

Story of Paula, My Mother

Paula House (1939-2008) Eulogy Delivered by a Son

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I think we are all in a state of shock. Among the scores of calls and condolences, I received an e-mail from the former Surgeon General of the Navy. My initial reaction was to forward a copy to my mother because I thought she'd get a kick out of it. That's where my head is right now...and probably yours too. It doesn't even seem real.

So first, let me thank everyone for being here to honor my mother. As some of you know, my mother loved the limelight. She *loved* being in front of a crowd. But she was not just a stage ham. She helped create the light. She wrote the script, she set the stage, she acted, and directed...all at once. And so I beg your indulgence, if for this once, for all the times she has spoken for us, that I may hold the microphone to speak about her. While we inherit different things from our parents--- being bashful is not something I inherited from my mother.

You can see I am wearing the uniform of our Navy. And like any culture, the military has its own special language. A phrase I learned from an Army Veterinarian is "BLUF" : "Bottom Line Up Front" —reserved for presenting to busy General's who may or may not have time to hear your "gunsa monsa" (the whole story)--- so you need to make your point quickly and up front...and not at the end.

Here's the BLUF: two words to describe her life "family" and "friends" --- Brian Pollock summer up her life in one phrase, "she was so easy to love" (because of her personality) . Who is Brian? My Aunt's Lisa's first husband. Who keeps in touch with your deceased sister's ex-husband? Somehow my mother pulled it off...that's what she did because she treasured those connections to family despite the passage of time and even over old disputes and grudges.

When I first came into my mother's kitchen on Wednesday, at her normal place setting next to her glasses and shopping list was a mug sitting on a place mat with this inscription "God Grant Me the Serenity to Accept the Things I cannot Change." (repeat) Although clearly her passing was utterly unexpected to everyone including herself, it was if she had left us a message. Why should we be seeking "Serenity?"--- Like many of you, my initial reaction was not just sadness. I was pretty darned angry and still am for right now. How could this happen? It's so unfair! She was so (relatively these days) young and had so much life left, so much more to give and enjoy. Life can be so unfair...or at least so it seems to us...unless we look to G-d...and ask for the Serenity to Accept the Things we Cannot Change.

None of us just falls out of the sky. So in understanding my mother's life we need to go back in time a little further...to her parents Joseph and Esther Kinstler...and someone else. How many people here know my mother had an older brother? His name was Eugene. In trying find my mother's Social Security number the other day, my brother Harry, discovered this letter she had saved. [read letter- from Creighton Elementary School thanking Mrs. and Mrs. Kinstler for their donation and understanding that they had "lost a little one"] Eugene died age 3. What a horror. Nobody should outlive their children. Now *that's* unfair. And so my grandparents, Joe and Esther had every right to be angry and bitter...but they were not. Perhaps because of Eugene, they had a better appreciation for the preciousness of life and they multiplied their love...and they poured it into their new little girl, Paula, who came into their lives at Mt. Sinai Hospital in South Philadelphia, on Father's Day, June 18th 1939 and later another little girl Lisa who was born January 1944.

As a side note, Eugene died on April 2nd, 1938 and through some quirk of coincidence or intervention I was born on April 2nd. I think back on those birthdays as a little kid, sitting with a party hat and a new GI Joe in a Howard Johnson's somewhere on Roosevelt Blvd thinking "wow, this is the greatest day of the year", not realizing the sorrow of what that day meant for my grandparents... and I never knew about it during their lifetime...because they choose to be loving and not angry and bitter...and that love glistened through my mother every day.

My mother often mentioned she would make a lousy guest on shows like Dr. Phil and Oprah where people pour their hearts out about their terrible childhood. She would say she actually had a very happy childhood—and her parents showered her, not with "things" because they were of very modest financial means, but with love and affection and attention.

The family moved to 5241 Pennway Street where my mother grew up attending Creighton Public Elementary School and Olney High--- Class of 1957. She often relished in the song "The Class of '57 had its Dreams." Going through her high school yearbook, even as I child, I could tell my mother was enormously popular and had SO many friends...not only because she was an attractive woman (which she was...and continued to be), but because of her outgoing personality and concern for other people. It's been said "If you want a friend, be a friend." My mother was that friend to so many people and as alluded to earlier, there were no bounds of time, age, background, or petty gripes that could prevent her from maintaining those friendships. If she knew you as "Little Joey Snyder" in 1950, be preparedshe would remember you 40 years later and everything about you.

Everyone here should know my mother; Paula was very creative and artistic. She attended the Philadelphia College of Art, now known as the "University of the Arts." Having her fill after two years, she decided to go to Beauty School and become a hairdresser. She married my biological

father, Calvin Lankin, in 1960 and moved to his hometown, Vineland, NJ. (For those who aren't familiar with Vineland, people down there still drive tractors). Being "down on the farm" was not a comfortable place for a "free-spirited" young woman from the big city. She took me and a couple suitcases and went back to Philadelphia...back to Pennway Street to live with her parents and Lisa.

A few years later she met a tall young man from Brooklyn named Harry House Jr. who didn't seem to mind she already had a little boy, (somewhat of a "shonda" a disgrace in those days) and they were married in 1964. My mother gave birth to another son, my brother, Harry William House III in 1966. We lived in the Colony Apartments near Bustleton and Tomlinson Roads in Somerton. These were golden days of being a "stay at home" Mom. I remember her ironing and listening to a white Zenith radio. In my step-father's tradition we went to St Paul's Lutheran Church. But in my mother's typical way, we just didn't attend services. She taught Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, helped publish the newsletter, and was President of the Women's Group. When it came time for my confirmation, my mother ensured it was not just a "confirmation", but the world's first Christian Bar Mitzvah of epic proportions.

In November of 1968 the family moved to 12109 Elmore Terrace where my mother would live for the rest of her life. Just before we almost lost my mother in 1967 due to a car crash with her as the solo occupant that involved knocking down a street pole and a fully mature sycamore tree, for which the city of Philadelphia sent us a bill. If I ever have a chance to own a classic automobile, I hope it will be a 1958 Buick, for it could have only been God, 4800 lbs of steel and those heavy chrome bumpers that saved my mother's life that day.

Unfortunately the second marriage, although longer lasting, wasn't a great fit either. My Dad and Mom separated in 1979—just after my graduation from High School. But let me thank my Dad and all step-parents for what they do. While a parent's love is innate, or should be, step-parents have literally "stepped-in" and have taken on responsibilities beyond their own. Dad, thank you for stepping-in and taking care of us. Even though this marriage ended, my mother still kept contact with your sister Joan and her husband Bob, and their children, our cousins Patty, Craig & Brenda...and in recent years, even your new wife, Barbara.

The ensuing years were turbulent for Paula as she tried to find her way. One of her close childhood friends, Ethel Pearl, in a suicide attempt, shot herself in the head, survived; only to emerge totally blind as the optic nerve was severed. Ethel eventually died from complications of institutional living. My mother suffered a debilitating stroke at age 44 that made her right arm and leg weak permanently weak. This could have been the demise of an average person, but not my mother. It was just the beginning. In finding new physical strength through hours of therapy she began to garner emotional strength and she enjoyed re-connecting with her Jewish heritage. She participated in many self-help and 12-step groups where her innate

spirituality came forth and of course, where she made lots of new friends. She became very involved in the community and reached out her hand to help others, such as teaching English to recent Russian immigrants. At a time when people should have been volunteering to help her, she was out there helping others.

But as she gave she received. She received enormous comfort and strength from her new connections of friends, old and new. People like Pam & Joe Gilchrist, Joe & Brenda Teich, Albert & Violet Goldberg, Robert & Gene Rifkind, Bob Finkleman, Shirley Glassman, Marlene Cohen & Ken Harris, Bonnie Samson & Jerry Jordan, neighbors Lorraine and Mike Gendek and Rose Gorniak. Cousins David & Dellie, Lenni and Lou. She loved you so much.

She also showed us that while there are certain things “we cannot change”, we can change our perspective. She came to new insight and peace regarding her past marriages. In an act of great humility she admitted perhaps she was immature when she married my father and jumped into a 2nd marriage a little too soon--- rather than continue to blaming others. This allowed my mother to re-connect with my father’s family, Norman and Estelle Lankin, Arnold and Roz Lankin, cousin Carol, and my father’s older sister, Dorothy Kirschenbaum.

In addition to hair dressing, Paula was involved in numerous enterprises. She was a Shaklee distributor, and had several of her own businesses such as selling art, party planning, and even a “Poetry to Order” business where my mother would create a special poem for your event. In all honesty, none of these was especially lucrative, but I think it’s because my mother was always more interested in making friends than making money.

Being of artistic persuasion, my mother was often in the avant garde of trends, whether it was a new style or political and social change. In the midst of our conservative working-class neighborhood, my mother dressed my brother and I in the “mod style” during the early 1970’s complete with purple turtle necks and medallions. I thought we looked like Sammy Davis Jr. During the racial unrest of the mid-1960’s, a council of churches decided a good way to break down barriers would be to send children to camp drawing from both traditionally black and traditionally white congregations. When I arrived at camp it turned out among the hundreds of children there I was one of only two Caucasian children. Nearly 99% of the Caucasian families didn’t participate--- but my mother was in the 1%-- because she loved people and knew it was a good thing to do... and the right thing to do.

Back in the 1960’s and 70’s a nutritious lunch was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on Wonder bread and a Twinkie. Not from our mother! She sent to school with fruit and sandwiches made on whole wheat bread. Harry and I hated it and thought we were being persecuted. She was SO ahead of her time.

As a mother, her children, Harry and I were always top priority...whether it was rescuing us from a neighborhood bully, writing a letter to the principal, helping us with a book report. She was always there and always involved. She loved us both, even when we were wrong, just for who we were...her children. When Harry and I had new loves in our lives---Harry's Kim and my Noreen, she welcomed them into the family as daughters with the same degree of unconditional love...and perhaps even with a little bit of extra excitement since Mom was so used to being the only "hen among roosters" in the house. Noreen, although we can credit your birth mother for introducing us, we have to thank my mother for helping me to open my eyes after we met and to let me know that real love was staring me right in the face...and I had better do something about it...like go down to Sansom Street and buy a ring.

As a sister, she helped her younger sister, Lisa, through a prolonged illness involving a liver and kidney transplant. My mother and Stanley took in Lisa's only child, Joe for some time, when Lisa passed away, strangely on October 30th, three years and one day from her own death. Joe, life has been very hard and I daresay "unfair" to you. To lose both your parents before age 17 and now Aunt Paula, who loved you like one of her own children...just for who you are...is a terrible tragedy. Please know you are not alone. Everyone in this room will be following along as you enter the Marine Corps in December. You have every right to be angry and bitter, but you are taking positive action and we're all proud of you.

My mother cherished her new role as a grandmother. Harry and Kim, she absolutely adored William and Andy as you know...and most recently, Noreen and I (almost like Sarah and Abraham) were blessed with a son, Edward who is 60 days old today. The last photo I have of my mother is her holding Edward.

I save a special place of honor for my mother's treasured companion, Stanley Lipton. Stanley, my mother found so much joy and strength and peace in her relationship with you. When she met you, it was the first time in years I could stop worrying about her. You were so good to her and she knew it and appreciated it. She often told me how thrilled she was to be in your company and relished in the love and care you gave her..even when she was ill or not feeling her best. My mother welcomed your family and loved them too: Bruce and Merle, Steven, and Bob, Stanley and Elaine Raditz and your brother Norman. Stanley, thanks for being so good to my mother.

My mother had a wonderful sense of humor. She was always "cutting up" as she liked to put it. She could do impressions, sing funny songs, and even make faces to make you smile. I remember an early tape recording of my grandmother, Esther visiting our house singing a song to my brother Harry and just bursting out in uncontrollable laughter, "Oh Paula, I look at you and you make me laugh." That's what my mother did. She made us to laugh.

In that spirit, let this not be "Paula's Last Party." In the words of one her favorite Saturday Night Live sketches, "Keep talking amongst yourselves." Stay in touch...with all of us ...that's truly the way my mother would have wanted it. "Keep coming back...it works if you work it." Keep coming back. Don't be strangers.