

Eulogy for a Soft-Hearted Woman

Bernie Hunhoff

Most strong and graceful men and women grow frail in their last years, and then are sometimes memorialized as cute and silly – which I always thought was unfortunate because they were so much more than that.

Mom was still driving her own car late in life. One day at about age 90 she started mailing her letters at our *South Dakota Magazine* publishing office instead of driving to the nearby post office. I told her, “We’re happy to stamp and mail your letters, Mom, but why did you quit going to the post office.”

“Well,” she said, “they get so touchy when you even just nick their cars there.”

A Yankton police officer told me he stopped her car one evening, after dark, to suggest she should dim her lights while driving in town.

The policeman said Mom replied, “No, I don’t want to dim my lights because if I hit someone I want to see them!”

The officer couldn’t argue.

That was Mom. If she hit a man, she would want to save him.

But those stories aren’t Margaret Hunhoff in her prime. Mom was a strong woman with a heart softened by tragedies and death.

She arrived in Yankton in 1943 after growing up in a family that had nothing in the Dirty Thirties in Iowa. They were so poor that she wouldn’t talk about it. After high school, she worked as a waitress and a nurse’s aide before she was accepted into the nursing cadet program at Sacred Heart School of Nursing. Because of a nursing shortage in World War II, all tuition and board was paid. She got off the bus on Third Street at the bus station and walked west, up the hill toward the convent and the hospital with the big mosaic image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

It’s a fitting metaphor for her life. She was always walking uphill – looking for a way to serve Jesus or anyone else who crossed her path.

She married a local farmer and soon they had four sons.

Mom’s saddest day was Oct. 10, 1952, when her third son Steven, just 2, was killed in a farm accident. He had dashed under the wheels of a water truck that came into the farmyard to fill the cistern.

Time does not heal all. Steven’s death changed her forever. I believe it softened her heart, maybe softer than a heart should be in a hard world. It seemed to us that she cared too much.

Steven’s accident was followed by other calamities. A brother-in-law was working as a lineman when he was electrocuted a few days before he was to be married; the wedding feast became a funeral lunch. One son was born with developmental disabilities; another was nearly killed while



helping to unload corn when a chain hoist broke and a wagon tongue smashed his little head. A wild mother sow nearly killed yet another son when he wandered upon her litter. So it went.

Mom’s brothers returned from military service with PTSD, though no one had a name or an acronym then for the problem. One committed suicide.

She and Dad tried to befriend a lonely neighbor, who was inconsolable after his wife and daughter had left him. But Dad was sick in bed one Sunday afternoon when the neighbor came, so Mom asked the man to stop another time. He killed himself the next day.

Two neighborhood boys found a pistol in a junk pile and played with it, thinking it was a toy, when it discharged. One of the boys was killed. Mom comforted the grieving mother and it freshened her own sorrows.

She and Dad were small farmers. They rented land for a share of the crops, and there was never much money left by the time they paid the bank and the landlord and fed their family, which eventually grew to seven sons. But poverty and hard work were minor headaches. Mom was concerned about death and illness and pain.

Writing and poetry kept her sane. Beginning in the 1950s, she began a correspondence with Adeline Jenney, the South Dakota poet laureate. They exchanged many long letters. Mrs. Jenney advised the young farmwife from Yankton County and encouraged her to write about the bad and the good. She published many of mom’s poems in her *Pasque Petals* volumes.

Still, writing was a luxury. Every one she knew came first. She tended to the swelled and sore feet of a neighbor lady who suffered from in-grown toenails for many years. Not once or twice but for years.

Some days she came home from visiting a hard-luck neighbor’s house and told Dad that they needed to send a sack of groceries over because the cupboards were bare.

She was unselfish to a fault. She wouldn't (and it seemed that she couldn't) do anything for herself. And she couldn't do enough for others – especially if they were suffering.

But don't mistake her soft heart for weakness. She was a tough lady.

She could cut the heads off a dozen chickens, gut them and pluck them with blood and feathers flying, and put them in a sack and drop them off to a buyer in town. She'd work a full shift at the nursing home or hospital, come home and help Dad on the farm and give us our marching orders – and she was probably writing a poem in her head all the while.

Mom wasn't perfect and she didn't expect anyone else to be perfect, which is a rare virtue. You didn't have to get straight A's (thank the Lord for that!) to make her proud of you. She filled our farmhouse with music and books. We shared an accordion, a guitar and several harmonicas. One day she found a free piano and sent three of us to bring it home in the back of a pickup truck. Unfortunately, it rolled out onto the road when we made a sharp turn and it broke apart into a hundred pieces. When we got home, we told Mom the bad news. She wasn't upset. We re-assembled it the best we could and soon we were playing "You Are My Sunshine" on the most out-of-tune keyboard in South Dakota.

One particular day in our teen years, my brothers and I were jumping our junky motorcycle off our farmhouse porch when a visiting relative asked Mom why she allowed such a thing.

She replied that she thought it might be a valuable skill if we ever found ourselves in a war zone or some such place.

You didn't have to behave a certain way to have her love and respect. Not her seven sons. Not her neighbors. And not a stranger.

She moved to Yankton after Dad died, mostly because she wanted to attend daily Mass at the Catholic church. In Yankton she found many more hungry and hurting people. It wasn't unusual to go to her house on Pearl Street and meet a homeless person waiting on the porch for a sandwich, or someone down on his luck raking her leaves for cash. She didn't always appreciate it if we shoveled her walk in winter because she was hoping she could pay some poor soul to clean the snow.

She volunteered all over town. She even moved to New York City to volunteer at a Catholic homeless shelter called the Covenant House. But she soon came home to South Dakota.

The pain of losing Steven in 1952 never went away. We knew that as children and we knew it all through our lives.

Mom penned her best poem 30 years later when Dad died. It was not about her troubles but of how Steven's death pained Dad. She began by noting that he was never much for words – "You liked the quiet of the long corn rows," she wrote. Then she finished it like this:

One day you stood beside a tiny casket

The only time that people saw you cry

Yet, when it closed and left him in the dark,
You found no words with which to say goodbye
Today your gentle presence gone, so deep
The void ... I hear the silence of God and weep.

Now the void she long endured, so deep, is finally bridged and she is home with Steven and Dad.

This is an edited version of the eulogy delivered at Margaret Hunhoff's funeral Mass on January 16, 2019.