Notes on My Mother
8/08/09

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Going

Only humans believe
there is a word for goodbye
we have one in every language
one of the first words we learn
it is made out of greeting
but they are going away
the raised hand waving
the face the person the place
the animal the day
leaving the word behind
and what it was meant to say

- W.S. Merwin
  *The Shadow of Sirius*

What do you say for the person who gave you life? What do you say for the person who taught you to tie your shoes, to read, to swim, to drive a car? What do you say about the person who showed you how to be kind, how to be a loving human being, how to show compassion for others?

You start by saying her name: Margaret Aylor Harris. My mother.

Any of you who were fortunate enough to have spent time with her know the sharpness of her mind, the openness of her heart, and gentle spirit she possessed.

These are just some of the things I will always remember:

- her delicate, absolutely perfect penmanship.
- her kindness and empathy for others. Ginny Morris in the cafeteria.
- her practicality and good advice. “Show some backbone.” Try computers.
- her sense of humor. Her collection of *Peanuts* and *Hagar the Horrible* strips
- her life ‘outside’ the family as a teacher, an actor, an elder of the church, and a citizen
- Her briefcase with the stenciled MAH on it.
- her pride and great joy in her children and grandchildren

These are moments I remember:

- having her read to me before bed when I was little…especially *Winnie the Pooh* or Dr. Seuss
  (*King’s Stilts, It Happened One Day on Mulberry St.*) or *The Possum That Didn’t*
- running away - “Sure…I’ll help you pack your bag.”
- tolerating the incessant ‘I wants’ from a little boy (B-17; Science program)
- goldfish and turtle burials
- the standoff over lima beans
- Watching *Gunsmoke* with her
- Going to Easter or Mother’s Day dinners at the Longview
- Going to see Ice Capades, or the Andrew Wyeth exhibit, or *The Music Man*, in Buffalo
- Going to the orthodontist in Olean…stopping for a burger afterward at Burger King
- Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners…especially the turkey (never done)
- Going for drives after church when she would let me practice my driving
- Decorating outside for Christmas…during the years between O and Holly’s departure for college and my own
- Watching TV in “the spot”…the nook next to the baseboard heat in the front room in front of the small TV.
- Her pleasure in the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson
- Retainer incident…I got sick while we were driving to Wellsville and Mom pulled over next to the road…I hurled and she took me home, only at which point I realized that I’d lost my retainer. She went back to the spot next to the road and found the retainer. ‘Nough said.
- Going to Dundee NY to find a new dog – the day we brought Maggie MacGhie home
- Having her visit me while I lived near Boston; walking the Freedom Trail with her and going for a picnic at Walden Pond. The incident at the Fanuell Hall Market
- Watching her brilliant performances in Watch on the Rhine and The Lion in Winter
- Being able to talk to her whenever I needed advice, or just needed someone to listen

Something we came across after Mom died were her responses to two questions Patti had asked her to address as part of an intended long-term question-and-answer correspondence. They shed light on her own beginnings, and on the love I was so blessed to have received. If you would indulge me, I’d like to close with Mom’s own words.

My Happiest Moment

There are three happiest moments in my life that are so easy to cite and that have become a continuous blessing.
The first was the time I saw my new baby, Owen, and knew he was perfect.
The second was the time I saw my second baby two years later, Holly, and knew she was perfect.
The third was the time I saw my third baby four years later, Steven, and knew he was perfect.

These happiest moments have grown to be the best, most enduring, and deeply loved parts of my life.

- How she would say how lucky she was to have me (or Owen or Holly) as one of her children…and how it really was always just the opposite, how lucky we were to have her for our mom.

Rain Light

All day the stars watch from long ago
my mother said I am going now
when you are alone you will be all right
whether or not you know you will know
look at the old house in the dawn rain
all the flowers are forms of water
the sun reminds them through a white cloud
touches the patchwork spread on the hill
the washed colors of the afterlife
that lived there long before you were born
see how they wake without a question
even though the whole world is burning

-- W.S. Merwin

*The Shadow of Sirius*

Thank you.
W. S. Merwin, from *Walled Place above the River*, *The Shadow of Sirius* (Copper Canyon Press, 2008). #W. S. Merwin #Walled Place above the River #The Shadow of Sirius #leaves #listening #voice #changes #longing #memory. 36 notes. thequoteaday. Â #One Valley #poetry #The Shadow of Sirius #W.S. Merwin. 12 notes. joansdidion. Â the splintered skyline of the city glitters in a silence we all know but cannot touch or reach for with words Â W.S. Merwin, Â #Booby the Avenue Â *The Shadow of Sirius*, (2009). #poetry #contemporary poetry #w.s. merwin #the shadow of siriuss #lit. 11 notes. joansdidion. I will be asleep and I will wake up far away we are going south where I know that my father is going to die but I will grow up before he does that the hands go on washing by themselves. Â universal themes as mortality in *The Shadow of Sirius* (2008), which earned a Pulitzer Prize. Much of his oeuvre was published by the Library of America (LOA) as the two-volume *The Collected Poems of W.S. Merwin* (2013). Merwin was only the second living writer to be so surveyed by the Â Read More. Ask us a question. Close. Ring in the new year with a Britannica Membership. Close Ad. Since Sirius has a smaller shadow star, perhaps Merwin refers with this title to his process of poetry that contains both the desire to capture the flute music and the knowledge this it is impossible. Read more. 56 people found this helpful. Â *The Shadow of Sirius* is divided into 3 unequal parts. The first dealing more overtly with the past, where Merwin’s travelling through distant times becomes our present. The second, shorter section, is dedicated to his dogs (the origins of “Sirius”? ) and explores the spaces that death leaves in life. The final, longest part of the collection is thematically eclectic, abstract in nature, where time and memory seem to bring an extra depth and quality of feeling to the paintings on a wall, a landscape, a month of the year. Â *The Shadow of Sirius* contains many poems that are deeply imagined, strongly crafted, and filled with wisdom and feeling. Â Georgia Review. Â Merwin’s ability to turn the mundane into the magical that makes him a special poet. He asks us to look again and listen again to the world around us. Â Jonathon Bastian, Time Out Literary Critic. Â this quintessential Merwin conveys existence with unabashed praise and revelation. Â Sirius is known as the brightest star in the sky, and as the title suggests, such raging brightness casts a deep shadow. Merwin’s poems are just that Â the veil behind a luminous burning. Â Hollins Critic.