Angel of Death

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My Dad and I shared a common interest in death. He was in the Pacific Theatre in World War II and saw it firsthand. I was just interested in the subject. He hoped to die and be buried on the farm in Indiana. To that end, he built a number of wooden coffins but could not perfect the model. They became toolboxes which fit nicely in the back of pickup trucks. It was common to ask about a tool and be told it was in the red or green coffin. No questions asked.

We were delighted when Kubler-Ross published "*On Death and Dying*" in 1969. It was more oriented toward last thoughts of dying people but became known for its five stages of grief for those left behind. My dad and I talked about how different cultures viewed death. He was around headhunters in New Guinea and aborigines in Australia, so he had different perspectives. I was just forming mine.

Fast forward to my sophomore year in college. I was one of five sophomores living in Augusta Hall at St. Mary's College (SMC) located in Notre Dame Indiana. In keeping with the 1970's, we called ourselves the Augusta Five. We had enrolled at St. Mary's College with the understanding that we would be the first females to integrate the all-male University of Norte Dame. Spring semester of our sophomore year, we were reeling from the news that the merger had been called off. We all began planning separate futures at different universities.

In my last semester there, I had discovered that a course on Theology of Death was being offered at Notre Dame. I was admittedly naive to think that it might cover more than the perspectives of Catholics, given that a priest was teaching it. I enrolled and we butted heads all semester. The final assignment was a breaking point for me. That and that he claimed to know exactly what happened when we die. I really struggled to accommodate the final assignment (that's how my students would later describe missing a deadline). The priest had told us that the only way a late paper would be accepted was if we had died.

The Augusta Five decided that one of us, Mary, would deliver my late paper to the priest's office, which was in the Memorial Library at Notre Dame. The scenario we created included Mary's appearance as the Angel of Death sent by God to deliver my paper after my untimely death. That night, Mary rode her bike to the Notre Dame library, with a long white flannel nightgown tucked into her backpack. After changing into her nightgown, she walked barefoot to the priest's office.

She knocked on the professor's door while holding the paper aloft, mentally reciting her line "Word from Jane." She planned to let the paper drift down onto his desk and dash back out the door. Instead, there was no answer to her knock. No office hours were posted on his door, so she slid it under the door. By then she had attracted a lot of attention as well as a security guard. In front of a large crowd of students, she finally managed to talk her way out of the library with all her belongings.

The next day, I visited the priest to see if he had received the paper. I explained our attempt to deliver the paper, and he looked at me with the most painful expression I had ever seen. He whispered: “Child of God: how do you survive in an academic environment?” I assumed our meeting was over at that point and did not give it a thought for over two years. I did not realize that he had given me an “F” for the course.

I repaid Mary by impersonating her at a St. Mary’s Mathematics Department reception. She could not attend, so I offered to go as her. She was taking her math classes on the Notre Dame campus and had only met the SMC Department Chair, so no one would know the difference. The reception was a delight as I attracted a lot of attention. I think it was because I told everyone that I, Mary, was working on a secret theorem and that I was destined to win a Nobel Prize.

Two years later, I left for the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa after completing my degree in Anthropology at Oregon and competing in the Women’s National Rowing Competition in San Francisco. I had to miss the university graduation ceremony so that my team could compete. I was sure graduation was in order as I had not heard otherwise. Crew and leaving the country had my full attention.

I did not think about it until I was sent to Washington D.C. after a serious case of malaria and a slightly mismatched blood transfusion in my first year in the Peace Corps. I was at the National Institutes of Health for a week of tests and then granted home leave. Once home, a surprise to my family, I told my parents I was on a double-secret mission home for the Peace Corps. One of my brothers finally ratted me out. My Dad had malaria from his time in the South Pacific, so we bonded over high fevers and chills. As his cases were light, my parents didn’t suspect anything more serious. My Dad took me and my Dachshund, Otto, on a long hike through the hilly wooded part of the farm to check out my stamina. After a strenuous hike, he told my Mom that I was fine, but that Otto might need to lose a few pounds.

My Mom then asked about my University of Oregon diploma. I had assumed it was mailed to my permanent address in Indiana. After a call to the University of Oregon, I learned I was one credit short of graduating due to recalculating that final grade of “F” in Theology of Death. As I was transferring to the University of Oregon, that elective class was classified as “in progress.” At some point, Oregon must have received a final transcript with the “F” grade. It was complicated transferring from a semester system into a quarter system, but I thought everything was fine. My very detached academic advisor never mentioned a problem. The Oregon Registrar had tried to reach me in Liberia but that did not work. It was a simple fix as I had taken German at DePauw University in high school. I had those credits transferred to satisfy Oregon’s graduation requirements and my diploma arrived a week later.

My undergraduate GPA took a bit of a hit from three credits of “F.” Later, as I applied to graduate school, it became a fun point of discussion with the admission committee. All the economics faculty thought it was cool to flunk Theology of Death. “Child of God: how do you survive in an academic environment?” became a motto and point of pride in my 33-year academic career.

Fast forward again 50 years during the Covid Pandemic. Mary was well into the *Storyworth* memoir writing process, responding to weekly questions that became written vignettes. These were later compiled into a book about her life. One question asked if she had ever participated in a prank. Writing the story about the Angel of Death prompted her to search out the Augusta Five. Her perseverance resulted in us reuniting at first in writing, then by Zoom, and then in person at what has become an annual reunion of five amazing women.

I was always a little surprised and disappointed that the priest did not appreciate the creativity and effort involved in The Angel of Death. Over fifty years later, knowing that it was the pivotal element in reuniting me with my best college friends, I treasure The Angel of Death.