

# To Honor Her: Mary Hugh Dotson Cartledge (1946-2022)

## A husband's remembrances and promises

She was my guiding light and my touchstone. She was all the things I wasn't. She completed me in all ways, and now she is gone. Her passing has left a hole that can't be filled, and an emptiness that threatens to consume me.



Mary Hugh Dotson Cartledge (M.S.W. '78/SW) was a kind, giving and wonderful person. Known to friends all over the world as "Miss Mary."

We met when she was living in Norfolk, Virginia, and had been accepted into the master's program at VCU's School of Social Work. We continued to live in the Norfolk/Virginia Beach area, getting married, and getting ready for her to have our son. She would commute to Richmond on Sunday or Monday, spend a few days there, then come back while she worked on her degree. Mary was able to type a master's level report in one pass without errors or corrections, something I marveled at every time she did it. The week before graduation, she talked to her doctor about the advisability of driving to Richmond one last time to participate in graduation ceremonies. He said

it shouldn't be a problem because there were lots of hospitals along the way. On graduation Saturday, Mary had contractions on the drive to Richmond, none during the ceremony, and then starting again on the way back to Virginia Beach. Our son was born the next day, Mother's Day.

Our life plan was for her to stay at home for a few months before using her M.S.W. Plans change. During the 10 years after graduation, she stayed at home, raised our son, picked up a real estate agent's license, got trained as a travel agent, and made lifelong friends. Training, experience, and friendships that would make our lives more interesting and enjoyable than if she hadn't.

Mary's nature, training and inclination was to help others. She set up programs to clothe those who were cold and homeless. She worked in public schools with teens helping them through their troubled years. She moved into substance abuse prevention and treatment in Chesapeake, where she worked for several years. Her work and dedication to the underserved in life touched hundreds of families and children over the years.

She continued to help others when she retired, connecting those in need with

those who could help. Helping others was one of the things she enjoyed the most.



As time and opportunity permitted, we would travel. Sometimes we went alone, making friends along the way. Friendships that lasted for decades. Other times with old friends, and those friendships deepened with shared experiences and time together. The internet enabled those friendships to grow and continue even during the COVID lockdowns. She never met a stranger, and always enjoyed making new friends all over the world. Many would automatically refer to her as "Miss Mary," as she let them know she was interested in their lives and wanted to hear their stories.

And then it stopped. Mary had trouble breathing for a few days, but didn't feel it was so bad as to need to see her doctor. On her last day, I helped to her chair, then went upstairs for a few minutes. When I came back she was gone. The minutes it took for the EMTs to arrive were the longest in my life. To hold her hand as it got

cold and to start to realize my tears wouldn't bring her back created a hole that is my life. The quickness of her passing was a mixed thing; there wasn't time for pain, also there wasn't time to say or hear goodbye. Life was there, and then it wasn't.

According to some traditions, everyone dies twice. The first is when the heart stops, and the body grows cold. The second is the last time someone says their name. It is easy to mark the first death; there are professionals to note the date, the time and cause of the passing, and the legal requirements to be met. The second is much harder to mark, and only slightly easier if there are children or children of children. The best any of us can do is plant seeds and hope that some take root and bear fruit long after we are gone.

In keeping with the adage, "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime," the Mary Hugh Dotson and Charles Lane Cartledge IV Endowed Scholarship is set up to help underserved and first-generation M.S.W. applicants. Populations she cared for and sought to help personally and professionally. Helping people who came from the population she sought to help is the best way to magnify her penchant for helping others. A way of paying it forward, by helping others now in the hopes that they will help others in the same way.



Multitudes of men and women whose minds are much subtler than mine

have spent their lives wondering and thinking about what comes after this life. I stand in awe of some of their wondrous and beautiful creations. I don't know what comes next. To the best of my knowledge, others who have passed haven't let those they left behind know what the ultimate answer is, and so I wonder. I wonder and think about what comes after we leave this mortal coil. In my best engineering mind, I try to apply Occam's razor, keeping in mind that I'll know for sure sooner than most.



From that perspective, there is something on the other side or there isn't. If there isn't anything, then it doesn't matter how we treat others, and by the same token there isn't any punishment for those who are unkind to us. A nothingness is the easiest situation to consider, the harder one being that there is something there. One possibility of something being there is we are judged and consigned to everlasting nirvana or never-ending torture. A possibility I have difficulty with from a moral perspective. A different possibility is we are judged and then recycled to a higher or lower plane based on how we lived on this plane. A possibility more intriguing because it isn't an absolute and has the promise that if we live a good life, then things will get better during the next go-around. Yet another possibility

is that on the other side of the veil, we get to be whatever or whomever we want. This option is interesting because we would have agency over ourselves. It isn't hard to imagine wanting to once again have a body strong and without pain, able to see again with clarity, and hear the sounds of birds and the wind whispering through the trees. If crossing through the veil allows you to become whatever you want, then finding someone who passed before could be a challenge. Would you or they be the same as when you were last together, or would time have changed you both? At least two common threads weave their way through all these (and perhaps others) possibilities. The threads being: We don't know what comes after this life, and treating others well will help regardless of which possibility is correct.



And so I continue on. I try to make real the plans she and I made to help and to be kind to others. To treat others the way we would like to be treated. I continue to put one foot in front of the other, hoping that when I pass through the veil, I'll be reunited with the woman who completed me, and she'll say I lived her life well and honored her.

—Chuck Cartledge, A husband