

Eulogy to My Mama

Bryant W. York
January 2007

On January 25, 1979 my mother, Mabel York, called her five living children (Billy, Yvonne, Bryant, Gail, and Gregory) together to celebrate her 64th birthday. Instead of celebrating she told us that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Her doctor gave her *three* months to live. She insisted that none of us should change our lives and that we should proceed as if nothing had happened. Of course, this was impossible to do and something *only* a mother could say. I was in graduate school at the time and immediately it became impossible to concentrate on my studies. I had interviewed at the IBM Research Labs in San Jose, CA during 1978 and had accepted an offer to begin work in June 1979. All I had to do was finish writing a dissertation. But, I just couldn't concentrate!

I tried everything in order to cope. I did meditation, jogging, and I tried to bury myself in my research but nothing helped. I read all of the Elizabeth Kubla Ross books on death and dying and I was *still* unable to accept it. As I reached the point of despair, I began to think of all the wonderful things that my mother had done for me throughout her life. They were numerous, but I most remember the good feeling I had when she would *sit in the closet with me*. To this day I sometimes sit in the closet just to feel close to her.

When we lived in the Orchard Park Housing Project (1950 – 1961) it was quite crowded. We had a 3 bedroom apartment with a mom, a dad, four boys and two girls. This meant that my mom and dad slept in one bedroom; my two sisters slept in a second bedroom; and the four boys slept in the third bedroom. All three bedrooms were maybe 8' x 12'. In the boys' room we had a single bed, a double bed, and a small closet. Until Billy left for the Air Force in 1955, Billy slept in the single bed and Greg, Stevie and I slept in the double bed. Because the apartment was so crowded and often noisy, I would seek refuge and solitude in the bedroom closet. Our closet was simply an opening in the wall with a curtain covering it; there was no door. My mom would often climb into the closet with me; the two of us sitting on the floor with clothes hanging in our faces. Most times we would just sit quietly, blocking out the din from beyond the curtain.

During one of our closet rendezvous, my mom told me how much she wanted one of her sons to become a priest. She had been raised in a Catholic orphanage and she had raised us as Catholics. She told me that I was smart and that I could use my brain to help a lot of people. Therefore I should I should be the son who became a priest. I balked at the idea of becoming a priest, but I did promise her I would try to help people. This was my enduring promise!

Later in life I would often wonder, where my mom found her refuge. She was one of 15 children, orphaned at a very young age. She was raised in a catholic orphanage in Philadelphia until she was 15. At age 15 (during the Depression) she was required to go to work. She moved to Boston, began working as a maid, and at age 21 she married and gave birth to six children over the ensuing 13 years. She became separated at age 40 and was left with 5 children to raise in the Orchard Park Housing Project. Instead of succumbing to *Welfare Mom Syndrome* of the 1950s, she started a successful slip-cover business. She taught my sisters how to cut and stitch;

she taught my brothers and me how to cut material; however, I mostly did deliveries. Just as her life was coming together financially, she was devastated by the violent death of her son, Steven, in 1960. Afterward she was never the same – unable to smile or laugh or feel. Cigarettes and Scotch became her companions. Eventually she was diagnosed with lung cancer. She insisted that I continue working on my dissertation and that I honor my commitment to start the job at IBM Research in San Jose in June 1979. Between February and June 1979 my mother's condition worsened. I would come to Boston to take her for chemotherapy treatments and stay by her bedside during the recovery process. It became impossible to think about my research at all and eventually I just stopped. In June 1979 my mother had a remarkable recovery. Suddenly she seemed healthy and strong and vibrant again. She insisted that she was getting better and sent me off to IBM. Over the summer her condition began to deteriorate again and she eventually succumbed on September 8, 1979. IBM had treated me very well during this time, flying me to Boston several times during the summer and allowing me to work out of the Cambridge Scientific Center to keep from losing work days. Unfortunately, I was unable to get back to Boston the night before my mom died. I had a flight scheduled for 7:30AM PT on September 8, 1979. My mom died just after 3:00AM ET on September 8, 1979. I knew the moment she died because, at that moment, I awoke to a fluttering noise like a bird in the rafters. It was no bird. I went to my closet and said goodbye to my mom.

Below I have included a short piece that I wrote for my mom. I am so thankful to God for telling me to write it and for giving her the opportunity to read it before she died.



Mabel Daves York
January 25, 1915 – September 8, 1979

February 17, 1979

Tonight as I lay in my bed unable to sleep, I imagine my mother as a little girl with long reddish-brown hair, a few freckles on her chubby face, and large brown eyes. Even as a child there is tremendous beauty, compassion and strength evident in her eyes. The scene is a sleepy little town in North Carolina circa 1920. My mother is chasing a chicken around the backyard in quest of breakfast - let's see first you ring its neck, then you pluck it! Fried chicken, mashed potatoes and greens - now that's what I call a breakfast.

I see myself as a tiny egg knocking around in her left ovary with some of my future siblings. All of a sudden a small single-engine airplane flies over - no doubt one of the early barnstormers. My mother looks up in fright - fright quickly turns to amazement and then to fantasy. She dreams of that far away place called the "NORTH". In that brief moment all of the impossible-dream molecules in her body began a dance that was destined to bring her and several, as yet unborn, children to an understanding of that shared single consciousness - the family. God, I love my mother and I thank you for letting me participate in this woman's immortality.