I have known, you are a model of faith for me.

The last trip we took together was an excursion to go walking in an apple orchard at apple blossom time. But when driving up a hill, you noticed that on both sides of the road there was gold bespeckled lawn. Yes, the ground was filled with dandelions! Of course we stopped so you could pick a bouquet! While you were picking dandelions, I got out my camera and took a series of five photographs, gradually zooming in on the bouquet of flowers you held in your hands. There you stood, resplendently communicating the full meaning of your powerful name: Beata—"the blessed one." Seeing you stand there, I was reminded of a poem we came across when reading a magazine together:

"The Madonna of the Dandelions," by Pollyanna Sedzoi

For a few days she stood resplendent with a carpet of gold at her feet. Now she ponders a brief fragile cloud.	Does she see youth become age health become illness wealth become poverty life become death?	Or does she see these delicate puffs for what they are— seeds of tomorrow's gold?
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You never said much in words about those dandelions, but seeing the way you cradled them, I'm sure you knew you were holding gold! Mom, today I have that series of photographs from that day with the dandelions and this poem mounted in a frame, and it sits on my coffee table at home.

As I have reflected on this, I realize what a gift our friendship is. I really believe that without this friendship I could never have endured these days of the "long good-bye." Our friendship is built on mutual goodness and virtue. We inspire each other to seek the good. Especially after Dad died, we discovered how similar we are—our interests, likes and dislikes, and our sense about what is *really* significant in life. Our

agreement on the good and the virtuous has enabled our friendship to be deep and enduring. Each of us loves the other for her own sake because we each love the good. We each also embody the good because we are virtuous.

For you, the standard of goodness was always “our gracious, loving God.” Jesus was truly your friend with whom you walked through each day. Prayer, Christian service, generosity, compassion—in short, “the love of Jesus and the love of neighbor” was a natural for you. In this milieu of friendship, I too came to know a friendship with God.

Friendship with God is classically marked by benevolence, mutual love, and conversion for the sake of another self. Through your daily communing with God in the ordinary events of life, purposeful participation in worship and religious education, and service to others in the civic and church community, you sought God’s good for God’s own sake and endeavored to make God’s will your own—even in these years of your diminishing health. In the love of God, which is charity, you were without a doubt formed in the Spirit and “changed *unto* God.” Through the love that bonds your friendship with God, you and God (who is also a person) become self for another. Your gentleness and knowing vulnerability clearly demonstrated this transformation. All those who ever knew you often remark about how you never seemed to be able to fully express yourself without some matter-of-fact mention of God.

So you see, Mom, in light of all of this, it is rather humbling for me to hear people say, “You are just like your mother.” While we both know neither of us is perfect, it is through knowing the likenesses of God in each of us and through each of us seeing herself mirrored in one another that we both have come to know our own true self. For the many ways your love and friendship made me a moral person, all I can offer is my continued love, thanks, and friendship.

Your daughter,

Dawn

[Editor’s note: Dawn’s mother died on the same day she submitted this letter for publication.]