Saying goodbye to my mother during the pandemic

She died in her nurse’s arms.

by Tom Montgomery Fate in the January 13, 2021 issue

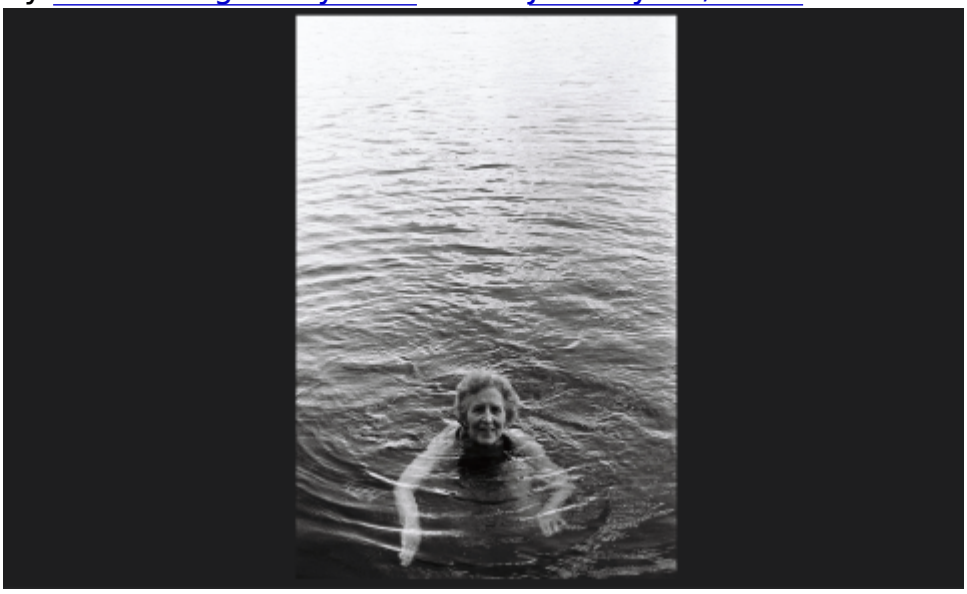

Photo by Robin Fate

The care center where my mom lived in St. Paul was in quarantine the week she died. My brothers Robin and Paul, who live nearby, would have a nurse take a cell phone in to her so they could FaceTime. They would explain to Mom about the pandemic, and why they couldn’t come inside, and how they didn’t know when the quarantine would end.

When I called from Chicago the next day, Mom didn’t remember about the virus, or that the cafeteria was closed, or even where she was. “Everything is fine,” she said, sounding weak. “Though I think I’m just about done with this job.”

She lived in the fog of dementia, but it often thinned, letting more light through.

“I just don’t seem to get much done anymore,” she continued.

“You’re 95,” I said, “you don’t have to get much done. Let people do stuff for you for a change.” She laughed at this. Then I asked what they had for dinner. She couldn’t remember.

“Oh, nothing fancy,” she finally said. “But it was a great plenty.”

A great plenty. The phrase meant, for her, “there is always enough,” though she often used it when there wasn’t—like at a poorly attended church potluck or fundraiser. “We’ll make do,” she’d always say.

Like thousands of other elders who are now isolated from their children and grandchildren during the pandemic, Mom lived through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl and World War II and other times when having “enough” was both gift and goal, a cause for gratitude. We are living through such a time now—a time of fear and loss, in which we can never imagine enough. Enough money or work or face masks or COVID-19 tests, enough compassion to make it through this.

The word compassion literally means “to suffer with,” and it’s the quality I most admired in my mom. She knew it was what enabled the possibility of a great plenty, of there being enough for everyone. That’s the world she lived toward, in small ways, in a small Iowa town, but with great love.

The morning after I talked to Mom, my brothers were notified that she was near the end. They rushed to the care center and, in spite of pandemic protocol, were buzzed in. Evading the wheelchairs and frail bodies shuffling by, they hurried toward her room and the growing darkness.

But they couldn’t make it in time. Mom died in the arms of her nurse, Gail, whose face was still streaked with tears when they arrived. I later called to thank Gail for being there at such a sacred time when we could not. “It was a blessing to be with Dee,” she said. This took me aback. It was “a blessing” for Gail to risk her own life—on the front lines of the pandemic—to be with Mom?

George Floyd was murdered nearby shortly thereafter, igniting demonstrations across the Twin Cities, and the image in my mind’s eye of a middle-aged Black nurse and her elderly White patient has grown more emotionally charged. Gail cradling Mom in her last moments, suffering with her to the end. Compassion bridging the personal and political, in a world where bridges seem impossible.

It was confusing to grieve alone. We didn’t want a Zoom funeral, and since Mom was cremated we kept pushing the date back, hoping more could attend. But the pandemic didn’t wane. So in June we finally had a graveside service in Iowa City, where Mom and Dad used to live and my other brother, Ken, still does. Nine masked

people formed a circle, remembering and grieving and celebrating. It was so bright and hot that day that some of us stepped back into the cool shade of the oak trees that towered over the grave.

I spoke about a conversation I'd had with Mom about her fear of death. "I'm not too keen on it," she'd told me. "And I don't believe all of the pie in the sky stuff." And then, after a pause: "But I do believe in God, that there's something more."

This prompted me to pull out the poem "Let Evening Come" by Jane Kenyon, which I had read at my father's funeral. The poem is full of images that call to mind rural Nebraska, where Mom and Dad grew up.

The poem begins, "Let the light of late afternoon / shine through chinks in the barn, moving / up the bales as the sun moves down."

I noted that every stanza in the poem contains the word *let*. Not "the light shines" but "let the light . . . shine." Not "evening comes" but "let evening come." Mom and I talked about our fear and not knowing, and about God and the mystery of God's love, and about whether we could just let God handle it instead of having to know. "Let it come, as it will, and don't / be afraid . . ." Let yourself belong to creation.

And then, in a moment of lucidity, Mom said, "I suppose that's the faith part." Then she put her hand over mine, offering me her love amid her own cycles of worry.

After the funeral we all had a picnic at Ken's house with carryout box lunches from the local co-op where Mom used to work. Since we were six feet apart and outdoors we removed our masks, but the only way we could touch each other was through the love we could conjure with our words. We all felt the distance between us.

During the next week I sorted through some old photos and letters from Mom, which was a comfort. Especially one black-and-white shot of her swimming, which my brother Robin had taken.

Robin inspired my own love of black-and-white photography and printing when I was in high school. In the darkroom, I learned to frame the black-and-white image so that it would both limit and invite the beholder. I figured out that a good photo—or essay, or painting—feels both framed and frameless, both limited and limitless.

This is what draws me to this one. The image has no boundaries or borders. The horizon merges with the sky—nothing but water and light and my mom, paddling

toward me. Moving out of the sun into shadow, from light into darkness. An image of death, perhaps, but she looks at home in the water. You can see it in her eyes. She is not just swimming out of the light but carrying it with her wherever she goes.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A great plenty.”