Remembering Sue

By Paul Edward Johnson

What must it have been like to be my sister Sue?

I don't think I ever asked her. Maybe I was afraid if I asked her she might tell me. Maybe she told me and I failed to listen. Maybe I just can't remember.

Tonight I was feeling too tired to go to bed.

So around midnight while surfing through the movie channels I happened upon a movie titled *The Theory of Flight.* Little did I know what I was getting myself into.

As I'm sitting here now I'm trying to clear my eyes. I don't think I've cried so hard in many a year. Cried? No. It wasn't just crying. It was flat-out gut-wrenching sobbing.

Throughout the movie all I could think about was Sue. My dear darling sister Sue.

Every morning I wake up. Every morning I roll out of bed. And with my feet upon the floor I gaze at two oil paintings that stand upon a low bookshelf. Sue painted them and gave them to me.

The one on the left portrays me playing a saxophone while looking at her husband, Maurice. He's playing clarinet in the painting while looking at me. We be jazz musicians in the painting. We be grooving. Me looking like a bearded cool cat. Maurice, with his European hat on, he looking like a hip and mellow dude showing me how to play soulfully.

The last time I spoke with Sue was on a cell phone. I was calling her from the Schubert Club's Musical Instrument Museum. Long distance from St. Paul to Seattle.

I had placed a CD into the museum's CD player and was listening to what I felt was one of the most beautiful opera pieces I had ever heard in my life. So beautiful that I had to call Sue so she could hear it with me. It was being sung by Renee Fleming. She maybe has the most beautiful voice in the universe.

With Sue on my cell phone, and with the museum's speakers cranked up full volume, and with the music taking flight, I asked Sue, "Is this not the most beautiful music you've ever heard?"

Without hesitating, she laughed and said, "Beautiful? As far as I can tell she sounds like a chicken squawking. All opera sopranos sound like a chicken in a barnyard to me. Next time you call me to listen to a woman singing, make sure she can sing with soul. Has to have soul. You know, like Peggy Lee or Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holiday. Has to have soul, bro."

Sue, God bless, had soul. Oceans of soul. And in her husband Maurice, she had found her soul mate. He was gentle and kind. Most of all, he was understanding. Empathetic is a better word for him. How do I know this? He had to be to remain happily married to Sue.

Among all of the people I've loved, Sue was the most aggravating. She could discover and unleash more ways to aggravate me than mosquitoes in a swamp. Sometimes she seemed to both know it and enjoy it. But before I elaborate upon this, there's the second painting I see every morning, the one of my youngest brother, Rick.

In her portrait of Rick what you see is a barefooted guy standing on top of a prairie hill, his back to you, as he's playing a guitar and gazing off at the horizon. His blonde hair blowing in the wind. His head tilted toward his right shoulder.

Sue painted this maybe 15 years or so after Rick had disappeared. Painted it from memories of Rick. Maybe painted it because memories of Rick haunted her. The image shows a young man who seems to be at one with the world and at the same time alone in the world. Perhaps content to be alone.

Sue often blamed herself for Rick's disappearance. She expressed that maybe she "bugged" him too often with phone calls and she made him sometimes feel had he been a more caring and comforting brother, she may not had made so many attempts at killing herself.

Fact is, I have documented proof that Rick wanted to be a comforting and caring brother to her. He just could not find ways that would soothe his troubled sister.

If I could now paint upon a canvas, I would paint my favorite, or if not favorite, most indelible image of Sue. Let's see if maybe I can now picture it in words.

It's a misty afternoon in Seattle. Sue and I are outside the front door of her apartment. I'm standing above her as she sits in her motorized wheelchair. She has told me she needs to go to a grocery store and I have agreed to go along to the store with her. She looks up at me like a smiling child, her watery blue eyes shining and says, "You're going to have to move fast to keep up with me, Paul."

Grabbing a joystick near the right arm of her battery powered wheelchair, she shifts into gear and races off ahead of me, the flag attached to the top of a tall aerial on the back of her wheelchair flying in the wind, her head tilted to the right, just like Rick's head is tilted to the right in her portrait of him. From where I was seeing her while trying to keep up with her it could have been Rick in that wheelchair.

At the top of a steep hill, Sue pauses, spins the wheelchair around to see how far behind I might be, and yells to me, "Now comes the fun part."

Before I can yell "WAIT," Sue spins the chair to face descending the hill. Then like a kid on a roller coaster ride, she plummets down the sidewalk at a speed faster than any kid on a bike could travel. Laughing all the way.

At the bottom of the hill, she somehow brings the heavy wheelchair to a halt, spins it back in my direction, and waves to me while I'm still standing at the top of the hill.

While standing at the top of the hill, while watching her sail down it in her wheelchair, I suspect she has once again failed an attempt at suicide.

It's also clear she may have only a year to remain alive. She has ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease.

ALS is different for every person who has it. According to written information I received, "in general, muscle weakness, especially in the arms and legs, is an early

symptom for more than half of people with ALS. Other early signs are tripping or falling a lot, dropping things, having difficulty speaking, and cramping or twitching of the muscles. As the disease gets worse over time, eating, swallowing, and even breathing may become difficult."

Sue cannot get in or out of bed without someone assisting her, cannot go to the bathroom on her own, cannot cook, cannot even dress or undress herself.

But in that motorized wheelchair, she flies. So on the way back from the grocery store, with a sack filled with cookies and milk cradled in her left arm, she now hustles her wheelchair up the hill with me trailing far behind, trying to catch my breath as I'm trying to catch up with her.

I'm looking at a Hallmark sympathy card. The caption on the top of the card announces, "We Never Walk Alone." If ever there were two images of solitary figures, it's the one Sue painted of Rick standing atop a hill with his guitar, his back to me, and that of Sue, her back to me, motoring away in her wheelchair.

Sometimes I like to tell myself that we are never really alone in this too often cold world we live in. I tell myself my parents told me we are from God. I tell myself my parents, Sue's parents, Rick's parents, our parents, told her and Rick the same thing. I tell myself, that being we are from God, we belong to God, and belonging to God means He's always with us, even if and when we turn our backs to Him.

The Hallmark card goes on to express "The time comes when those whom we have loved the longest and the best will travel far ahead into a place of joy and rest . . . And we must walk a lonely path through shadows for a while without a certain kindred voice, a dear, familiar smile—yet each day brings us nearer to horizons yet unknown and even when the way is dark, we never walk alone, for memories travel with us toward the happy destination where we will join our loved ones in eternal celebration."

As sappy as this may all sound and seem, I buy it and will continue to buy into it. If I could afford it, I'd be buying Hallmark stock. Yes, I can respect those who prefer to "tough it out" by insisting we are all solitary lonely beings alienated from one another and from a god who created a world filled

with people who seem to only experience suffering and tragedy. I can respect them because from their observation point they are often seeing it like it is and not pretending it's something it isn't. They insist facts are facts. And they see deeply felt beliefs or faith as often being simply the result of wishful thinking.

What they fail to share with my parents and me and my sister Sue and perhaps my brother Rick is that as wretched and wrong as our world may be, as alone and lonely as we may often feel we may be, we have at one point or another, in splendid shining moments, experienced the warmth and comfort of genuine love and compassion from someone other than just ourselves. A flight of love that sails beyond understanding, defies objective scientific microscopic analysis, and remains delightfully mysterious. And because it seems so mysterious, it becomes the source or inspiration of poetry, music, and all other expressions we call art.

What's inspiring me to write about Sue is that for all her failings and foibles, for all her humanness, for all her aggravating ways, she was and remains an inspiration to me.

Yes, Sue was royally pissed off that at an early age she became a victim of what was called rheumatic fever and had to spend an entire summer in bed and be teased about it by me, her insensitive big brother, Paul. And again she became angered after she would fall upon the floor in her grade school and junior high school classrooms, foaming at the mouth in what were called epileptic seizures, kids and teachers yelling "get a pencil between her teeth before she bites off her tongue."

And soon after she had graduated from high school, she became more than bothered by often hearing the voice of a radio disc jockey repeatedly saying inane things in her head. Always the same damn disc jockey, even when she moved from Minneapolis to Winona, and then to San Francisco, and then back to Minneapolis, and then on to Denver.

She became so undone by hearing the voice of a disc jockey in her head that she said "screw this," and chose to try to find ways to kill herself. But like most things Sue tried, she was not good at killing herself.

When she tried slitting her wrists, she cut from the wrong angle. When she walked into a bedroom in which my first wife Alice and I were sleeping, announcing to us she had just slit her throat, she had missed the jugular.

I'm sure she was not happy her failed suicide attempts only resulted in her being committed and recommitted to a state run insane asylum in Anoka County for more than a couple years. It was a miserable prison place reeking of urine from pajama-clad inmates. They drooled when they spoke unintelligibly and they would offer visitors a handful of their feces as they reached out to shake hands.

And if that was not going to make her unhappy enough, there were the shock treatments after doctors claimed she was suffering from various forms of schizophrenia. What forms? Before they were done diagnosing her, all forms. For reasons I shamefully have refused to remember, she was finally released from the institution's padded cells, around 1973. I think maybe about 10 years after she had graduated from high school, but no longer looking like the sweet young smiling trusting lovely girl in her graduation photo.

What was given to her upon her release was a purse filled with medications. Bottles and bottles full of this med and that med with the notion that one or two or three or four of them might actually help her. They didn't.

The only thing that helped her was love. The love she received from a man named Maurice. A man who himself was for much of his life feeling all alone in this world.

Sue met him in a community college's cafeteria where she would spend hours smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee while trying to make some sense out of a textbook she was trying to read for a college class she had been taking so as to get a job in a hospital. Maurice was the cafeteria's janitor.

Before becoming the cafeteria janitor, Maurice had spent much of his life being a professional hobo and migrant worker, traveling in box cars up and down the west coast states, picking whatever produce was available to be seasonally picked in vineyards, apple orchards, lettuce and celery fields, and doing his best to avoid being knifed in his

sleep by desperate hungry men who had not been as successful as him in his chosen line of work. Maurice chose to be a hobo and migrant worker because it allowed him to become and remain a story teller and musician in ways that were true to the traditions he had grown up in while living as a child and teenager in New York City.

Growing up in Harlem, Maurice would often meet and talk with men and women who inspired him with their humanity and artistry. People like Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, Clark Terry, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and a guy everyone called Bird. He met them through his father before his father disgraced himself and Maurice by, to use Maurice's words, "selling out."

His father was a talented jazz trumpet player in Harlem. So talented that his peers called him the next Louis Armstrong. Problem was his father became impatient and opted instead to sign contracts requiring him to record pop tunes that put him in the nation's Top-40 charts. Armstrong was doing the same thing, but he had long ago paid his dues and had established a rep as being an inspiration to jazz musicians. To Maurice, his father, Jonah Jones, had "gone commercial" before his time, before he had established himself as the true jazz artist he was gradually becoming.

Emerging jazz musicians like Sonny Rollins and J.J. Johnson made it clear to Maurice that his father was no longer someone they could admire, and consequently, Maurice left Harlem so as not to be confronted by their increasing ridicule of the man, his father, the former jazzman, he had once been so proud of.

At the time he met Sue, rather than talk about his father, Maurice preferred to talk about how as a boy going to a public school in New York City, he would enjoy shaking down Henry Kissinger on the playground for his lunch money.

Not long after Sue and Maurice met each other through long conversations in the college cafeteria, they chose to live together in a dumpy apartment in what I perceived to be the worst neighborhood in south Minneapolis. Not far from where Rick lived before he up and disappeared at age 21.

Above the door inside their apartment was a hole in the wall, caused by when Maurice fired his .38 caliber pistol at the wall when someone was attempting to break into their place. When I asked Maurice why he continued to live in that awful neighborhood, he said, "It's the only place in Minneapolis where I can feel comfortable. It's as close to being like Harlem as I can find here in Minnesota."

Sue? She didn't seem to mind living there at all. It sure as hell beat being in the nut house. And for the first time since I could ever remember, she seemed to be happy. Perhaps happier than she had ever been in her entire life.

She had reduced her medications to maybe only one or two, and she had been able to clear her head enough to read and understand her textbooks, enough so that she could pass her classes and earn a certificate that qualified her to be a medical records technician in a Minneapolis hospital. To look at her college graduation day photo, with her standing next to Maurice and Mom and me, you'd have to say she was again shining.

Maurice got a job as a janitor at Folwell Hall, located on the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus, and soon became a supervisor of the building's janitorial staff. And Sue got a job as a medical records technician at a hospital not far from the university.

They had then moved from their dumpy apartment in south Minneapolis to an apartment near the university. Maybe it was just after they got married.

Their wedding was as simple and charming any wedding could be. I had the honor of "giving the bride away." I can't recall what year it was. Maybe 1981? It was held in Colonial Congregational Church that was located on the corner of 56th and Woodward Avenue in Edina, with Reverend Arthur Rauner conducting the ceremony.

Dr. Rauner had been my family's minister for more than 15 years, and when my mother and father divorced around 1964, and Mom and Sue and Sylvia and Rick lived in a house about a block from the church, Dad continued to live in the family's other house on the corner of 50th and Chowen in southwest Minneapolis.

Although Mom and Dad had divorced, Dad continued to sing with my youngest sister Sylvia every Sunday in the Congregational church's choir. Sue, she attended the services until she moved to San Francisco around 1964.

After Sue and Maurice married, Sue's career as a medical records technician seemed to me to be unstable. She moved from one hospital to another, never seeming to cope with the demands of the job. The work seemed to be too demanding and stress inducing for her. But nevertheless, she persisted in her sincere attempts to satisfy the requirements of her supervisors.

What I didn't know then was something she had held back from telling me until about two years before she died in the summer of 2003. The reason she had chosen to become a medical records technician is that she felt it might help her locate Rick. At each hospital she worked in, she made every attempt she could to somehow discover where Rick might be through the medical records available to her in the hospitals. What I did know during the years she worked in the hospitals was that she had become obsessed with her search for Rick.

Between 1984 and 1994 I would receive phone calls from her whenever she had spotted someone who she felt looked like Rick. Sometimes these "Rick spottings" would occur as often as every other month or so.

On one such occasion, she asked my wife Tracey and me to confirm that the bus driver on her bus route was indeed Rick. So we obligingly got on that bus one morning to behold the driver, and to my disappointment could not tell one way or another if he might be Rick. But the most distressing moment on that bus ride was when Tracey and I watched Sue board the bus, sit within several feet from him, and crane her head in our direction, earnestly and, yes, pathetically seek some gesture from us that would confirm I believed he was indeed Rick.

When we got off the bus at Sue's stop in downtown Minneapolis, I had to tell Sue that I doubted he was Rick. Tracey, of course, having never met Rick, could not confirm the driver was Rick.

I promised Sue I would call the bus company and find out the drivers name and would call him to ascertain if he might be Rick, which I did the next day. He was not Rick.

This is just one of many many many Rick sightings by Sue. Once she swore he was a rock singer who had appeared on the Johnny Carson Show. In that instance she got the Minneapolis Police Department involved.

How her obsession with locating Rick affected Maurice, I cannot say with any certainty. As much as he seemed to respect and understand her desire to reunite with Rick, he also seemed from time to time to express consternation, telling her and Tracey and me that he himself had once chosen to disappear from his family for more than 10 years during his career as a hobo, always trying to assure Sue that when Rick felt the time was right to return, he would do so, and until that time comes, let it be, let it rest.

But Sue could never let it rest. She persisted in hiring private detectives who at best could only tell her that after Rick had disappeared around September of 1972, the “paper trail” only led to his cashing a check in Duluth shortly thereafter.

One detective produced a computer printout showing that an Eric Palmer Johnson who was born on January 22, 1951 had been issued driving tickets in Michigan and in California during the late 1970s.

That got the family excited. Or so it seemed. Problem was, I mailed the printout to our brother Larry, who at the time was practicing law in Seattle, and who said that next time he was in Sacramento he would “look into it.” Larry lost the printout and never looked into it. Or he never looked into it and eventually lost the printout.

That led Sue to increasingly believe that Larry and I actually knew where Rick was residing and would not tell her. Many of my subsequent conversations with Sue always seemed to get around to me having to reassure her that I had no clue where Rick might be.

Somewhere around 1995, Maurice became very ill. According to Sue, he told her he needed to go off and be by himself until he either recovered or died. Where he went, I

have no real recollection. All I know for sure is that Sue soon got a job as a medical records technician in a hospital located in Yakima Washington, so she could be close to him if he wanted her to be with him while he was suffering.

After Maurice died, I'm guessing about a year after Sue had moved to Yakima, Sue chose to move to Seattle, where Larry and Sylvia and Mom were then living.

Seattle is perhaps among the most beautiful towns in the entire world. Larry calls Seattle the most beautiful place he's ever been, with the exception of a place he lived for about a year in Switzerland. He calls Seattle "eye candy."

I tried living in Seattle for six months back in the middle 70s after divorced from my first wife, Alice. And tried again for six months in 1983. During both attempts, I never, not once, ever felt warm. I would set the thermostat to 74 degrees and wear winter clothes and still feel a chill that penetrated to the marrow of my bones. Seattle had a way of making me feel profoundly depressed. But this isn't supposed to be about me. It's supposed to be about Sue.

For Sue, being in Seattle seemed to be an adventure. How she could feel that way, I have no way of agreeing with her. For one thing, she never seemed to be able to get a decent job. As I recall, the best she could do was get a miserable night shift at a Taco Bell fast-food place. And soon after that, she gave up that job and started to "work the system."

Somehow, perhaps as the result of working in hospitals, she had discovered ways to receive income from governmental agencies. I never really understood how she did this. Much of it had to do with her ability to claim medical benefits for her many mysterious disabilities. I say "mysterious" because I could never seem to understand what they were, most likely because I never really wanted to know.

When I spent several days visiting with her in Seattle, she was living in what I thought was a pleasant apartment just down the block from a church she was actively involved in and a neat little coffee shop where she would get together with people she enjoyed socializing with. When she tried explaining how her income was satisfactory as the result of the benefits she was receiving from social workers, I'm

ashamed to say I found myself disinclined to listen. I would just nod and say something like, “Well, for the meantime Sue, if that works for you, good for you.”

Maybe that’s why when she told me around three years before she died that she had been diagnosed as having ALS or Lou Gehrig’s Disease, I was not inclined to believe that may be true. I suspected what she may be doing was simply presenting symptoms that would entitle her to more medical benefits. Maybe I felt that way because she herself would often tell me that she believed she really didn’t have ALS, but as long as doctors insisted she did, she would take advantage of whatever advantages that gave her. I had by then come to see Sue as being a con artist who had figured out how to milk the system.

The last time I saw her, I realized how wrong I was. It was a week before Thanksgiving.

Sue was living in an apartment building that had been made accessible to people in wheelchairs. When I buzzed her apartment, she soon appeared before me in her wheelchair, beaming, so happy to see me. I wish I could have beamed back.

She had become a skeleton of her former self. Almost emaciated. Her garments hung from her bony body in ways that could not conceal her fragile scarecrow condition. Her fingers appeared to be useless twigs.

When we entered her apartment she pointed to a room I could sleep in, saying, “That’s where my nurse sleeps, but she won’t be here for a few days.”

Her living room had one window, which was actually a sliding glass door. Near the base of the glass door was a collection of squatting ceramic frogs, all looking up cheerfully. In a corner near the sliding glass door was a television. Upon a desk along a wall, close to the frogs, was a personal computer.

She said, “Larry gave me that PC and showed me how to use email. Only problem is, my fingers don’t work so good now. But when I attach these wooden sticks to them, I can peck out some sentences.”

She held up wooden sticks that looked like chop sticks and fired up the PC so that she could show me how she could type with them.

"I belong to internet chat groups. One's a bunch of people who live here in Seattle. All bound to wheel chairs. Once in awhile we get together, sometimes go to ball games at the dome, or get together here in the party room. They're really cool people and fun to be with. We have a shuttle bus that picks us up and takes us places together," she said.

She explained to me that I would have to help her from her wheelchair whenever she needed to go to the bathroom and when she needed to rest in bed. "I'm not any good at getting in and out of this, and it's a bitch trying to reach the shelves in the kitchen."

During the days leading up to Thanksgiving, it became clear to me that Thanksgiving day would have to be at Sue's apartment. Sylvia, Larry, and Mom agreed.

The last time I had dined with all of them, a year or so before in Seattle, we had all gone to a restaurant for dinner, one of Mom's favorite places. We were in a no-smoking section and Sue said she needed to smoke a cigarette.

After she excused herself from the table, the waitress arrived, and while she was taking our order, Sue suddenly appeared, outside the window next to our table.

Standing outside the window, her face near the glass, she pointed her index finger to her open mouth, then pointed to her tummy, then back again to her mouth, then back to her tummy.

The waitress said, "I'm sorry. This has never happened here before. I will have our management deal with her. I'm so sorry she's confronting you."

I'm sure she was shocked when she then beheld all of us laughing so hard we couldn't even explain who Sue was and that what she was doing was her idea of a "practical joke."

Our family seemed to have made a tradition of doing embarrassing things when we would go out to eat. Like the time when I was visiting Seattle and I agreed to drive Sue

and Mom to a posh restaurant that Sylvia and her husband John had always enjoyed, a place called Arnie's located in what soon seemed to us to be an impossible place to find.

Try as we did, we could not find Arnie's, and after realizing we were at least a half-hour late, I started to look for a pay phone, so as to get directions and page John or Sylvia at the restaurant to tell them I was lost. All the while, Mom is sitting in the back seat of this car I had rented, offering all kinds of suggestions about what road to take. But it was a Ford Mustang and from where she was sitting all she could see from the back seat was the back of my bucket seat and out her side window. And being she's only five-feet-two, I could only hear her but not see her through the rearview mirror.

Then, out of nowhere, I spied a sign. It said ARNIE'S. We were on Aurora Avenue. Maybe three lanes of traffic going north and three lanes going south. We all knew Arnie's was supposed to be a posh place located on the Puget Sound with great views of ships and sailboats. But I had become so frazzled from all the faulty directions Sue and Mom had been giving me, that I chose to pull up to the curb in front of this worn down building that had a sign on it that said Arnie's and announce to Sue and Mom that we had finally found Arnie's.

At first, Mom seemed relieved that we had arrived. But then she looked up at the sign from her side window and read the smaller print under the name Arnie's, which read "Auto Body Shop."

Well maybe you had to be there to realize how hard we laughed during the next half hour of searching for Arnie's.

Sylvia and John and Larry were not laughing when we finally showed up more than an hour late, and they were no longer hungry because of all the appetizers they had gone through while waiting for us. Sue was so stressed out that she spent almost all her time at Arnie's outside, smoking, with me.

And as long as I'm amply digressing I may as well relate the last time we all went to our family's favorite restaurant in Minneapolis when Sylvia and Mom were visiting from Seattle, the Cafe di Napoli.

When the waitress arrived Maurice ordered for Sue, and John ordered for Sylvia, so I ordered for both Tracey and me, not realizing Tracey had already ordered her dinner for herself. And when two dinner plates were placed before me and one before Tracey, I sipped the wine that had been poured by the waitress from a carafe and pompously announced to the waitress that the wine was not Chianti as I had requested. She then went to the trouble of presenting a bottle of Chianti to me, pouring it into another wine glass, and asking me if the two glasses of wine tasted the same. They did.

After we finished our meals and desserts, me eating both of the meals served before me, the waitress, I'm sure now seeing me as not only being a glutton but also an arrogant dolt, I told everyone I would get the check but first had to go to the men's room.

After doing my business in the stall in the men's room, I couldn't unlock the door to the stall. The space between the bottom of the stall was too small to crawl under. The space between the top of the stall and the ceiling seemed to be too small to crawl over. But after planting my feet upon the top of the stool, and tossing my suit coat to the floor below, I somehow, after what seemed nearly a half-hour, managed to squeeze my ass between the top of the stall and the ceiling and drop down to the floor, free at last.

When I arrived back to our table, which had been cleared of everything but coffee cups, try as I did, Sue, Maurice, Mom, Sylvia, John, and even Tracey, no one would believe me when I tried to explain why I had been gone for so long.

Okay. Okay. I admit it now. I needed to take a break here from describing my last Thanksgiving with Sue and my family. Felt a need for what's called a little comic relief.

The Thanksgiving dinner was the last dinner I had with Sue. Larry and Sylvia and Mom showed up around two or so in the afternoon at Sue's apartment.

We set up TV trays because Sue did not have a table we could eat at. An hour or so before they arrived I had picked up an entire Thanksgiving turkey dinner I had

previously ordered from a supermarket in Seattle. All I had to do was heat it all up before serving it. It turned out to be a great dinner with lots of leftovers Sue could enjoy over the weekend.

As much as we enjoyed the occasion, we all seemed to sense that this might be our last Thanksgiving with Sue. When we finished eating we sat around for about an hour or more talking about whatever it was I can't remember.

After Larry and Sylvia and Mom had left, Sue looked up at me and said, "This is the happiest Thanksgiving I can ever remember having with our family."

When I said goodbye to her, she said, "You know what I enjoyed most about you being here with me? During the entire week you've been here you've never looked at me as though I'm a wheelchair. Almost everyone looks and talks to me now as though I have *become* a wheelchair."

During the year that followed, well I should say up until her death in the summer of 2003, we would engage each other in long phone conversations, often talking about Rick and her hope he would reappear before she died. Her speech became increasingly impaired, and sometimes she would need to stop talking, unable to form words she wanted to express.

Her Christmas present to me was a little glazed brown crock pot about three inches high and maybe three inches in diameter. It sits upon my desk here. I'm going to open the lid now and show you what she put in the crock pot. I haven't opened this little pot in what seems to be way too long a time.

As I open the pot, what we see inside are thin strips of paper, each strip about a half inch wide and eight inches long. They sort of look like the paper strips you find in fortune cookies. Each strip of paper has something Sue wrote upon it. As I pull each strip of paper from the crock pot, I'm going to read what each one says:

> I remember watching you play basketball on the church champion basketball team.
>
> I remember you showed me how to create a planning schedule so that I could plan each

hour of each day. It saved me when I was in college.

I remember I was mad you and Larry could go to Don & Mark's and get French fries and never shared them, so I sneaked over there and bought a bag and hid them in my bedroom.

I remember you showed me how to smoke Marlboro cigarettes and I thought they were awful.

I remember you let me go to Tory Black's party.

I remember when you went into the Air Force I hoped you wouldn't have to go to Viet Nam, and then I remember you always made it sound like a big adventure to me.

I remember you slept on a sandbar in the middle of the St. Croix River, near the island we camped on, and around 4 in the morning hearing you scream really loud. Water from the river's dam had been released and was washing over your sleeping bag.

I remember loving to listen to your dance band rehearse in our house on Upton Avenue.

I remember you were vicious in Monopoly.

I remember you showing me nuclear missiles at K.I. Sawyer AFB I wasn't supposed to see. That was more exciting than seeing the B-52 bombers.

I remember how when we would go on canoe trips you and Dad would get out to push them because the water would become too shallow.

I remember you showed me how to flip over the piano keys anyway I wanted and call it jazz.

I remember I decided to never become a camp counselor after what you went through as a camp counselor.

I remember going with you to Austin Minnesota to pick up Mom's furniture in storage and we found out we had driven all the way into Iowa.

I remember we hid snowballs in trees to get Larry and Sylvia.

I remember you taught me how to play chess, but I never really could ever win.

I remember you gave our family a big expensive hi-fi for a Christmas present and spent the next three years making installment payments on it.

I remember when you helped me put together my chain bracelet when I was in the playpen.

I remember on the porch with you in Royal Oak Michigan how we drew pictures with crayons.

I remember I played your secretary when you sold pencils and Larry was your competitor.

I remember you taught me how to shoot pool.

I remember how we'd sneak into the University of Minnesota's computer lab and you showed me how to use the Mac.

I remember how you tried to teach me how to perform "walk the dog" and "around the world" yo-yo tricks.

I remember I felt you were the best in *Our Town*.

I remember you taught me how to write poetry.

I remember when you came back from a canoe trip in the Boundary Waters and showed me a cookie can that had been clawed open by a bear.

I remember we went to the Southwest High School 50th Anniversary football game and being surprised to see Judy Green and Wayne Swanson.

I remember how Angie Dauterman walked with me to school and asked questions about you.

I remember when you had your leg in a cast after being hit by a car. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to walk again.

I remember whenever you brought Mart Aldre into our home I would wonder what it would be like to go out with him.

I remember running into your bedroom in my birthday suit waving an American flag when I was about 3 years old and you and Larry roared.

I remember you liked to tease me, but I never told you I liked it (I did think it was sort of neat).

I remember playing marbles with you, and sometimes you would give me a pretty one.

I remember I didn't want to go to Dad's viewing, so I was sort of last to go across the street to the funeral home. You held my hand while I went over there. I used to think he winked at me.

I remember walking to the grocery store with you when you were in third grade and we lived in Circle Pines.

I remember being so proud you were the Choir President and recorded the hit songs "God's Christmas Tree" and "Great Somebody."

I remember you took me to see "The Wizard of Oz" and the theater was packed.

I remember reading your stories and supposedly helping you word some things. I was so proud you respected my opinion.

I remember you wanted to be a minister and I thought you were going to be the best, but was glad you became an English teacher because you proved to be so perfect for that.

I remember your 16th birthday was really special because to me you seemed to be the most popular guy in school that day.

I remember going to dinner at a colonel's house, a man who was in charge of the B-52 bombers at your Air Force base, and I was impressed.

I remember going to the Fulton playground and flying kites with you and Larry.

I remember when you worked for Dad and feeling jealous I couldn't work for him.

I remember when I got Miss Sklater in fourth grade we both had a bonding because you had had her for fourth grade, too.

I remember you wanted to see if I liked a record album of Ella Fitzgerald's, but you did not want me to see the album cover because you felt I then might not like her. Maurice sat on Ella's lap when he was a baby.

Now please excuse me while I fold all the strips of paper back into the little crock pot.

Those strips of paper are more important to me than they might be to anyone else. And whenever I look at that pot on my desk, which is just about every day, I see Sue. Maybe that's why I didn't feel I needed to keep her urn of ashes after she was cremated and why Larry and I woke up one morning around four o'clock, got her urn and ourselves into my car, and drove way over to Minnehaha Falls.

Standing upon a small stone footbridge that goes over Minnehaha Creek, looking down at the rapids, hearing the loud roar of the water, feeling the mist from the waterfall upon our cheeks, looking down only a few feet away from the top of the waterfall, Larry and I opened Sue's urn and poured her white ashes into the mist and water that carried her ashes over the falls to begin a journey to the Gulf and then into the oceans.

There was a bit of breeze blowing toward us, and as the last of her ashes left the urn, I could taste her ashes on my tongue and teeth, just as I now can taste my tears.

If you look through Sue's old photo albums, what you see are a lot of pictures of Sue and Maurice. Hand in hand. Always smiling. In the background of many of their photos, standing behind them, is Minnehaha Falls.

On our way home from Minnehaha Falls, Larry, as he often does when the two of us enjoy becoming sentimental together, began recalling one of his last memories of Sue. What he said went something like this:

> A few weeks before Sue died she had managed to take a regular bus out to our house in Snohomish. Our busses are equipped for wheelchairs. She had to switch busses in Everett, so it took her over an hour each way.
>
> Long before her visit, I had had my brother-in-law, Roland, build me a couple of wooden ramps just for her use, so her wheelchair could drive up two steps on an even incline, and enter our house through the kitchen door. As it turned out, that would be the only time I would haul those out of the garage.
>
> She stayed for the afternoon, and I am now embarrassed to say I can't remember what we did, I think it included watching a ball game on TV, but honestly, I don't remember. What I do remember is walking her to the bus stop when it was time for her to go, and waiting with her there until the bus came.
>
> She was so serene and cheerful. It broke my heart, but I had no reason to feel blue, really, because she was so upbeat.

> I knew -- I just knew -- this was going to be the last time I saw her.
>
> She got on the bus in that wheelchair with her little Swedish flag attached. Smiled, waved.
>
> As the bus drove away, I felt this awful emptiness, this loss of her, and shame, too, of never, ever really fully connecting with her. I know she hero-worshipped me, much as she did you, and that made the sense of loss and shame only worse. That's just one of those things that comes and sits there, and sits there. Nothing you can do about it. The emotion I most associate with Sue is shame. It's more of a fixture than an association.

When I pulled the car into my garage and turned off the engine, Larry and I just sat there in silence for a long moment.

Then he placed his hand upon my arm and began talking again, saying something that went like this:

> My last conversation with Sue she had called me to tell me how truly happy she was, as if she was about to be going off to college or camp for the first time. It was an excited kind of anticipation-happiness.
>
> She said she was calling everyone to tell them how especially happy she was feeling. It was a new kind of happiness for her she said. And she said she felt so overwhelmingly happy she had to share it.
>
> I interpreted this to myself as her way of saying she knew she was going to die soon, and it was okay, it was okay with her; as though this was her

> farewell message. I didn't say so, but that is what I thought.
>
> And sure enough, it was that same message that the pastor pointed out at her memorial service, as Sue having said that to him, too, not long before she died . . . how happy she was, on the eve of her death. So she was given a foretaste of heaven before entering it. You could say: she *was* the foretaste of heaven.
>
> She was and is an inspiration. While being the butt of so many of our jokes, pranks and, yes, cruelties, a victim of many horrors and diseases, and in many ways a "failure" by how our society measures success, she was spiritually light years ahead of all the rest of us.
>
> And, yes, thank God for Maurice. He gave her many years of happiness, a special person for a special person.

I'd like to believe that what I've tried to express here serves to stand beside Sue and behind her; to support my memory of her, if nothing else. And to perhaps help you who read this to remember her, too.

But before I "let her go" for awhile, there's something important about Sue that Larry mentioned that I have to try to elaborate upon: her spirituality.

Sue was raised by my mother and father in what might be called traditional protestant churches. Baptized in an Episcopal church, she was then taught about Jesus in first a Congregational church and then a Methodist church and then again in another Congregational church, the one out in Edina where she and Maurice were married.

After they married they found a new spiritual home within an Episcopal church on Lowry Avenue in Northeast Minneapolis, the same church my father and his parents and sisters attended when he was a lad.

While attending that church, Sue created a large painting of Jesus, which was then displayed in the church stairwell that leads to the room where people meet for coffee and fellowship after the Sunday worship services.

It was around the time that she created the painting of Jesus, somewhere around 1984, she began to talk about how she would again hear voices. But this time, they were not the voices of disc jockeys talking to her. They were, instead, voices of ancient Egyptians.

When they would talk to her they would tell her they were not so much talking to her as they were talking *through* her. They would tell her who they were, giving her their names. The one who would talk through her the most often was Ramtha. Ramtha instructed Sue to meet with orthodox Hebrew rabbis, which she did.

The rabbis would sit with Sue and listen to what she told them, about what Ramtha and others were saying as they spoke through her. The rabbis told Sue she was what they regarded as being a "soft medium." They treated her reverentially.

When Sue started telling me all of this, my response was to suddenly hear something in *my* head; the sound we hear at the start of a rerun of the *Twilight Zone* show on television: do-dee-do-do, do-dee-do-do.

And I found myself saying to myself, "Okay Sue, here we go again." Whenever Sue would tell me what Ramtha and the other ancient Egyptians were telling her I would simply nod my head and say, "Uh huh, uh huh."

Most of what they seemed to be saying through her made no sense at all to me. Much of it was in a language that was not English. But to the rabbis, it seemed to either make some sense or, at the very least, captivate them as they listened to her.

When I was going through what I now call "my religion period" during 1961 and 1962, I was all wrapped up in what was then called "The Ecumenical Movement." I was at that time "hell-bent" to discover what Catholics and Protestants and Hebrews and Muslims and Buddhists and American Indians, and you name it, all had in common spiritually.

Maybe, somehow, we could all come to agreements about our Creator in ways that would allow us to live in harmony.

My view was each religion in the world could maybe give us additional insights into God that other religions failed to perceive. I still like to hope that might be possible.

So when Sue waltzed forward with her revelations I felt the least I could do was listen to her and maybe refrain from seeming to be too skeptical or dismissive about what she claimed she was experiencing.

All I could then know with certainty was that she was taking all of this seriously and, according to her, so were the rabbis, who she would meet with about once a week, while Sue still continued to worship at the Episcopal church our father used to serve in as an altar boy.

Initially, Maurice and I wondered if she might be using these "voices" as an attention-getting device. Moreover, we'd become increasingly agitated or aggravated whenever we'd be in a conversation with her and she would hold up her hands and exclaim, "Excuse me. Ramtha is talking in me now." Signifying to us to shush up until Ramtha finished his business with Sue.

Often she would have to leave the room to go write down what Ramtha and the others were saying through her, much of it in a language she could not understand but nevertheless attempted to spell phonetically.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this, from both Maurice's and my observations, was that during this "Ramtha Period" which lasted for several years before gradually diminishing, Sue seemed to be mysteriously serene. Yes, she continued to be preoccupied with trying to locate Rick, but overall, she seemed to be floating pleasantly in another world, or in this world but on another level of existence.

Maurice and Tracey and I would sometime suspect that Ramtha and his gang of Egyptians might be a side effect from the medications Sue was taking.

But Sue was constantly changing her meds and so I doubt that was it.

One thing Sue was also doing was painting up a storm. Every chance she'd get, she'd be buying canvas and brushes and oil paints and sketch books, drawing and painting anything and everything.

And when she didn't have something to draw or paint upon, she'd write poems and call me and read them to me.

Sue's poems were essentially spiritual expressions, more like prayers. Sometimes directly addressed to God.

And so that led us to talk about God and the mysteries life presents us. Much in the same way Mom always seemed to invite conversations about God and all things that are mysterious.

Sue, like Mom, and for that matter, Dad, too, always seemed to be optimistic about God and the power of Love. Always insisting there are things or elements or truths in our world that we cannot as humans fully comprehend yet.

But, if we sit down in solitude, open our palms to the sky, and listen carefully, we just might hear a voice signifying something poetic or musical that leads us to another level of being, of perception, and of acceptance of our human condition and our place in the scheme of things.

Long before Sue faced her final days with us, she had found her place, her center of being, her abiding peace within her heart and within the hearts of those she loved, perhaps even with her ceramic frogs who always smiled up at her as she sat in her wheelchair, awaiting her destiny, her next great adventure.

With and within that crock pot upon my desk, she helped soothe my soul, by showing me again what I seemed to have forgotten when I started writing this a few months ago, always only typing out a couple lines, paragraphs, or a page before I would became despondent about how much I miss her in my life.

Within that little crock pot upon my desk is truth and proof that I was a pretty good brother to her after all.

As much as I may fault myself for whatever I did not do for Sue while she muddled and struggled through the

torturous life she lived, Sue now, like the lady in the movie *The Theory of Flight*, Sue smiles at me on each one of those strips of "fortune cookie paper," and as I read them again and again she says to me, joyfully, "I remember . . ."

And now, while sitting here quietly, about to take my hands off my keyboard, I can hear her voice in my head, singing softly, "And so now remember I loved you, bro, and don't forget, the next singer you send my way, she had better have soul."