

LETTER OF LIFE

A Digital Memory Preservation Project

The Letter of

Mary Lynn Hannings

A Life Rooted in Family, Friendship, Learning, and Kindness

For Bill, Kristin, Dimitri, Luca,
and anyone in our family who comes after.

“Be your own best friend.”

WHERE I BEGAN

This letter comes from me, Mary Green Hannings, to tell you something about who I am, not only as your mother, grandmother, relative, or friend, but as a human being. I hope that in telling my story, I can pass along some of the wisdom I have gathered over a lifetime. I do not claim to have found every answer. If age teaches anything, it is that there is much more gray in life than we understand when we are young. Still, I have learned a few things about kindness, family, friendship, patience, education, and the importance of treating yourself with the same compassion you would offer to someone you love.

I was born on June 14, 1948, in Jessup, Pennsylvania, in the coal region of the northeastern part of the state. Jessup was a small town made up largely of immigrant families. There were Irish families, Slovak and Polish families, and Italian families, each with their own histories but living close together. My grandfather, my father for a short time, and several of my uncles worked in or around the coal mines. Those mines were part of the economy, the landscape, and the lives of many families.

I lived in Jessup until I was seven. Some of my warmest memories from those early years are of being close to my grandparents. After that, our family moved to Fleetville, a tiny farming community that became the setting for most of my childhood. Fleetville was the kind of place that sounds almost imaginary today. At one time, a town of roughly 250 people had two stores, two gas stations, two churches, and two bars. Small farms surrounded us, and almost everyone knew everyone else.

The town changed as farming became less viable and younger people moved elsewhere. Many of the old establishments disappeared. My brother remained connected to Fleetville, and the last time I was truly there was around the time of his death in 2013. Even though the place changed, the Fleetville of my childhood remains very clear in my mind. It was a wonderful place to grow up because the outdoors seemed to belong to us.

THE WORLD OUTSIDE OUR DOOR

My brothers and I spent much of our time outside. My older brother was John Robert Green, whom we called Jack, and my younger brother was Joe. His full name was Joseph Francis Green, but we called him Jo-Jo until he demanded that he be called Joe at age five. As I like to put it, he was the “true character” of our small family! Jack was about two years older than I was, and Joe was about eighteen months younger. With so few children nearby, you learned to make your own fun and to appreciate the companions you had.

My best girlfriend, Anne Marie, lived across the street. We played with dolls, roller skated, swam, and wandered outdoors. The people across the street had horses, and occasionally I was able to ride them. The area was surrounded by lakes, and creeks ran through the countryside, so swimming became part of our lives. We did not need devices or complicated plans. We had woods, water, horses, roads, imagination, and one another.

Our house stood on three acres of land that went down toward a lake. About two and a half acres were woods. It was a Cape Cod style house, comfortable and large enough that each of us eventually had our own room. My grandmother lived with us until she died when I was twelve. Before then, Joe and I shared a room. I always felt that we were well-to-do, although we were not wealthy. I felt that way because I had everything I needed. Children did not expect to have as much then, and our happiness did not depend upon owning very much.

We did not often take vacations because my father worked away from home during the week, but we had lakes, creeks, relatives, and the local firemen's carnivals. The carnivals were major events. There were rides, food, games, and friends everywhere. When you were a teenager, you might meet your boyfriend and walk around holding hands. It was a simple life in many ways, and I remember it fondly.

Small-town life also meant that privacy could be difficult. We had a party-line telephone shared by four households. Each home had its own ring. Our call might be two rings, Anne Marie's one ring, and the other households three or four. A person could pick up and listen to somebody else's conversation if she chose. There was plenty of gossip in a place where everybody knew everybody, but not in our house. My parents respected privacy and did not make other people's business their entertainment. Their rule was simple: if you have nothing good to say about someone, say nothing. I have carried that lesson with me.

MY PARENTS AND BROTHERS

Both of my parents were born in Jessup. My mother came from a Slovak family. Her father was from Austria, and her mother was from what was then Czechoslovakia. My father was Irish Catholic. His father came from England, and his mother came from Ireland. Even within the Catholic community, marrying someone from a different ethnic background could feel like crossing a major social boundary at that time. My parents did it anyway and built a hardworking, generous home together.

My mother became a registered nurse. She went away to train in Scranton, only about ten miles from home, but to her it felt a million miles away. She was one of the few mothers in Fleetville who worked outside the home. I was proud of her for that. She inspired several of my friends to become nurses. Because she worked, my grandmother helped get us ready for school, and my mother returned home around four. We still ate together. Work did not replace family life; it was part of how the family was sustained.

My father attended college for one year on a football scholarship at the University of Scranton, which was then called St. Thomas College. The Second World War interrupted that path. He tried to join the Marines, but they rejected him because he had flat feet and was deaf in one ear. The Army was happy to take him. After his service, he worked in the mines for about a year and then became a steamfitter. Much

of the large construction work was in New York or New Jersey, so he was often away during the week and home on weekends.

My parents were kind people who believed in living and letting live. They did not need to approve of every choice another person made in order to treat that person decently. They worked hard, protected our privacy, and gave us the security of knowing that home was dependable.

My brothers each had strong abilities of their own. Jack was exceptionally bright, confident, and the valedictorian of his class. School seemed to come easily to him. He became a chemical engineer and worked for Exxon, traveling around the world to help establish refineries in places that included China, Japan, Russia, and Milan. Joe was the brother with whom I played more often. If the two boys were together, they tended to gang up on me, so one brother at a time was better company. Joe was mechanically gifted, studied electrical engineering, and later worked in a state hospital.

We all began working young. Jack had a paper route. My brothers worked on local beef and dairy farms. I began working in the general store when I was fourteen or fifteen. The store seemed to have everything, from a delicatessen counter to glass cutting. I worked six days a week for thirty-five dollars, which felt like a great deal of money in 1962 or 1963. I worked for the parents of a close friend because, in Fleetville, nearly every relationship overlapped with another.

SCHOOL, BOOKS, AND THE GIRL I WAS

I loved school. I was near the top of my class, although I always joked that being at the top was easier when only eighteen students were in the class. The whole school held about two hundred children across all twelve grades. There were ten girls and eight boys in my class, and the teachers knew not only us but our families.

English and reading were my favorite subjects. I enjoyed gym class, although girls had few athletic opportunities. We played intramural half-court basketball, but there were

not many organized sports for us. Geography was not a favorite, perhaps because that teacher did not bring the subject alive in the way others did.

One teacher I remember especially was Miss Humphreys in second grade. She seemed old to me then, though she was probably only around thirty-five. She lived down the road and sometimes took children on walks even outside school. She was kind, and for a time she made me imagine becoming a teacher.

I have been a reader since childhood. Books carried me beyond our little town before I had the opportunity to travel. I remember reading Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* when I was around twelve. It introduced me to a way of life far outside my own small world. My father insisted that we have reference books in the house, including the Books of Knowledge. I loved the fairy tales, the information about other countries, and the feeling that whole worlds were available between covers.

Later I came to love poetry, including the work of Maya Angelou. Reading has remained one of the central pleasures of my life. A book does more than tell a story. It gives you a chance to inhabit another person's circumstances and to notice a theme or truth you might miss in your own life.

I loved music and dancing too. After school, I listened to American Bandstand, and I went to dances on weekends. Although our family was Catholic and the nearest Catholic church was some distance away, my mother was open-minded enough to let me sing with the choir at a Protestant church. I attended and later helped teach vacation Bible school there. I also belonged to a small Girl Scout troop that included girls of different ages because there were so few children.

I was responsible and independent, but I was also self-conscious. Public speaking frightened me. In college, the required public speaking course made me feel as though I might have a heart attack. Over time and through experience, speaking became easier. Even now, people may not think of me as shy, but part of that self-conscious girl has always remained inside me.

FINDING MY WAY TO WORK THAT MATTERED

My first idea for a career came from Anne Marie's family. Her older sister had Down syndrome and was educated at home rather than in school, as was common in that era. She was much older than we were but functioned like a young child. I could communicate with her, and knowing her made me want to teach children with special needs. From about the age of seven, I imagined becoming a special education teacher.

I entered Bloomsburg University on that path, but college opened several possibilities. I became interested in psychology, writing, and literature. I changed from a Bachelor of Science in education to a Bachelor of Arts in English literature. Part of me still wonders whether I should have remained with special education or perhaps become a speech therapist. Shyness influenced that decision more than I understood at the time. I was comfortable with children, but I disliked the thought of being observed by a student-teaching supervisor.

After college, my interest in psychology led me to an interview at Norristown State Hospital. I entered a government career-training program for young people interested in psychology and worked at the hospital for six years. I then spent another three years in the county mental-health system, coordinating geriatric mental-health services.

My husband and I both worked for the county for a period, sometimes driving in together. When I became pregnant at thirty-one, I stayed home with our children for seven or eight years. Later, I moved into business and joined Harleysville Insurance. I began as a rater, became an underwriter, and earned an associate degree in underwriting. I handled personal insurance, including automobile and homeowners coverage.

I worked in insurance for about six years, and I learned a great deal, but I became dissatisfied. I missed helping people directly. I contacted people I knew from mental

health and learned about a civil-service position in early intervention. That decision returned me to the purpose that had attracted me as a child.

For the final twenty years of my career, I worked for Montgomery County as a coordinator for early-intervention services. I helped families of children from birth to age three arrange services for developmental delays. In a way, I came back to special education by a longer route. It became my true professional passion.

Organizations recognized my work, and I was honored by groups including The Arc. Those recognitions mattered because they reflected years of trying to serve families well. Still, the role of which I am most proud was not paid employment. It was being a wife and parent. A career can express part of your purpose, but family asks for your whole heart.

LOVE, DIFFERENCE, AND FIFTY-ONE YEARS

The most important relationship in my adult life was my marriage. My husband and I met in college and dated for four years. He then left for six months of military service. Afterward, he entered Villanova Law School, and we married over Thanksgiving break during his first year. I was twenty-three.

We were married for fifty-one years. We were not the same kind of person. He was more cerebral and highly structured. I was more inclined toward compassion and flexibility. The differences that made the marriage challenging were also part of what made it strong. Beneath them, we shared core values. We believed in family, responsibility, service, faith, and the importance of treating people fairly.

I had grown up Catholic, and he was Lutheran. When we married, I joined the Lutheran church. The change did not feel like abandoning Christianity but joining our religious lives together.

As the years passed, my husband became increasingly active. He skied, sailed, and served as a whitewater-rafting guide in the Poconos. I joined him in some activities and supported him in others, but we also maintained interests of our own. I loved dancing and took many kinds of dance classes. A lasting marriage does not require two people to become identical. It requires enough shared ground to give their differences a safe place to exist.

Parenthood revealed those differences too. I tended to be the more flexible parent, while my husband believed strongly in structure and equal expectations. Looking back, I can see the value in both. His structure helped our children, and my compassion helped them. Marriage often asks two people to bring different strengths to the same responsibility.

I can also admit now that I could sometimes be picky or judgmental with my husband. We had a good relationship, but age has helped me see that being right is less important than being patient. The people we love are separate human beings with histories and habits of their own. Love becomes gentler when we stop demanding that another person see every situation exactly as we do.

BECOMING A MOTHER AND GRANDMOTHER

We waited to have children while my husband completed law school and established his career. By the time I became pregnant at thirty-one, we felt ready. We had a home, we had matured, and we wanted a family very much. Becoming a mother was thrilling.

Our son, Bill, was born first and became one of the great joys of my life. Kristin arrived two years later, when I was thirty-three. Parenthood changed my attention completely. Before becoming a parent, you cannot fully understand how engrossing it will be. Your work, money, time, worry, hope, and planning all become connected to the well-being of someone else. It is an enormous responsibility and an extraordinary privilege.

Both sets of grandparents gave us strong models. My parents were somewhat less structured, while my husband's parents were more structured. We built our own family from what we had learned in both homes.

Our children grew into adults with lives of their own. Bill lives in Philadelphia, and I am so very proud of him. For the past sixteen years, he has excelled in a career providing customer support services for the United States Army. In this role, he helps veterans and military families receive the benefits available to them after the death of a loved one. He is compassionate and honest, and he is a true friend. He has the strength and compassion of his father and both of his grandfathers, who were veterans of World War II. He is also an avid Revolutionary War reenactor and has recently taken up fencing, at which he has become quite proficient. Like his father, Bill is a man of many interests.

Kristin lives in Lansdale with her husband, Dimitri. She taught high-school English for sixteen years and later became a guidance counselor. I am especially pleased that she started a book group of her own. I know how much a circle of readers can become a circle of friends.

On April 4, 2025, Luca was born. I was seventy-six, nearly seventy-seven, when I became a grandmother for the first time. The day he was born belongs beside the births of my children among the happiest days of my life. Having a grandchild has renewed the wonder of watching a life begin.

I feel fortunate that my children and grandchild live nearby. Family is not only the fact of loving someone. It is the ability to be present, to share ordinary days, and to remain part of one another's lives. For my eightieth birthday, I hope to take the family to Greece, where Dimitri's family has roots and a family farm. Travel is meaningful, but traveling with the people I love gives the journey an even deeper purpose.

FRIENDSHIP, COMMUNITY, AND THE WIDER WORLD

I have been richly blessed by friendship. One of my closest friends and I met through work more than thirty years ago. She is a little older than I am, Jewish, and very similar to me in the values that matter. We believe in equality, compassion, and looking beyond the narrow boundaries of our own experience. We have traveled together, played cards, and supported one another through widowhood. She is like the sister I never had.

My husband and I also belonged to groups of friends who traveled, watched films, and spent time together as couples. After he died, those friends did not drop me from their lives. They continued to include me. That loyalty became a salvation. When a spouse dies, friendship is not a secondary comfort. It can become one of the structures that holds daily life together.

I joined a book group in 1976. The group itself had already existed for several years. For roughly half a century, its members have gathered in one another's homes, chosen books, led discussions, and lived through the stages of life together. We began as young people building careers and families. Over the years, the group witnessed births, divorces, illnesses, deaths, changes, and the ordinary unfolding of decades. A book group may begin with literature, but after fifty years it becomes part of your life story.

I also take classes and belong to a movie group. I enjoy the way a good discussion reveals something I did not see at first. Recently, a discussion of Jane Goodall's *The Book of Hope* became a larger conversation about what gives us hope for the next generation and what brings comfort in difficult times. That is what books and films can do. They give people a shared object to examine and then open a door into the matters that are truly personal.

Travel has broadened me in the same way. Seeing other places teaches you that human beings differ in custom but share the same basic joys, losses, families, needs, and

hopes. Bigotry and hatred often grow from ignorance. Knowledge does not solve every disagreement, but it makes it harder to reduce another person to a stereotype.

Community matters especially as we grow older. Isolation can shrink a person's world. Living at Acts at Brittany Pointe gives me chances to participate, see friends, play cards, discuss books and films, and remain active. If I were alone in a house, I would still try to reach people, but I would not have the same opportunities. A good community makes it easier to keep giving and receiving.

HISTORY AS I LIVED IT

The historical period that marked my young adulthood most strongly was the Vietnam era. My husband's younger brother entered the Marines at eighteen and died in Vietnam at nineteen, about two weeks before he was expected home. I had met him only once, but his death changed my husband's life and became part of the history of our family.

The late 1960s transformed the culture around us. Bloomsburg had been a conservative college when I arrived. There was a dean of women, and women wore white gloves. By the time I left, students wore cutoffs and tie-dye, and they protested the war. Music changed. Expectations for women and men changed. The civil-rights movement challenged the country to face injustice, and a wider idea of freedom entered public life. It felt like a revolution happening around us.

September 11, 2001, affected our family in another direct way. My husband served in the Army Reserve for thirty-eight years. After the attacks, he went to Kuwait for roughly eight months as the head of a JAG unit. Our children were in college, and his departure changed the rhythm of our lives. We knew the assignment was temporary, but temporary does not mean easy. His service required strength from him and adjustment from all of us.

History is not only a list of public dates. It enters kitchens, marriages, college campuses, and family decisions. It appears when someone you love leaves for military service, when a young man does not return from war, or when the culture a student entered is almost unrecognizable by graduation.

THE HARDEST YEARS

The hardest experience of my life was my husband's illness and death. He was diagnosed with brain cancer in his early seventies. We moved to Acts not long afterward, and eventually he received care here. He was able to participate in decisions about his own life, and I was able to see him constantly. Our children lived close enough to be present.

Illness took many things from us, but it also brought us closer. Adversity reveals qualities that ordinary life may not fully show. I had always known my husband was exceptional, and during his illness he proved it again. He faced what happened with bravery, discipline, strength, and an extraordinary positive spirit. He was not always easygoing. He believed strongly that right was right and wrong was wrong. Yet the same firmness that could make him demanding also gave him courage.

He died in 2022. We had shared fifty-one years of marriage, parenthood, work, faith, activity, argument, travel, and everyday life. Grief does not reduce such a relationship to its final illness. The ending belongs to the story, but it does not replace the whole story.

Family helped me through. Friends helped almost as much. My brother-in-law Randy, who is about ten years younger than my husband, has been part of my life since he was eight. He and his wife continued visiting from Cape May. Friends at Brittany Pointe and friends from the many groups my husband and I had known remained close.

Faith in God has also helped me through difficult challenges. Faith is personal, and I know not everyone experiences it in the same way, but it has given me a foundation. Staying busy, remaining part of a community, and helping other people have also mattered. Helping someone else reminds you that you still have something to contribute. It restores a sense of worth that grief can temporarily hide.

WHAT AGE HAS TAUGHT ME

The surprising thing about getting older is that inside, you still feel very much like the person you were at twenty-five. You may not look the same or move in the same way. You may have to pace yourself more carefully. Yet the person doing the thinking still feels familiar. Sometimes the mind believes the body should be able to do what it did twenty years earlier.

Age has taught me to be less judgmental of myself and others. When we are young, many questions seem black and white. Experience reveals the gray. People arrive at different conclusions because they have lived through different families, pressures, fears, responsibilities, and losses. You do not have to agree with everyone, but you should try to see the world from another person's point of view.

I have also learned that another person's unkindness is not always about you. People sometimes behave badly because they are living through pain you cannot see. That does not excuse cruelty, but it can keep you from carrying another person's behavior as a judgment of your own worth.

At eighteen, I wish I had known not to judge myself so harshly. We are often our own worst enemies when we should be our own best friends. That is not permission to avoid responsibility. A best friend tells you the truth, but she does not humiliate you. She encourages you to try again.

Education remains one of my deepest values. Education does not end with a degree. It continues through work, books, classes, travel, conversation, and the courage to

reconsider an old belief. If you have a job that teaches you something every day, do not dismiss its value simply because it is not the most glamorous position.

I believe a person's outlook can become partly self-fulfilling. Success does not have to mean money or status. It can mean building a loving family, serving others, maintaining friendships, continuing to learn, and meeting difficulty without surrendering hope. If you see yourself only as a failure, you may stop noticing the ways you can still act with purpose. Hope leaves room for action.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO CARRY

This letter is for Bill and Kristin, for Dimitri and Luca, for anyone who joins our family later, and also for me. Telling a life story gives the person who lived it a chance to look back and see the threads that were difficult to notice one day at a time.

Remember the coal towns and farm country from which our family came. Remember an Irish Catholic father and a Slovak mother whose marriage crossed lines that seemed larger then than they do now. Remember a nurse who worked outside the home when few mothers in town did and a steamfitter who traveled during the week and returned to his family.

Remember the little Cape Cod house, the woods running down toward the lake, the creeks, the horses across the road, and the firemen's carnivals. Remember the party-line telephone and a household where gossip was not welcome. If you have nothing good to say, it is often wiser to say nothing.

Remember Jack's intelligence and worldwide work, Joe's mechanical ability, and the brothers who filled my childhood with companionship and occasional ganging up. Remember the general store, six days of work for thirty-five dollars, American Bandstand, choir practice, Girl Scouts, and Miss Humphreys taking children on walks.

Remember that books can open the world before you are able to travel through it. Keep reading. Join a group if you can. Talk about what you read. A friendship built around books can last fifty years and become much more than a discussion of stories.

Remember that a career may take a winding path. I left special education, moved through psychology, mental health, parenting at home, insurance, and finally early intervention. The road still returned me to the wish I had as a girl: helping children and families.

Remember that love does not require sameness. My husband and I were different people with the same core values. His structure and my compassion each had something to offer. A relationship grows when two people learn to respect the strengths they do not share.

Remember that family is both a responsibility and a privilege. Bill and Kristin changed the direction of my attention and became the work of my heart. Luca arrived when I had waited many years to become a grandmother and reminded me that joy can begin at any stage of life.

Make good friends and keep them. Do not assume friendship is less important than family. Friends may become the people who carry you through the loss of someone you love. Be the friend who continues to call, visit, invite, listen, and include.

Travel when you can, but do not travel only to collect places. Travel to understand people. Learn enough about lives unlike your own that fear and ignorance cannot make your decisions for you.

Be persistent in your dreams. Value yourself. Do not expect perfection from yourself or from the people you love. Be patient, because there is more than one way to look at almost every human problem. Try to understand the gray without losing the values that guide you.

Most of all, I hope I am remembered for kindness, generosity, and friendship. I do not expect people to remember me for one enormous accomplishment. I hope they remember that I tried to be a good person, that I cared about family and community, that I remained curious, and that I was there when people needed me.

Be your own best friend. Keep learning. Make room for other people's differences. Love your family. Keep hope alive by doing what you can for someone else.

With all my love,

Mary

Mary Lynn Hannings