

LETTER OF LIFE

A Digital Memory Preservation Project

The Letter of

Susan Jacqueline Alpine

What I Want My Family to Know

For my nieces, my great nieces, my great nephew,
and anyone who comes after.

“Find your own happiness within yourself.”

WHERE I BEGAN

My full name is Susan Jacqueline Alpine, although most people have called me Sue or Susie. There is a small family story behind that name. My father was serving in the Canadian Navy when I was born, so he was not there. The last time he had spoken with my mother, they had agreed that I would be named Judith. Then my grandmother sent him a telegram announcing that Susan Jacqueline had arrived. When he finally came home, his first question was, “What happened to Judith?” My mother told him that she had forgotten. I have always found that funny. She had chosen Jacqueline because she thought that if I became a tomboy, I could be called Jackie. I became such a tomboy that my parents decided they had better keep something feminine about me, so they called me Sue. My father had another name for me. To him, I was his ‘Baby Doll’.

I was born on October 7, 1945 in Timmins, Ontario, Canada, just as the Second World War was ending. Timmins was a gold mining town far north of Toronto. The winters could reach forty below, and the mine was the reason many families were there. My father was one of the youngest superintendents at the mine, and the managers lived in a small group of houses on the mine property, out in the bush. That was where I spent the first four years of my life.

Some of my earliest memories may be things I truly remember, and some may have become memories because my parents told the stories so often. We had a dog named Nipper who followed me everywhere. When my mother called me and I did not want to come home, I would hide. She learned that all she had to do was call Nipper. Whatever direction he came from was where she would find me.

I used to pick up pieces of pyrite and run into the house asking, “Mummy, Mummy, is this gold?” She would tell me it was fool's gold. I did not know what a fool was, but I heard the word gold, so I still thought I had found something valuable. We went tobogganing, and the snow piled so high that my brother could build igloos. That was

ordinary life in Northern Ontario. It was cold, remote, and full of room for a little girl and her dog to wander.

I returned to Timmins many times but the last was in 2010. By then it had been many years, and of course it was different. Places change, and memories smooth over many details. Still, it mattered to stand again where my life had begun.

MY PARENTS AND MY BROTHER

My father, Albert Earl Alpine (Bert), was a self made man. He was born in the Toronto area and went north to Timmins looking for work. He began as a welder at the mine and worked his way up until he became a superintendent. Later, after we left Northern Ontario, he traveled a great deal because he was always trying to build a better life for us. He was not home as much as I would have liked, but when he was home, I was often beside him.

My brother, Dean, was busy with sports, so I became my father's helper. I worked with him on projects and watched how he solved problems. We were alike in temperament, which was sometimes a good thing and sometimes a challenge, but it made us close. He taught me by letting me take part. I do not remember long speeches from him. I remember being trusted to help.

My mother, Edna Claire nee McQuarrie (Neddie), was a lovely and very proper lady. She became a full time homemaker after my brother was born and carried the responsibility for the children and the house, especially while my father was traveling. She was always coordinated in the way she dressed and seemed to know what belonged with what. I did not inherit much of that. I was the tomboy who would rather be active than carefully put together. Still, some of her rules settled deep inside me. Even now, when Memorial Day approaches, I hear her reminding me that one should not wear white before then.

My brother was five years older than I. I hero worshipped him. Whatever he did, I wanted to do, even when being a younger sister made that impossible. He was very athletic and became the first person on either side of our family to attend college. He went to Harvard! Later he studied dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania. I became the first girl in the family to attend college, and I was proud of that.

Dean and his wife, Trina, live in Portland, Oregon, and he now has Parkinson's disease. We do not speak as often as I would like. The time difference is part of it, and I think he prefers to call when he feels able to speak clearly. I understand that. I love him dearly, and I still see the older brother I followed everywhere.

My parents believed that what they did for Dean, they should also do for me. They paid for my college education, my first car, and a trip to Europe. The timing was not always identical. Dean had a car earlier, and he worked more during the summers, but I always knew that I mattered equally. I appreciated that then, and I appreciate it even more now. They were frugal people, but their frugality was not a lack of generosity. It was how they made generosity possible.

MOVING AND FINDING HOME

It is difficult for me to describe one childhood home because we moved so often. Over seventeen years of education, I attended nine schools. When I was four, we moved from Northern Ontario to Southern Ontario. When I was eleven, we moved to the United States and settled in New Jersey. For my senior year of high school, we moved again, this time to Ohio.

The move to New Jersey was hard at first. I had left relatives, friends, and everything familiar in Canada. After six years, though, New Jersey became the longest I had lived anywhere, and it felt like home. I had a best friend named Holly, and we rode our bicycles from one end of North Plainfield to the other. Years later, after moving to the Lansdale area, I saw the letters NPHS in the newspaper for North Penn High School.

I felt an immediate warmth because my school had also been NPHS, North Plainfield High School. It was a small connection across many years.

Moving to Ohio for my senior year was difficult. By then I understood what it meant to leave friends and begin again, and I did not enjoy having to do it at such an important point in school. From Ohio I went to Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. My parents had moved back toward Eastern Pennsylvania, so the family remained spread across places but never entirely disconnected.

After college and marriage, I lived near Allentown and Bethlehem. My first husband was in graduate school at Lehigh University. When the draft board began pressing him, he finished his master's degree and entered the Navy as an officer. We spent those years stateside, including time in Virginia Beach. After the marriage ended, I moved to Missouri and lived there for nineteen years. Eventually I came back to Pennsylvania because my parents were getting older and I wanted to be near them.

When people ask where I am from, there is no single easy answer. I was born in Northern Ontario. I grew up in several communities. I became an adult in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Missouri, and Pennsylvania again. For a long time, home was wherever my parents were. Later, home became the place where I had built a life and accepted responsibility for it.

THE GIRL I WAS

I loved school. When summer came in Canada, I asked my mother why they could not keep the school open. I was usually among the top students in my class, and I enjoyed the feeling of learning something and getting it right. I also loved sports. I played volleyball, baseball, field hockey, basketball, and did track. In high school I joined nearly every activity that interested me, including the Girls Athletic Association, Future Teachers of America, Future Nurses of America, French club, and Leaders club.

Basketball was my favorite. Girls basketball was different then. There were three guards and three forwards, and players could not cross the center line. By the time I graduated, one guard was allowed to move across the line. That player was called the roving guard, and that was me. I liked being active and involved in the whole game.

Because I stayed after school for so many activities, my mother had to pick me up almost every day. We were frugal, and a pay telephone cost a dime. I carried one dime for the whole school year. When I was ready to come home, I called, let the telephone ring three times, and hung up. The dime came back, and my mother knew it was time to get me. One dime lasted a year because we had a system.

Dean had a similar system when he returned to Harvard. My parents wanted to know he had arrived safely, but nobody wanted to pay for a long distance call. He would place a person to person call asking for Dean Alpine (himself). My parents would say that Dean was not there, the call would end without charge, and they would know he was back at school. Once an operator asked who was calling, and Dean said, “Mr. Warm. Mr. Luke Warm.” That answer rather spoiled the plan.

My favorite subject was mathematics. In New Jersey, I had a teacher named Mr. Green. We had a special math program through the University of Illinois, and every answer had to be supported through logical steps and theorems. That training stayed with me. It taught me to look for the reason an answer worked, not only the answer itself. Mr. Green also helped me get into Dickinson when I was on the waiting list. I believe he wrote a letter on my behalf, and it made a difference.

For all that success in school and sports, I was very shy. I could perform well in a classroom and still be frightened by a simple conversation. Once my mother stopped in front of a store and asked me to buy a loaf of bread. I walked inside, came right back out, and said they had none. Of course they had bread. I was too shy to ask where it was.

Another time, my mother drove me across town to a pajama party. We knew the street but not the exact house. She expected me to knock on a door and ask. I wanted her to drive all the way home, look up the address in the telephone book, and come back. I do not remember exactly how the problem was settled, but I know I made it to the party. That was how shy I was.

Even now, I sometimes hesitate to make a telephone call for myself. If somebody else needs help, I can make the call without trouble. Doing something for another person has always been easier than asking for something for me.

Teenage life was simpler in some ways. We had no personal devices, so we went outdoors. I went to sporting events, rode bicycles with Holly, and listened to rock and roll. I liked the music of the sixties, and because Dean was five years older, I also knew the music of the fifties. On Sunday drives, my parents listened to singers such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. My taste became a mixture of their music, my brother's music, and my own.

My birthday dinner was usually spaghetti and meatballs with lemon meringue pie. I preferred pie to cake, and spaghetti is still one of my favorite foods. If I went to a movie, I wanted popcorn. These are small details, but a life is made from small details as much as from major decisions.

COLLEGE AND GROWING UP SLOWLY

I entered Dickinson thinking I would major in mathematics. First year calculus did not go especially well, partly because I was dating the man who became my first husband and was not paying enough attention. By second year calculus, I was lost. I switched my major to economics and kept a minor in mathematics.

At the time, I did not have a clear picture of what I wanted to do. I thought a mathematics degree might lead to teaching, but I had not made a firm choice. Economics seemed broad enough to leave possibilities open. Dean had also studied

economics at Harvard before deciding on dentistry. Perhaps his example influenced me. I have always believed there is value in a liberal arts education because it allows a person to learn widely before deciding exactly what to do.

Between my junior and senior years, I spent six weeks touring Europe. My parents made that possible. Travel opened the world for me and later became one of the great pleasures of my life. In fact, I'm proud of the fact that I've been to all 50 states in the US, all 10 provinces of Canada and stepped foot on all 7 continents! Ed says my next 'bucket list' is Planets. I say "NOT"!

I married between semesters of my senior year. At the time, marriage felt like what I was supposed to do. I had gone from living with my parents directly into marriage, and I had never truly been on my own. That delayed an important part of growing up. I could handle school, work, and responsibility, but I had not yet learned that my life belonged to me.

When the first marriage ended, divorce was still heavily frowned upon in my family. I carried shame about it, and some of that feeling lasted for years. I moved to Missouri and began building a life on my own. That period proved something to me. I could be responsible for myself. I could make decisions, earn a living, manage a household, and keep going without another person directing the course of my life.

I wish I had understood that sooner. I do not say that to erase the past. The past is how I learned. I say it because a young person should have the chance to know herself before attaching her happiness to somebody else.

THE WORK THAT FIT ME

I graduated with an economics degree and found my first job as a budget assistant with Lehigh Valley Cooperative Farmers in Allentown. The company was bringing in its first mainframe computer and moving its computer work from Lansdale to Allentown. I was interested in what the programmers were doing.

A college friend had told me that IBM offered aptitude tests for programming. I contacted IBM and took one. They called very quickly and asked whether I could relocate. I was married and my husband was in graduate school, so relocation was not practical. I then spoke with the computer people at the dairy. They offered to give me their own aptitude test. I told them I had already taken the IBM test and suggested they ask IBM for the result. Soon afterward I was transferred into programming.

There was no long formal training program. They gave me a COBOL manual and let me write my first program. I loved it. The logic work I had done in Mr. Green's class came back to me. Programming required patience, logic, and a willingness to keep testing until the solution was accurate.

I progressed from programmer to programmer analyst, then systems analyst, and eventually manager of the programming department. Management was not a good fit for me. I expected people to work as hard as I did without having to be reminded, and that is not always how management works. When I had the opportunity, I stepped back into the technical work. Some people might see that as moving backward. I saw it as returning to something I enjoyed and did well.

I got real satisfaction from making a program work properly. I tested my own work through every situation I could imagine and often debugged other people's code. I cannot point to one grand professional accomplishment. What made me proud was being thorough and dependable. I wanted the work to be right when it left my hands.

Later, Ed and I worked together at Merrill Lynch in Fort Washington. Our department was downsized. I found another computer related position involving quality control, testing, and help desk work, and then that company was bought and I was downsized again. Eventually I became the office manager at a machine shop in Lansdale owned by a friend from church. I handled payables, receivables, payroll, and the work of keeping the front office organized. I stayed there for several years and then retired.

My career was not a straight line, but the thread through it was logical work, careful work, and trust. I learned that a title is less important than finding the kind of responsibility that suits you.

FRIENDSHIP AND THE WIDER WORLD

I have been fortunate to have two especially important friends. One was my college roommate for two years, Laila Nada, now Isaacson. She came from Cairo, Egypt, and I was still Canadian, so the two of us were ‘the foreigners’. We understood each other and became close.

My father was very superstitious, especially about Friday the thirteenth. In college, I pretended to share his fear and sometimes stayed in bed late on that day. To this day, my former roommate calls me every Friday the thirteenth and asks, “Are you up yet?” A friendship that can carry a joke across decades is a precious thing.

My other dear friend is Barbara Moore. We met through church because her cousin was certain we should know each other. He kept telling each of us about the other until we finally met, and he was right. We began traveling together in 2000 with a trip to Israel and Egypt. Over the years we traveled to China and Hong Kong, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Germany. Sometimes Ed came, sometimes others joined us, and sometimes Barbara and I traveled together.

Travel gave me a chance to see how large and varied the world is. It also reminded me that people everywhere build families, solve problems, hold traditions, and try to make a life. Barbara was already at Brittany Pointe, and she was an important reason Ed and I chose to move here. Her friendship changed where we lived and the community we joined.

Church was also an important part of my life. Through church I found friends, service, and responsibilities that required trust. I served as treasurer and later took part in a mission trip to South Carolina. We worked mainly in a poor Black

community, laying floors, building ramps, removing kitchens, and doing other physical work. The people there fed us lunch and made us feel appreciated. I know helping others gives the helper a sense of satisfaction too. I do not think that makes the help less sincere. It is one of the ways service strengthens both sides.

LOVE AND LEARNING TO STAND ON MY OWN

Ed Scheetz is my fourth husband, and I am his third wife. That is not a fact I once would have offered easily. I had several marriages because I was searching outside myself for something I had not learned to provide within myself. I thought another person was supposed to make me happy.

The lesson I want to pass on is simple. Do not make your happiness somebody else's responsibility. A loving relationship can add joy to your life, but another person cannot build the foundation for you. You must be able to stand inside your own life first.

The happiest day of my life was the day Ed and I married. The reason matters. I had already lived on my own. I knew I did not have to be married. I wanted to marry him. That difference gave the day its meaning. It was a choice made by a woman who had finally learned that she could take care of herself.

My earlier marriages and divorces are among the parts of my life I am least proud of. I do not pretend otherwise. I also know that shame alone teaches very little. What matters is whether a person becomes more honest through experience. I became honest about the way I had searched for happiness and about the responsibility I had avoided.

Ed and I have shared work, travel, retirement, and the ordinary business of daily life. Happiness did not arrive because marriage solved everything. It grew because I entered this marriage knowing that my life was already mine.

THE HARDEST THING I DID

Quitting smoking was the hardest thing I ever did. Smoking was common when I was young. Both of my parents smoked. When we visited my grandfather in Northern Ontario, we helped him roll cigarettes using papers and a small machine, and sometimes we stole one to try in the backyard.

I was not a regular smoker when I entered college. On my dormitory wing, a few girls smoked, including my roommate. Their parents did not know, so nobody had brought an ashtray. My roommate used the lid of a Noxzema jar, and the other smokers gathered in our room. Eventually I joined them.

At the time I lived in Kent, Ohio, and my roommate smoked Kent cigarettes, so that was what I started smoking. Later she switched to menthol, and the dormitory cigarette machine carried Alpine cigarettes. I went from smoking the name of my town to smoking my own last name. It was silly, but the addiction was not. Before long I was smoking about two packs a day.

I tried to quit more than once. One year I gave myself a hospital quitting program for my birthday and stayed away from cigarettes for about five months. Then my parents planned a visit. I worried that if they saw me not smoking, they would think I had quit forever, and I was not ready to make that promise. I started again before they arrived. That tells you how strongly addiction can twist a person's thinking.

A few years later, my employer paid for another hospital program. This time I had a nicotine patch and signed a pledge with another participant that I would contact her before smoking. The patch helped with the physical part. The promise made me stop and think before acting. Together, they worked.

I have always been grateful that I did not become involved with anything harder. Smoking was difficult enough to leave behind. My advice is to never start. It is easier to refuse the first cigarette than to fight the thousandth.

WHAT HISTORY FELT LIKE

I was born at the end of the Second World War. My father served in the Canadian Navy but remained in the eastern provinces and did not go overseas. The Korean War did not touch my childhood directly. The Vietnam War affected people around me, including college friends and my first husband's military service, but we remained stateside.

The historical event that struck me most deeply was September 11, 2001. It made me understand how quickly the ordinary world can change. I remember the fear, but I also remember the way Americans looked after one another and the support that came from other countries. I remember hearing Celine Dion sing “God Bless America” after the attacks and feeling that a Canadian voice was reaching toward the country where I had made my life. To me, that was the most beautiful rendition of anyone and it brought tears to my eyes

My father had died in March of that year. On the morning of the attacks, the first thing I did was call my mother. She was safe in Hatfield and nowhere near the danger. I simply needed to hear her voice. I also remember thinking that I was glad my father had not lived to see it because it would have devastated him.

I came to the United States as a permanent resident in 1956. My parents never became citizens, so politics and voting were not major subjects in our home. I did not become a citizen until much later, probably in the nineteen nineties. For years I hesitated because I had been told I would have to give up my Canadian citizenship, and I still had family and strong ties there. I eventually naturalized, but I never stopped being proud that I was born Canadian.

WHAT I BELIEVE

The qualities that matter most to me are honesty, compassion, and helping others. I also value trust. Soon after moving to Brittany Pointe, I was asked to head the finance

committee for the annual bazaar and quilt fair. I was later asked whether I would serve as treasurer of the Residents Association, although I was not ready to take that on. I had already served as treasurer of my church and as treasurer of P.E.O., an organization that supports women's education.

Being trusted with money is an honor because it means people believe you will be careful and honest when nobody is watching. I do not need everyone to know every position I held. What matters is that people who worked with me believed I was dependable.

I have remained proud of my Canadian beginning and of the Alpine name. My father was an only son. Dean was his only son, and Dean's only son, Ryan, died of leukemia at eighteen. That loss was terrible for the family, and it also meant the family name would not continue. Part of the reason I kept my maiden name was that I wanted Alpine to carry on a little farther. One of my nieces later returned to the Alpine name after a divorce. The name may not continue forever, but it has carried our family story through another generation.

I believe family is more important than pride, status, or appearances. Dean's family became especially close after the death of his son. Grief pulled them inward, sometimes almost to the exclusion of others, but it showed how strongly they held one another. Family is where people should be able to return when life becomes difficult.

I also believe a person does not have to be liked by everyone. Young people feel enormous pressure to fit in. I felt it in quieter ways, and I sometimes lacked the confidence to act as an individual. You should listen to others, but you should not surrender your values simply because a crowd is moving in one direction.

WHAT AGE HAS TAUGHT ME

At eighteen, I wish I had known that I did not have to be so shy. My lack of confidence did not come from my parents. They encouraged me and treated me fairly. I was strong in school and athletics, but socially I was immature. Ability in one part of life does not automatically create confidence in another.

Age has surprised me because old age keeps moving farther into the future. When I was young, eighty sounded ancient. Now I am eighty, and I know people in their nineties and past one hundred who do not seem ancient at all. They are simply people who have lived longer.

When I turned forty, I heard people complain about what a terrible milestone it was. I said, “If I had known it was going to be this much fun, I would have done it sooner.” That is still how I feel. Every age seems old until you reach it. Inside, some part of you remains eighteen and is still trying to understand how the years passed so quickly.

I have learned to accept that a life can contain intelligence and foolishness, success and regret. I did good work. I made choices I wish I had made differently. I cared for people. I sometimes depended too much on being cared for. All of those things belong to the same life.

The most useful lesson I can offer is the one that took me longest to learn. Find your own happiness within yourself. That does not mean living without other people. It means bringing a whole person into your relationships instead of asking somebody else to complete what you have not faced.

FOR MY FAMILY

This letter is for my two nieces (Kristin Alpine & Darcie Randall (Trip)), my five great nieces (Emery & Lilli Gluck, Ava & Eliza & Tessa Randall) and my great nephew (Stuart Gluck), and anyone in the family who reads it later. I never had children of my own, so the family that comes through my brother has always mattered greatly to me.

I want you to remember where the family began and how far it traveled. Remember the gold mine in Northern Ontario, the little group of managers' houses in the bush, the snow, the igloos, and Nipper giving away my hiding place. Remember a father who worked his way from welder to superintendent (and later, even to vice president) and a mother who carried the household while he traveled. Remember Dean going to Harvard and a younger sister determined to follow him into college.

Remember that I loved school, sports, logic, and the satisfaction of solving a problem. Remember the roving guard, the one dime telephone signal, the COBOL manual, and the programs that finally worked after patient testing. Remember the shy girl who could not ask for bread and the older woman who could be trusted with an organization's money.

Remember that friendship can last across distance and decades. A call every Friday the thirteenth can hold a college friendship together. A friend from church can become a traveling companion and lead you toward a new home. Service can begin with laying a floor or building a ramp and end with people feeling less alone.

Remember that mistakes do not have to become the final definition of a person. I married more than once while looking for happiness in the wrong place. I eventually learned to stand on my own and then chose a marriage because I wanted it, not because I needed somebody to take responsibility for me.

Remember that addiction can make an intelligent person behave irrationally, and that asking for help can be part of strength. Remember that family names and family stories continue only when somebody chooses to carry them.

Most of all, take responsibility for your own happiness. Love your family. Be honest enough that people can trust you. Help when you are able. Do not let shyness convince you that you are less capable than you are. Do not surrender your values because you want approval.

If you think of me years from now, I hope you remember that I tried to be loving and helpful. Those are simple words, but they describe the person I wanted to be.

If you think of me years from now, I hope you remember that I tried to be loving and helpful, that I learned to stand on my own, and that I found, in the end, the happiness I had spent so long looking for in other places.

With all my love,

Susie

Susan Jacqueline Alpine