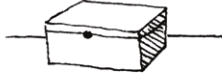


*Sharing my mother's gift of
faith, love and letting go*

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introduction

Last fall, I wrote an essay about a discovery my family made after losing my mom. We found her God Box, in which she had stowed dozens of tiny handwritten messages to God on our behalf. My father, brother and I always knew Mom loved us and knew that she placed petitions for us in her God Box, but it wasn't until we found this treasure that we truly realized just how deeply and unselfishly she cared for so many years.

The groundswell of feedback in response to that essay took me by surprise. I heard from women who missed the mothers they had lost, as well as from those lucky enough to still be close with their moms. Some wrote that, despite being distant from their own parents, they had started the God Box tradition so that someday their own children would know how loved they were.



“Ever my
guardian angel,
MY MOM WOULD CONTINUE TO TEACH ME
ABOUT MYSELF, EVEN AFTER HER DEATH.”



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Their letters caused me to dig deeper into my mom's God Box. The more I reread what she had written, the more I realized that these notes filled with loving words were more than mementos. Fingering each slip of paper, I could reclaim her sparkle and common sense, her humor and optimism, and—above all—her enduring spirit. And ever my guardian angel, Mom would continue to teach me about myself, even after her death.

Since her passing, pieces of her personality and spirit have become part of me. Her influence showed gradually at first—a change of heart, a gesture of kindness—until at last I came to understand that her greatest gift wasn't inside the God Box, but in the lessons she taught me that transformed my life for good.

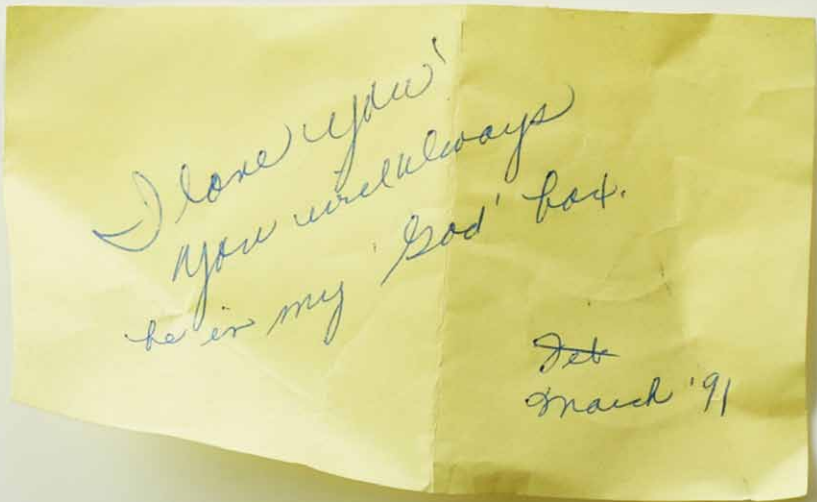
Shortly before my father died, I told him I was writing Mom's story for publication. Dad clapped his hands together and grinned from ear to ear. "Your mother would be so thrilled!" he said. He knew her so intimately that his permission was akin to getting hers. And as her daughter and confidante, I was careful to guard what I knew she would want kept secret and sacred.

Yet sometimes we never know our parents' inner

THE GOD BOX

thoughts until it's too late. Despite our closeness, when Mom passed away, I still wished I knew more of what she held in her heart. By reading the contents of the box, I would come to understand the unspoken pain and fear she shielded from us, the daily depth of her devotion to our family, the breadth of her empathy. The God Box would turn out to be our favorite heirloom, handmade by Mom herself. The slips of paper told the story of what mattered most to her, all in her signature candor and soulful voice.

But if I thought I had heard all I could from my mom by reading each note, I was wrong. A few weeks ago,



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rummaging around in an old jewelry box of mine, I found a piece of torn paper with this message, dated exactly twenty years before.

“I love you. You will always be in my God Box.”

This book is my way of sharing her gift of faith, love and letting go.



My mother's name was Mary. I am her namesake and her soul mate.

I lost her on May 29, 2006, as the Memorial Day fireworks kissed the sky good night. It was just Mom and me. I believe she planned it that way. Though she lay in a coma from a terrible stroke, I still felt I could read her mind.

I knew she couldn't bear to look one last time into the eyes of her beloved husband—my father, Ray—or hug my brother, Jack, good-bye. But me? She knew I could take it. I was her best friend.

When she breathed her last breath, her hand in mine, I swear I could feel her spirit lift into that firecracking sky. She took a part of me with her.

* * *



"I WAS DADDY'S GIRL BUT
my mother's
daughter."

I was Daddy's girl but my mother's daughter. I never had any children of my own so I was never the mother. Instead, I spent my life trying to get an A, even an A+, in daughter. I know that not everyone loves their mother this way, but I did, and there's nothing I wouldn't give to hear Mom's full-throated laugh again or to feel her hug that squeezed right through the phone to me.

Perhaps it's inevitable that we become our mothers, but I was my mother from the start. We both loved sexy shoes and scary movies. We both worked in advertising, disliked braggarts and beat ourselves up if we hurt anyone's feelings. My hips are uneven, just like hers, but unfortunately, she gave her beautiful curly red hair to Jack instead of me. (From time to time, I've colored some red into my hair because it makes me feel closer to her.)

Mom and I had secret names for each other. I called her "Mare," short for Mary, just to be fresh, or "Marmie," the name of the kind mother in *Little Women*. She called me "Anna Banana." I never knew why.

We shared bad habits too. She taught me how to eavesdrop. If, when we were out for one of our girls-only lunches she'd spot upset faces on the couple in the booth

behind me, she'd say under her breath, "Don't look!" We'd pretend to eat our salads while we rolled our eyes at an overheard break-up.

We both were magnets for people who wanted to divulge their deepest secrets. (And, thanks to our amazing intuitive powers, we assumed we knew what they were going to say next. We were wrong more often than not, but that didn't stop us from finishing other people's sentences, a quirk of mine that my patient husband, Joe, finds particularly exasperating.)

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For years, Mom and I shared a code for our closeness: “Hands on.” We ended every nightly phone call by pressing our palms to our receivers and saying “Hands on,” which meant that we were always together, even when living far apart. She had retired to Florida with Dad twenty years before her death, and whenever I left her at the airport, I would drop my luggage on the curb and press my

hand to her car window. She would place her palm on the inside glass, her fingers lined up against mine, and we'd both mouth the words "Hands on."

I whispered it to her that last sad night we had together.

* * *

I miss so much about Mom, especially the way she could make me feel that everything would be okay. She could solve any situation, from a scraped knee to a broken heart, with a prayer. She prayed for every need, hurt or hiccup that hit Dad, Jack and me, and our spouses and kids, as well as friends and neighbors. Mom was so naturally empathetic that even strangers poured out their troubles to her. She always promised to keep everyone in her prayers, no matter what their religion or beliefs.

She inhaled a worry. She exhaled a prayer. Truth be told, Mom was holier than the rest of our family, but she wasn't a holy roller, if you know what I mean. Deep inside, she just believed. During our family's early years in Philadelphia, Mom relied on a pretty standard Catholic repertoire of novenas and rosaries and Mass for whatever ailed Dad or Jack or me. Every once in a while she would call the Sisters of St. Joseph to ask them to put in a good



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word Upstairs if one of us was sick or a big exam was coming up.

But by the time Mom and Dad had settled in Florida in the mid-'80s, there was more to ask for. Jack and I had grown up and started families of our own. I married Joe Quinlan and moved to New York City. Jack and his wife, Sandy, had two little girls, Kelley and Meghan. We had busy, challenging careers and lives up north, and Mom was separated from us by so many miles. The passing years brought new health problems for both of my parents. And, once Mom had more free time in Florida, her empathetic nature attracted an ever-expanding list of people who adopted her as their personal counselor as soon as they met her. Their concerns became hers.

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Mom needed a better way to cope with the growing list of worries weighing on her shoulders and her mind. That's when the God Box was born. She started writing down her petitions on random scraps of paper that she addressed to God and then placed into her God Box for resolution and relief.

Whenever we had a hope or a concern, Mom would cheerfully offer, "I'll put it in the God Box." Just hearing that

made me feel like my issue of the moment was somehow worthy. If it was important to me, it was important to Mom. And if it was important to Mom, into the God Box it went.

It wasn't odd that Mom took to this very simple solution. She was a fixer and a doer with a practical bent. She was an early adopter of convenience foods, instant messaging, and automatic bill paying. The God Box was an easy way to make good on her promises to help.

* * *

On the night before her funeral, Dad, Jack and I felt like dishrags. Dad kept shuffling from room to room. He couldn't even look at Mom's recliner, so still next to his. Jack pretended to care about the work on his laptop. I threw myself into every detail of preparing the service because "doing" is what I do best.

My Mom, ever the planner, had left behind hints of what she wanted for her service. In her desk drawer, for instance, I found the programs from her friends' memorial services, and she had checked off the hymns she liked. On one pamphlet, she had marked "good choice!" next to "Spanish Eyes," but I nixed that in favor of "Ave Maria."

I had already written Mom's eulogy and had read it to



“None of us felt as shiny
WITHOUT HER IN THE ROOM.”

her while she lay in a hospice room. It's not that I wanted to jinx her. I just wanted her to hear how much we loved her. When I gave it to Jack to review, his eyes filled with tears. "How am I going to read this out loud? I can't even read it to myself without crying."

If Mom had been there, she would have teased us into cheering up because she was such an effervescent, fun woman. She was always up for a good time, turning up the volume if Willie Nelson was on the radio, dressing up her khakis with a bangle belt just to go out for breakfast. Even at eighty-two, Mom was the life of our party. None of us felt as shiny without her in the room.

We were each picking at our takeout dinner on the back porch when Jack asked, "Where's Mom's God Box?" The three of us looked at each other, forks in midair. For all the times she had mentioned it, Mom had never told us where she kept her little cache of prayers.