

The age of mothers

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January 30, 2015 in *Cross-Cultural*

On December 27, at the remarkable age of 102 years and 7 months, my mother Helen died in the city where she was born, Cincinnati, Ohio, with next to no sign of dementia. The cause of her death was not sickness but old age. From observation these past few years, I've learned that old age manifests as a winding down, devolving into a shutting down.



Mother and Twins Monument by Henry Dmochowski Saunders, commemorating his wife and children. The site overlooks the bend in the Schuylkill River where the twins drowned. (Photo by Smallbones via Creative Commons/Wikipedia)

In my mother's case, the crucial shutting down had to do with cessation of blood flow to her left foot; the main leg artery was diagnosed irreparably closed from the knee down. Without blood flow, the foot began to die from within, which brought pain, which led to the administration of morphine, which tolled the final note. Morphine stimulates and accelerates the whole overall process of shutting down — eating, drinking, digesting, eliminating, purifying, and everything else.

The alternative would have been to amputate her leg well above the knee.

Goodbye to All

I left the bedside of my mother before her actual death. I kissed the top of her head and said, “Goodbye, darling Mother.” She appeared lost in a haze. But then, parting the veil of morphine, she leaned to touch me, saying, “Goodbye, my dear.” And with my brother Bruce to her right, my sister Gloria to her left, and me at her head, she looked outward, through bright and glistening turquoise blue eyes; and smiling like the glow of sunset, she said, “Goodbye to All.” I was free to go on my way.

Four days after I said goodbye to my mother, she died in her bedroom at the assisted living facility where she’d resided for almost two years. It was 7:15 on a Saturday morning, and no one with whom she had spent a day of her life was with her. The attending hospice nurse reported her visibly free of pain. A doctor was called in to pronounce my mother’s body dead, and the body was removed to the funeral home for cremation.

Many mothers

A month after my mother’s departure, on a winter weekend when the sky was a cloudless sheet of construction paper, I was drawn to visit [Laurel Hill Cemetery](#) above the banks of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. The cemetery is an outlook as well as a site in itself, doubling as an arboretum and tripling as a sculptural garden. Founded in 1836 and now a national historic landmark, Laurel Hill abounds with handsome mausoleums; noble trees; flowering (when in season) shrubs; winding roadways; hills and hillocks portioned with gates, walls, and steps; and grave markers sculpted into columns, urns, books, lions, wreaths, arches, and angels. I’d never been there except when flowers were in bloom. On this bleak Saturday, all was stark. And yet the towering tombstones in shades of grey and tones of white, clustering up from a carpet of snow, were as satisfying as an unwavering field of grain.

Alone in the cemetery, with nothing but the sound of the Schuylkill Expressway across the river, I walked the trails looking for stones engraved with the word *mother*. There were some, often beside a stone engraved with the word *father*.

Looking for Anna Jarvis

The next day, Sunday, I ventured out to Bala Cynwyd, where lies [West Laurel Hill](#), a sprawling

sister cemetery incorporated in 1869 to accept overflow from the unexpandable Laurel Hill. Larger than, if not quite so renowned or historic as, the Philadelphia site, West Laurel Hill is lush and lovely, with great ornate architecture and a fabulous Gothic bell tower; the cemetery also attaches to the [Cynwyd Heritage rail trail](#).

Before going, I'd scanned the website of West Laurel Hill and had discovered of all things that one of the notables buried there is none other than the founder of Mother's Day. I went in search of, and was able to find, [the grave of Anna Jarvis](#) (1864-1948), inscribed as follows on white stone:

Founded Mother's Day May 10, 1908

Officially Proclaimed By President Woodrow Wilson May 9, 1914

As history notes, in adoration of her mother Ann, Ms. Jarvis worked zealously toward the inauguration of a national holiday based on sentiment for mothers. As it turned out, abhorring what the holiday had turned into, she spent the last years of her life working equally zealously against the commercialization of Mother's Day. Surely Ms. Jarvis rests content — not on any achievement of noncommercialization, but in her resting place. After her death, in West Chester, Anna Jarvis, who had neither married nor given birth to children, was buried beside the remains of her mother.

A tradition worth reconsidering

In Victorian times, it was customary to visit parklike cemeteries, designed as civic institutions for public use as places for strolling, picnicking, relaxation, and quietude. With environs as winsome and welcoming as Laurel Hill and West Laurel Hill, cemetery enjoyment is a 19th-century custom worthy of reconsideration.

Which brings to mind some musing words of Charles Dickens, most esteemed of Victorian writers, who would himself visit London's cemeteries during night walks. His reflections adhere to us, here today, in Philadelphia and beyond:

It was a solemn consideration what enormous hosts of dead belong to one old great city, and how, if they were raised while the living slept, there would not be the space of a pin's point in all the streets and ways for the living to come out into. Not only that, but the vast armies of dead would overflow the hills and valleys beyond the city, and would stretch away all round it . . . seemingly, to the

confines of the earth.

— The Uncommercial Traveller (1860)

Later this year, my mother's ashes will be placed or encased in a gleaming granite wall, alongside my father's ashes; he, metaphorically, has been awaiting her for 20 years and 2 months. Their vestiges may look down upon a landscaped waterfall and out upon a vast expanse of fellow travelers.



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