

Eulogy for Anita E. Maigret
by her daughter, Jean Potuchek
August 2, 2010

The task I have set for myself this morning is to make my mother's personality present with us.

When I think about my mother, I think about words. She loved words; she loved to read, to write, to speak, to do word puzzles. She was almost never without a crossword puzzle, and she worked even the most difficult ones in ink. She always enjoyed getting letters from my brother Steve, because she loved his use of language, his humor, and his story-telling ability. But she did worry, when he was first out of school and working as a radio announcer, that if he were assigned to read the news and it wasn't very interesting, he might be tempted to embellish it a bit!

My mother could be fiercely competitive, especially when playing Scrabble, where she usually trounced her opponents. At one point or another, all of her children were suckered into playing Scrabble with her. My sister Ann Marie, who had a somewhat strained relationship with my mother as an adolescent, got so tired of being annihilated in Scrabble that she convinced my mother to play gin rummy instead – a game that my sister always won. As my mother's frustration about losing at gin rummy mounted, Ann Marie was torn between gloating and guilt. Finally the guilt won out and she confessed that the reason she won so consistently was that she could see my mother's cards reflected in her eyeglasses!

My mother had very high expectations for herself and for others. She once confessed to me that, as a young mother, she expected my brother Bob to be able to recite his bedtime prayers from memory at a very early age. She would sit by his bed each night while he said his prayers, prompting him when he faltered, but expecting him to get through them. Only years later did she realize that this was a lot to expect from a two-year-old!

My mother could wield words as weapons, and at one time or another, we all felt the sting of not living up to her expectations. When I was in my first year of college and had not written home for more than a month, my mother, who knew I was writing to my boyfriend almost daily, expressed her displeasure by sending me a 2-page letter in the form of a true/false test. First item: "True or False - I have been deathly ill for the past month;" second item: "True or False - I have not written to anyone in the past month." And it went on from there.

She could be a master of indirection and had a talent for saying things that started out sounding sweetly reasonable but had a little twist at the end. As children, we hated having to go to bed in the summer while it was still light out. "Mummy," we would call out from our beds, "I can't sleep." "That's all right," she would say, "You don't have to go to sleep. Just close your eyes and your mouth and stay there until morning."

My mother was very witty and almost always approached life's difficulties with humor. As the effects of her tumor mimicked some of my sister Mary's disabilities,

she turned more and more to Mary for advice and understanding, but also for sharing gallows humor. On more than one occasion, the two of them dissolved into fits of laughter as they tried to have conversations which seemed to consist mostly of them saying to each other, "I can't hear what you're saying."

My mother virtually never used curse words or vulgar language and thought that those who used such language lacked the imagination and vocabulary to express themselves more precisely. Once when I was helping her with some heavy housecleaning and spilled a whole pail of water, I used a four-letter expletive – the one that rhymes with "fit." As soon as the word was out of my mouth, I braced myself for the inevitable lecture. But my mother surprised me: "No," she said mildly, "fortunately, it's only water."

In the last year of her life, my mother discovered just how often health care workers use the word "okay." (As in: I'm just going to check your vital signs now, okay? Here are your 4 o'clock meds, okay?) The more they said okay, the more irritated she got; she really felt those workers needed to improve their word power! Every so often, she would reach the breaking point and erupt at the current offender: "Stop saying okay!"

My mother was not just my mother; she was also my friend, and I'm going to miss her. But I know that much of her spirit, her wit, and her wisdom will remain with me. And I suspect I'm not the only person here who, years from now, will use the word "okay" in conversation and hear a voice in the back of my head: "Stop saying okay!" Okay, Mom!