

R E M E M B E R I N G

Helen



“ When our eyes see our hands doing the work of our hearts,  
the circle of creation is completed inside us, the doors of our  
souls fly open, and love steps forth to heal everything in sight. ”

— Michael Bridge



To gather my thoughts for composing what I would say at my mother's memorial, I needed to create a space where I could work from my heart. Unbelievably blessed at birth—Helen Butters for a mother—I learned by her example how to find that place long before I was old enough to know what she was teaching me.

Before yoga and meditation and books with titles like *The*

*Woman's Comfort Book* became mainstream, my mother was the master of focus. She was the guru of calm and the maven of comfort. Starting her day a good two hours before any of us, she would sit for an hour every day, handiwork in hand, creating the special touches that not only decorated our lives, but kept her in touch with her own heart. "When our eyes see our hands doing the work of our hearts, the circle of creation is completed inside us, the doors of our souls fly open, and love steps forth to heal everything in sight."

Everything she gave me and everything she gave to everyone (her legacy) started coming to me on the wings of her love, her extraordinary love and passion for people, sometimes even total strangers. I am honored to share with you the incredible person, woman, mother, wife, mother-in-law, grandmother, friend, neighbor, intellect, gardener, and saint, she was!

*Helen the incredible person* lived her life methodically. Everything she dreamed of accomplishing was merely a function of putting it on her life agenda, her list of things to do. Things like:

### ✓ **Take my children camping 500 times**

— in any kind of weather (sometimes while pregnant), prepare food ahead of time (from scratch), heat water with wood for bathing and clothes washing, be excited about any and ALL kinds of fish the kids catch, teach them how to identify bugs and such, always look my best (sleep in hair curlers even while camping), help my kids dam up the creeks with rocks, actually enjoy the hours and hours of work it requires, take lots of games to play, especially Scrabble so my children learn to love words, always have a crossword puzzle in the works, never speak a cross word to my children while camping even if we get holed up in an old canvas tent for days in the rain, keep the campsite extremely neat and clean, gussy up picnic tables with handmade tablecloths,

invite the neighbors and their children, never speak a cross word to anyone, laugh.

✓ **Make more than 100 quilts**, often using scraps—not only bed and couch quilts, but travel quilts complete with matching pillows! Make quilts for grandchildren too.

✓ **Doily up EVERYTHING!** NEVER complain about lack of money or things like a proper dining room. When the arms of couches and chairs wear out, crochet them a nice new adorable cover or sew some from scrap fabric. When extra dinner guests arrive, doll up some card tables using handmade tablecloths in all the colors of the rainbow. If inviting dozens of guests, serve dinner on the ping-pong table—again, tablecloths. I will make what I have be enough.

✓ **Preserve 20,000 cans of food**, all of them sealed by hand on a manual hand-crank device. Create a whole wall of shelves in the basement with labels so my children can fetch the canned goods easily. In this way, teach my children to value food. Every year, grow enormous Hubbard squash, store them in the basement root cellar next to the canned goods, break them with an ax, and turn each squash into twelve meals.

✓ **Stitch 300 dresses**, 200 dolly dresses, 50 men's suits, 70 winter coats, 60 pajamas, 50 robes, 2,000 diapers, 10 sets of curtains, 40 bedspreads, 10 sleeping bags, 5 swim suits ...

✓ **Read books with abandon**, hundreds of them.

✓ **Keep a journal** for 66 years!

✓ **Bake bread**, without fail, every week, for 50 years.

(While going through papers at my parents' home, I found my father's first checking-account register. He started out in 1941 with \$18. Along the way, he would add small amounts like \$2. On September 18, 1941, he took out \$85 to marry my mother. Then he spent \$18 on a washer and \$12.51 the following Christmas. The only other withdrawal comes a year later: \$100 for a sewing machine, and then eventually \$53 for their first baby, Judy. That dropped their account down to \$1.89! Now I know why they claimed to have lived on love alone!!!)

*Helen the woman* always took the time to dress nicely, do up her hair, put on some lipstick. In her memory, she kept alive her younger self, allowing her to understand and fully accept her daughters' and granddaughters' passions.

*Helen the mother* was like none other. Denmother to the world, she touched and comforted the lives of many, even those outside her circle, with a dynamic compassion so jolting we all came to realize it was real ... and rare.

Books? That was something my mother and I had in common. Her love of books and her curiosity and openness about things and ideas outside her world is the reason I'm a writer. I'm absolutely sure of it, given I never thought to be a writer or had any training. But all writers must at some point be good readers. She and I swore by the Groucho Marx quote: "I find television very educating. Every time somebody turns on the set, I go into the other room and read a book."

The true mark of a good mother is in her adaptation: adjusting her belief system to embrace those of her children. I contend that includes everything from weird hairdos to political or sexual orientation. My mother had that adaptation down pat. She wasn't malleable, just a good mix of curiosity and respect and passion for others. When I was fresh out of high school and bursting with idealism, I briefly joined the Young Socialist Alliance. With finesse, she validated both our beliefs by saying,

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"It's okay to question authority; that's how a democracy works." She really, really listened to me, unafraid. She was secure enough in her own beliefs never to turn her back on one of her children ... and we ARE a diverse bunch.

While Momma lay dying (still totally lucid), surrounded by her children and grandchildren, I thought a lot about the group of people around her that she'd birthed and loved so passionately.

Scott is the big brother in every sense of the word. A take-charge kind of guy, he filled in for Dad when Momma found herself alone three years ago. Exhausted from taking care of Dad until his end, my mother was in need of a strong shoulder. I should know about the strength of my brother's shoulder and his love. I've relied on it many times myself.

Judy was Momma's best friend, girlfriend really. My sis is an incredible cook, using exclusively wholesome and organic ingredients. My mother adored Judy's children and her many grandchildren ... seriously plural. (Judy's the prolific one in our family.) In the last few years, she spent weeks at a time with Momma, just hangin' out.

Momma was soooooo proud of her son Kent and pleased to see him enjoying his work and being adventurous, traveling the world as an Olympic host. It was Kent who thought to install the "first alert" system in her home, the button she pushed when the soon-to-be-fatal fall that broke her hip rocked her world and she needed emergency help. Of course Rex was there in minutes.

If Judy was her girlfriend, Rex (my baby brother that I adore with all my heart) was Momma's boyfriend. He never really left home. His welding and machine shop is only minutes away. He was a daily constant in her (and Dad's) life, and vice versa. He idolized my parents. When I was a teenager and dreaming about "down the road" and striking out on my own, Rex and Momma had a daily pact, a paper route in the mornings and homework every evening. I never once heard her lose patience as she tutored him at our kitchen table. And the paper route? Every morning (for six years!!!) she knelt with him on our living-room floor rolling up newspapers for the doorsteps of our neighbors. She considered it a privilege to have a "date" every day with Rex. And when he couldn't deliver papers because of illness, I'd watch my mother head out the door herself carrying all the papers in

canvas bags slung over her back. It's no wonder he stuck around. Even though Rex lost his buddy, Allen, three years ago, he still "had" his father in his life ... through Momma.

*Helen the mother-in-law* always referred to Scott's wife, Sue, as "the dearest, best daughter-in-law I could ever want, just sooooo dear and precious."

She called Rex's wife, Sheryl, her "guardian angel." Sheryl was her constant companion when it came to matters of the heart, especially when Sheryl battled cancer years ago or when my mother herself needed medical attention. My mother was in awe of Sheryl's grit and grace.

She thought of Bobby as the "perfect wife" for Kent. As the two of them shared and realized so many common goals together, such as traveling to distant places (they've been to the last three Olympic Games), I know my mother traveled vicariously through them.

My sweetheart Nick was her heartthrob. She adored my husband and was always making me promise that I was indeed taking

good care of him. Often when we were getting ready to end a phone conversation, she'd say, "Now you promise me you're taking good care of that Nick. He's a one-of-a-kind gem of a husband and sooooo handsome. Don't you ever lose him! Hold him tight." I'm sure her attitude about pampering partners was one of the reasons my parents had a playful, loving relationship for sixty-two years.

*Helen the grandmother* was, of course, cherished by her grandchildren. Her fourteen grandchildren (including four step-grandchildren) and twenty-three great-grandchildren are too numerous to list.

But the fact that my mother "babysat" some of them daily for years needs to be mentioned. When their mothers struggled under the modern two-income trap, my mother opened her nursing arms again. It helped that in my mother's home, kids' games had become a permanent part of her decorating style. "Early Child," she called it.

*Helen the friend* took the "girlfriend until death do us part" oath very seriously. My mother met twice a month, without fail, for almost fifty years with a group of fifteen women who came from a cross section of religions and backgrounds. They called themselves "The Girls." One night a month was always set aside for pinochle, and the other night for needlework—crocheting, embroidery, and knitting.

*Helen the neighbor* lived her life by the folksy decree, "Neighbor Round" (gather-up to visit or take care of someone). She considered her neighbors her best friends.

*Helen the intellect* was the side of her that didn't always find an outlet. It was the part of my mother I will miss the most, her inquisitive, dig-for-answers side. When she first showed me the original clippings from the regular newspaper column she started writing for the *Salt Lake Tribune* when she was thirteen years old, I was thunderstruck. Things like: How to read and enjoy Shakespeare and Dickens at an early age, Why burning wood crackles, Ideas for girls' clubs,



My mother in 1925

How to be patient with a younger sibling." (Remember, this was long before easy access to the Internet.) I felt like I'd just discovered the lost City of Atlantis.

I just couldn't get enough of that part of her, that depth, in the last few years. The new house I'm building with a third-story floor designed just for her (that, as of today, includes a partially-built elevator) didn't get done in time. I was looking forward to holding court with my mother, lively conversations about all manner of things. I was anxious also to pamper her, treat her to fresh-squeezed juices every day, farm-fresh milk and eggs, routine massages. I envisioned having her help me review books for my someday online book club.

When my daughter and I left for a three-month, coast-to-coast book tour, my mother got busy and stitched up a storm. Before every presentation in every city, Meggie adorned our backdrop with dozens of adorable embroidered kitchen towels, redwork, doilies, and more that Momma had made and "packed" into our suitcases, reminiscent of the way she used to sneak surprises into our lunchboxes. It was our way of taking her with us.

*Helen the saint* is the hardest act to follow. As I sat by her bedside, it was obvious she was in severe pain at times (a cascade of bad medical decisions that caught all of us off-guard), but even so, she was still "giving comfort." When a nurse would come in to move her or put yet another needle into her already overly-needled body, my mother's demeanor, even as sweat beads formed on her upper lip, was one of concern for the nurse. She would struggle to lift her hand and comfort the nurse by patting her reassuringly and mouthing the words, "It's okay, sweetie."

Thornton Wilder said, "There's a land of the living and a land of the dead; and the bridge is love." In a world that desperately needs more love and less tolerance for things like war and hatred, Helen's song, how she lived her life, is the hymnal I intend to sing, right out loud, keeping her very much alive ... her song, her work, her dedication to love.

**“To have a mother who loves you for being independent  
is to have a mother who fosters rebellion in your heart  
and revolution in your bones.”**

— Judy Chicago, 1975