

LETTER OF LIFE

A Digital Memory Preservation Project

The Letter of

Suzanne Hope

The Woman Who Became Your Mother

For my children,
with all my love.

“Never let the outside world interfere with your inner peace.”

My dear children,

There are so many things about my life that I have wanted to share with you, not because I think my story is extraordinary, but because it is the story of the woman who became your mother. I want to tell you about where I came from, the people and experiences that shaped me, the joys and disappointments along the way, and, most importantly, the life we have shared together. I hope that by reading my story, you will understand me a little better and see more clearly the love, hopes, and dreams I have always carried for each of you. Above all, I want you to know how much I love you and how proud I am of the wonderful adults you have become.

WHERE I BEGAN

I am Suzanne Hope, although people often call me Sue. I was born on Aug 6, 1946 at Germantown Hospital in Philadelphia. The neighborhood of my earliest childhood had the twin houses that were common then. The houses are still there, but much of the world around them has changed. The small shops are gone. The large billboards near Stenton Avenue with structures behind them where children once made forts have disappeared too.

One of my earliest clear memories was at the shore in Ocean City. I was five or six, and the beach was crowded. I came out of the water and every umbrella looked the same. I could not find my parents. I finally sat on the porch of the lifeguard station and waited. When my mother found me, she was hysterical because she had believed I might have drowned.

That experience fits the pattern of my childhood in another way. My father worked in corporate America, so we moved constantly. I lived in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and Ohio, sometimes moving back and forth between the same states. For much of my early life, I entered a new school almost every year. Each time, I had to walk into a classroom where I knew nobody and start fresh.

A CHILDHOOD OF BEGINNING AGAIN

At the time, I did not always appreciate moving. It is difficult to invest in friendship when some part of you expects to leave. Once, my family built a house in Ohio, moved into it, and moved again six weeks later. Even now, I meet people who have known the same friends since kindergarten, and I understand the special history they share. I did not have that.

What I received instead was flexibility. I learned how to speak with almost anybody, almost anywhere. I learned to enter a room without waiting for someone else to make it comfortable for me. A childhood that could have made me withdraw instead taught me to reach outward. If it were up to me, I would not have chosen to move as frequently as we did, but I am grateful for how those moves shaped me.

The home I remember most clearly was in Westfield, New Jersey. We moved there when I was entering eighth grade, and for once I stayed through high school. It was a big house with woods behind it. The neighborhood children built enormous tree forts back there, almost a small colony of our own. My high school was large too. My graduating class had about six hundred students.

In other places, we rode bicycles through alleys and played baseball there. In Scotch Plains, the neighborhood children spent a summer clearing weeds from a pond so it would freeze well enough for ice skating in winter. We left home after breakfast, found lunch wherever we happened to be, and returned for dinner. Parents did not know where their children were every minute like nowadays. Back then, we were expected to use judgment, find our way home, and show up for dinner.

That freedom stayed with me when I became a mother. I wanted my own children to have a childhood, not a schedule supervised down to the minute. We lived near farm fields, woods, dogs, and creeks. You rode bicycles through the neighborhood, floated down the creek, and built dams. I sometimes called you home for dinner with an air horn because I did not know exactly where you were. The air horn worked.

MY FAMILY BEFORE ME

My mother's parents came from Hungary, although they met after arriving in the United States. They married when they were nineteen. My grandfather had been trained through an apprenticeship as a barber and hairdresser, and my grandmother had been trained as a cook. She was a phenomenal one.

I remember sitting in my grandfather's shop at the end of a day. The money they had earned came home in a cigar box. There were not many dollar bills. Most of it was coins, and we counted them together. That cigar box gave me an early picture of work: many small efforts collected patiently until they became a living.

My father's parents lived across the street from us when I was very young. His father worked for Greyhound, and his mother kept the home. My grandfather smoked cigars, and I liked the paper bands around them. He would give the bands to me, and I would put them around my fingers as rings. It is a small memory, but family history is often carried in small things: a cigar box, a paper ring, the smell of a kitchen, or the way a grandparent made a child feel included.

My mother did not work outside the home after she married. My father built his career in the tire industry, beginning with Firestone and eventually becoming the president of Seiberling Tire and Rubber Company, a subsidiary of Firestone. His work was the reason we moved so often. It also meant that my brother and I grew up watching ambition, responsibility, and the demands a career can place on a family.

My brother was eighteen months younger than I was, and we got along well. He attended Perkiomen School and then Otterbein College. He began his career at Firestone, though working in the shadow of our father was difficult. He found his own path through General Motors, Porsche Audi, and finally Mitsubishi, where he became one of only a few directors in the United States. He died in his sixties from multiple myeloma. I remain proud that he stepped out of someone else's shadow and built a life that belonged to him.

One thing my father told me has remained with me. After college, I was home and upset because I had no idea what to do with my life. He told me, “Don't worry about it. We Cummings are late bloomers. You'll find your way.” He was right. I did find my way. It simply was not a straight line.

THE GIRL WHO LOVED SCIENCE

From the time I was eight or nine, I knew that I wanted to do something in science. I had a chemistry set and loved it. For a while I imagined becoming a veterinarian, although allergies to cats, dogs, grass, ragweed, and other things made that path less practical. What never changed was my desire to work in a laboratory.

School came fairly easily to me, especially mathematics and science. That was both an advantage and, in its own way, a problem. Because I could understand things without always working hard, I did not apply myself as much as I should have. My parents could be forgiving about a bad grade in a foreign language. A poor grade in mathematics was another matter entirely.

I remember an eighth-grade mathematics class in which students had to solve problems at the board. I had not done the homework. When I could not solve the problem, I began to cry. My teacher came over and said, “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” I have remembered that line all my life because she made me take responsibility. Ability does not excuse preparation.

Another algebra teacher was so good that the material seemed to enter by osmosis. You could understand even when you thought you were not paying attention. I also remember a Spanish teacher who had apparently worked as a spy during the Second World War. He did not say much about it, which naturally made him even more interesting.

As a teenager, I worked at a Fanny Farmer candy store. I began at ninety-five cents an hour and eventually rose to one dollar and fifteen cents. In college, I worked at the

Copper Kettle Fudge Shop in Ocean City, which was an excellent job for someone who loved Mounds bars and ice cream.

Getting to high school required effort too. We lived two and a half miles away, just inside the distance at which the school would not provide a bus. I walked, rode a bicycle, or sometimes went with a neighbor to the train station and walked from there. My parents gave me money for public transportation home, but I usually saved it and walked instead.

I also loved sports. I played field hockey at the national level as a goalkeeper. Later, I coached girls' field hockey and basketball and helped with a junior varsity field hockey team at Souderton High School. Sports taught me to commit, react, and keep going after a mistake.

EDUCATION AND THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

I earned a Bachelor of Science in biology from Lebanon Valley College. My freshman year was not my finest academic performance. College brought sudden freedom, and I made some of the decisions young people make when nobody is standing over them. I spent the next three years bringing my grades back up.

After graduation, I still did not know exactly what I wanted. My father's reminder about late bloomers helped. I went to the University of Akron, completed the courses needed for teaching certification, and did my student teaching in Ohio.

When I look back now, one of my real regrets is that I did not take school more seriously. My grades were good, but they could have been better. By not applying myself fully, I reduced the choices available to me before I understood how valuable those choices were.

At one point I wanted to become a chemical engineer. In those years, women were generally directed toward nursing, teaching, or library work. Women were not

expected to become chemical engineers, and I allowed myself to be talked out of it. When I later entered professional meetings, I found four or five women in a room with forty-five men. The world had told women what we were supposed to do, and too often we listened.

That is why I would tell any girl who loves science to pursue it. Do not let anyone talk you out of your dream because of your sex. You do not need an IQ of 165 or a mysterious “science brain.” You need curiosity, patience, and a desire to solve problems.

THE BLIND DATE THAT BECAME A LIFE

Before my life in laboratories, I was a science teacher. I also coached field hockey and girls' basketball. One of the mothers regularly asked what the parents could do to help during games, perhaps bringing oranges or water. One day, I made a smart-aleck suggestion: “Why don't one of you find me a husband?”

That Saturday, Mrs. Kinkner called and told me she had a date for me. I said, “I beg your pardon?” She replied that if it did not work out, at least I would get a free dinner.

It worked out wonderfully. That blind date became my husband.

He has been the most important relationship in my life and my best friend. I know that he has my back, and he knows that I have his. A strong marriage is not the absence of disagreement. It is the certainty that the person beside you is still on your side when a disagreement ends.

He also gave me one of the pieces of advice I most believe: never let the outside world interfere with your inner peace. The world will always provide noise, conflict, unfairness, and reasons to be angry. We cannot control all of it. We can decide what we allow to take up residence inside us.

BECOMING YOUR MOTHER

The happiest days of my life include the day I married and the days each of my three children was born. Becoming a parent was also the moment that made me an adult, if I ever truly became one. Even now, I am not sure I have figured out what I want to be when I grow up.

When you bring home a first baby, you check constantly to make sure the baby is still breathing. You worry about every decision and read books by people who seem completely certain about how children should be raised. Eventually, you throw out much of the advice and use common sense. By the second and third child, a scraped knee no longer felt like a medical emergency.

Parents must be parents. They cannot always be their children's friends, because sometimes love requires making a decision a child will dislike. Other people, including grandparents, will have their own theories about how the children should be raised.

I wanted you to have the freedom I remembered from childhood. Pong arrived when you were young, and our first computer used a tape drive, but screens did not organize the day. There were fields, bicycles, creeks, dogs, and the air horn calling you home.

There was also dinner. In the home where I grew up, the family waited for my father and ate together. I tried to give you real food and a shared table. I cooked from scratch, and I still like to cook even now, when a dining room is available to me. Family dinner may not look important while it is happening. Years later, ordinary meals became part of what home meant.

What makes me proudest is not a job title or a difficult project. It is the three of you. You have all done well, and every parent's hope is that the children will go farther than the parent did. I believe we accomplished that. I hope you know that your

success has never been only a fact I report about you. It has been one of the great joys of my life.

A LIFE IN CLASSROOMS

My first profession was teaching middle-school science in Norristown. I taught eighth and ninth grades, coached girls' field hockey and basketball, and loved the work. Some of the students were challenging, but many of those children had difficult home lives and needed far more than a science lesson.

During one period of racial unrest, Eisenhower School closed for a week. People came from Philadelphia and ran through the halls. It was a reminder that a classroom is never isolated from the world outside it. Children carry their homes, fears, neighborhoods, and the conflicts of their time through the school doors.

When I began having children, I decided that I could not give everything to other people's children while withholding it from my own. I left teaching to stay home. That was not the end of my work with young people.

When my children were in elementary and middle school, I became "Mrs. Wizard." I visited classrooms and showed children that scientific ideas could be understood and enjoyed. I ran an after-school electronics program for sixth graders. My only academic requirement was that a child be able to read at the sixth-grade level. I did not care whether the student was the highest achiever in the class or its biggest bully. I wanted children, especially girls, to see that science belonged to them too.

The experiments were memorable. I demonstrated voltage and waves, and I once ran fifty thousand volts across my son, which the students naturally thought was wonderful. Years later, one of those students sat through a high-school presentation by a man playing Mr. Wizard. The student announced that Mrs. Hope had already taught them the concept in fifth grade. That probably took some wind out of the presenter's sails, but it made me happy.

I also took students to a field hockey camp in Michigan. In those days, a teacher could put five children in a car, drive them across several states, coach them, comfort them, and become part of their lives in a way that is much harder now. I understand why boundaries exist, but I am still sorry that some forms of human closeness have been lost.

LEARNING AGAIN IN THE LAB

When my youngest child was three, I returned to work. I began at Leeds & Northrup as an electrochemical technician, then moved into semiconductor research. I took additional electronics classes at a technical school at night. My laboratory partner was an engineer from work, so we could complete the lab efficiently while some younger students were still figuring out how to turn on the oscilloscope. Experience can be a useful head start.

I enjoyed semiconductor research. I liked the precision of the clean room, the logic of the work, and the satisfaction of solving a problem. The path I had imagined as a child, working in a laboratory, had arrived later and in a different form than expected. My father had been right about late bloomers.

When Leeds & Northrup closed, I needed another job. At the time, we had three children in college, including a period when we were paying three tuition fees at once. My husband made the situation clear: I could not simply come home. So, I went to Merck.

THE WORK I LOVED

I began at Merck as a biological technician in manufacturing. A manager in research later invited me for coffee and said there might be a job I would like. I moved into research, first supervising the area that weighed and dispensed raw materials for

experimental and clinical-trial drugs. Over time, the position changed into something much broader.

If I had described my real job rather than my official title, I would have called myself a firefighter. When something was stuck in customs, lost in logistics, delayed in transit, or missing somewhere inside the plant, I found it. Some materials were connected to experimental medicines and might be the only available supply in the world. The work required accuracy, urgency, and the ability to stay calm when everybody else had started to panic.

One Monday, I received a call from Ireland. A shipment of vials had failed inspection, and the site needed six hundred thousand replacements by Friday. Finding that quantity was only the beginning. We had to make sure another operation could release the inventory without shutting itself down, complete the import and export requirements, arrange freight and aircraft, and move everything across borders on time. That logistical puzzle was exactly the kind of work I enjoyed.

An earlier supervisory experience taught me something different. I was managing union personnel, and the rules were supposed to ensure that everybody received the same treatment. One young man in his twenties came to me in tears. He had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor. I told him to go home, speak with his parents, seek another medical opinion, and plan what to do next.

Other employees objected because I had given him time they had not received. Eventually I said, “When you get a brain tumor, let me know. I’ll give you the day off.” That ended the discussion, at least with me. Fairness does not always mean pretending that every human situation is identical.

The boss who most influenced me was one of the most ethical people I knew. He would not compromise the integrity of research. If a refrigerated material exceeded its permitted time outside refrigeration, a researcher’s assurance that “another half hour is fine” was not enough. These were experimental drugs. We did not know all the ways

a material might change, and people could ultimately depend on our judgment. Rules were not obstacles to science. In that setting, they protected it.

I loved my work and the people around me. I retired at seventy-two, then returned for six months when I was asked to help. I retired again, returned again for eight months, and was later asked whether I would come back for another two years. I finally said no. There were other things I wanted to do, and at some point retirement should be allowed to take effect.

I was fortunate. Many people spend their careers waiting for the end of the day or the beginning of the weekend. I had work that made me curious, useful, and eager to solve the next problem.

THE PEOPLE WHO MADE LIFE LARGER

Moving so often made long childhood friendships difficult, but later life gave me people who stayed. A chemist I worked with in semiconductor research became one of my closest friends. We shared our work, loved music, held season tickets to the opera, and spent time together with our husbands. The friendship began with common work and grew beyond it.

At Merck, my officemate was Chinese and became like an older brother. He and his wife taught me how to make dumplings. We went into Chinatown, ordered dim sum, and he explained what I was eating. Friendship is one of the ways the world becomes larger. Someone trusts you enough to bring you inside a culture, a kitchen, or a way of seeing, and you leave knowing more than you did before.

I hope I have been that kind of person for others. When I am remembered, I would like people to say that I was there for my friends, willing to help and support them. It's easy to say, but harder to live out consistently.

THE FIRE AND THE PEOPLE WHO CAME THROUGH

One of the hardest periods of my life began with a house fire caused by faulty construction in the fireplace. We were out of our home for six months. The fire itself was frightening, but the long struggle with the insurance company became emotionally exhausting. One day it seemed a cost would be covered; the next day it would not. Meanwhile, we had three children displaced from home.

We were lucky in the ways that mattered. My in-laws lived about ten minutes away and were in Florida for the winter, so we moved into their house. They stayed in Florida until we could return home. The arrangement required extra driving because you still had to attend your own school, but it gave us a place to be a family.

Our neighbors were extraordinary. We ran from the house in our pajamas. When my husband later went back for clothes, he could not find them because the neighbors had already entered, removed clothing and important belongings, cleaned what they could, and stored everything for us.

OUTWARD BOUND AND THE WOMAN I FOUND

After forty, I took an Outward Bound course designed for women my age. It included backpacking, whitewater canoeing, and rock climbing. It was one of the most incredible experiences of my life.

The course taught me that I was capable of far more than I had been asking of myself. That lesson did not arrive as a slogan. It came while carrying weight, facing a rock wall, working with other women, and discovering that the body and mind could continue after the first instinct said to stop. I wish I had learned that confidence earlier. Still, discovering your strength after forty is not too late.

THE WORLD AS I SAW IT

The Vietnam War was the major historical event of my youth, but I did not fully understand it while it was happening. I was not an activist, and I did not realize how terrible the war was. Young people today can learn almost instantly about events across the country or the world. Something happens in California and appears on a screen in Pennsylvania moments later. In my youth, an event could happen and many people might never hear the full story.

More information does not automatically create more wisdom. Young people often care deeply, which is a good thing, but life experience teaches you to test emotion against facts and intention against consequences. A proposal may sound compassionate and still create effects its supporters did not expect. Before deciding, ask how a system works, who will bear the cost, and what people are likely to do in response.

WHAT I BELIEVE

I believe in God, and I believe in treating other people as I would want them to treat me. Respect and love should not depend on whether someone can do something for you.

That belief is easiest when other people are kind. Its real test comes when you feel misunderstood, mistreated, or tempted to strike back. I have imagined the satisfying response and thought about what revenge might look like. Then I tried to let it go. Choosing peace does not mean pretending that something was right. It means refusing to let another person's wrongdoing control what you become.

Never let the outside world interfere with your inner peace. That is not an instruction to ignore the world. Help where you can. Stand up for what matters. Solve the

problem in front of you. Then understand the boundary between what you can change and what you must release.

Integrity matters too. My work in research taught me that doing the ethical thing is often quiet. It may consist of refusing a shortcut, recording an inconvenient fact, or protecting the standard when somebody powerful wants an exception. People may never know what did not go wrong because you did your job correctly. Do it correctly anyway.

WHAT AGE HAS TAUGHT ME

Getting older has surprised me because mentally I do not feel old. Physically, the truth announces itself. I wake up stiff. My balance is not what it once was. I go to the gym and work on it because at this age, balance can determine whether a person remains independent. I once could stand on one foot indefinitely. Now a second can feel like an achievement.

Age has also given me perspective. At eighteen, I was naive and unfocused. I wish I had possessed the wisdom to think more strategically and the discipline to use my abilities fully. Yet wisdom cannot simply be handed to an eighteen-year-old. Much of it is made from living, choosing, being wrong, trying again, and finally recognizing a pattern.

I have learned not to assume that the first path is the only path. I began in teaching, stayed home with children, returned as an electrochemical technician, moved into semiconductor research, and ended up solving global logistics problems for experimental medicines. None of that would have appeared as a neat plan when I was young.

I have learned that private people can still share what matters. I do not always reveal my thoughts and feelings easily. In many ways, though, what you see is what you get. I

hope this letter says some of the things that ordinary days did not always leave time to say.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO CARRY

To my children, treat everyone the way you would want to be treated, with respect and love. Be proud of what you stand for. At the same time, remain willing to think, learn, and revise your view when facts require it.

Do not let anybody narrow your future before you have had the chance to explore it. Take your education seriously. Curiosity may reveal the direction, but effort creates the choices. If you are a late bloomer, bloom late. Just do not use that phrase as permission to avoid beginning.

Remember that science is not reserved for a special class of people. Ask questions. Learn how things work. Do not panic when a subject sounds difficult. Most mysteries become less frightening when you take them apart one piece at a time.

Work with integrity. If a material has been outside refrigeration too long, record the truth. If six hundred thousand vials have to reach Ireland by Friday, begin solving the problem. If a frightened young man tells you he has a brain tumor, remember that humanity belongs inside good judgment.

Choose people who have your back, and be the person who has theirs. Keep friends who teach you something, whether it is how to make dumplings, how to listen to an opera, or how to see a problem more honestly. When a neighbor's house burns, carry out the clothes before being asked.

Make room for family. Sit down for dinner when you can. Cook something from scratch. Let children ride bicycles, build dams, scrape their knees, and learn their way home. When necessary, use an air horn.

Do something that proves you are capable of more than you thought. It may be rock climbing after forty. It may be returning to school, entering a new laboratory, or walking into a room where you know nobody. The first step may feel familiar to me. I spent my childhood taking it.

Protect your inner peace without becoming indifferent. The world will always be noisy. Care about it, work on what is yours to improve, and do not let its anger become your identity.

I am proud of the career I built, the students I taught, the problems I solved, and the moments when I chose integrity over convenience. I am proud that I kept learning and that the little girl with the chemistry set eventually found her laboratory.

Most of all, I am proud of you.

When you remember me, I hope you remember someone who was curious, practical, willing to work, and ready to help. Remember Mrs. Wizard, the goalkeeper, the mother with the air horn, the woman who could move six hundred thousand vials across the world, and the late bloomer who kept finding new ways to grow.

Remember that my story is not extraordinary because every part of it was grand. It matters because it is ours. It is the story of the woman who became your mother, and of how much she loved you.

With all my love,

Mom

Suzanne Hope