

ODYSSEY OF AN ADDRESS BOOK

Mary's mother died in 2010, Mary's 60-year-old husband David died in 2012, and Mary's 8-year-old grandson died in 2013.

BY MARY POTTERY KENYON, adapted from the book, *Grief Diaries: Poetry and Prose & More*
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Self care articles for the bereaved

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I started flipping through the pages of my mother's address book even before she'd died. The pages were filled with her neat script and careful notations. She must have used the same one for years, as some names had address after address crossed off.

If someone had passed away,
my mother jotted that down next to
their name. "Dead," she noted in pencil.

My eyes filled with tears. Her handwriting had started changing, even before the radiation to her brain. The cancer had likely been affecting her for far longer than we'd realized. In my last letter from her the writing veers upwards and she joked about it. "They say if your handwriting goes upwards you must be an optimistic person."

My mother was an optimist, despite the difficulties and struggles she had faced most of her life. She always saw the good in people.

As Mom lay dying in the next room, I picked up her address book on the premise that we would be able to use it in notifying others of her death after she was gone. But honestly, it was because I was curious about the enigma that was our mother.

Mom loved people. The few times she had traveled, she returned with stories about the interesting people she'd met. Her address book showed just how much she cared about others. I studied the pages, amazed and astounded by the sheer number of names written in it. Many I recognized.

My siblings were all in there, her brothers, my cousins. Other names I'd heard her mention, but I wasn't sure who they were. A handwritten name and address from Guam was taped to one page. The Brach's candy company was listed. So was the Pope.

I quickly returned the book to her
writing desk, suddenly feeling as though
I was invading her privacy.

After my mother died, the address book was the first thing I removed from her house, knowing she would have names and phone numbers of some of the people we owed thank-you notes to. I was right. Friends not listed in the phone book were in her address book.

I dutifully wrote out thank-you notes, and then flipped through the pages again. My sister later told me that the Brach's company was listed

because she'd written to them about some cinnamon candy they no longer made. I'm not sure why the Pope was listed, but I wouldn't be surprised to discover she'd written him, too.

Every few days I'd pick up my mother's address book and flip through the pages, pondering what kind of person she had been. In 2010, I wasn't much of a people person yet I wanted to be. I yearned to be more like my mother, and my husband, who never met a stranger.

A few months after her death, I began writing human interest stories for the local newspaper. I overcame my natural shyness by pretending I was Mom, approaching each person I interviewed as if they had a story to tell. It turns out, they did. After a while, I stopped pretending and started to become more like the best of her. I now make my living as a reporter, telling other people's stories.

After the thank you notes, I decided to write a few letters to people who had known my mother, those who might not have heard about her death. The first letter I wrote was to a friend who had spent a lot of time on the phone with Mom in recent years, and had traveled to see her after the cancer diagnosis. The woman replied with a long letter that informed me of how much my mother had meant to her.

I found the address of a man who'd done some detective work for Mom years before (I told you she was an enigma. How many of us have a private investigator in our address book?) along with several notations indicating the last few Christmas cards she'd sent had been returned because his address changed. An old business card was taped to the page. Within minutes, I'd found his website and an email address. My mother, who didn't use the internet, likely would not have considered a Google search for a website or email address.

I emailed to ask if he remembered Mom, informing him of her death. Remember her? The man emailed back immediately, lauding praises of her and mentioning several visits he'd had after their professional relationship ended. Visits I knew nothing about. He asked about projects she'd been working on, and promised to have a Mass said in her name, indicating he was Catholic and had known how much her faith meant to her.

I wrote a young man whose letter I found among her things. His family had cut down some of her trees and they'd evidently had much in common. The family wrote back with condolences and memories of the woman they'd so admired.

I didn't want the stories or the letters to end. They brought much comfort, and kept Mom alive in some way.

When I discovered a box of Christmas cards along with her mailing list from the past few years, an idea began forming in my head, but I shrugged it off at first. After all, I was working on a book and had my own Christmas cards to address and send.

But once it formed,
the idea wouldn't let go of me.

When my mother was diagnosed in August, she had every reason to believe she would live to see another Christmas. Mom asked the doctor if she would make it to her February birthday if she underwent radiation to her brain. He'd given her no reason to think otherwise.

In December, she would have been working diligently on her Christmas cards. Some of the people on the list might not even know she had died. When I finally made the decision to use my mother's cards and her list to send each of the people on it a Christmas card, I started to get

excited. Here was something I could do for my mother!

I spent several mornings writing out my mother's Christmas cards; two cousins I hadn't seen for twenty years got a card. An aunt I met only a few times. A nephew I haven't ever corresponded with. The wife of an Army buddy of Dad's got a card, a letter, and a copy of the clipping of my mother's obituary.

The pile on my table grew.

I didn't know who some of them were,
but maybe I would find out.

Not everyone in Mom's address book got a card. The Brach's company didn't hear from me, or the stranger in Guam that my mother may have met once on a bus. Or the eye specialist or dentist.

But the Pope? He got a Christmas card from my mother.