



Linda and Juli, San Diego, 1998

The Afterlife of Friends

By Juli Miller

The fax machine burps and then beeps to indicate an incoming transmission as pink light brightens the eastern sky above the Sierras. Holding my morning cup of ginger tea, I walk over and tear off the fresh fax.

I laugh out loud. It's a certificate of admission to membership in the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) addressed to Linda K. Olson. The printed reminder in the corner says, "You must be fifty or over. You need not be retired." A neat handwritten note at the top edge reads, "Juli. Do you already belong to this elite group?"

I pick up the phone and dial. One ring. "Hello!" "No, I am not a member of AARP!" I announce. I tell Linda I had tossed the same invitation I received last year. "I don't think I'm ever going to retire, but I probably should join just to get those senior discounts." We laugh. She argues for joining. I imagine both of us presenting our AARP membership cards at some motel or restaurant in November when we celebrate our birthdays. We'll not be able to keep a straight face.

"You're right," I reply. "We should both be dead. But we're not. So let's. As another way to celebrate being alive."

"Okay, I'll send in my application," Linda responds. "Have another great day!"

"You, too. Bye," I say as I behold the sun rising from the peaks. We've both come to appreciate every sunrise.

The Wake-Up Call

I cannot recall what time it was when the phone rang on a muggy August night in 1979. The caller was weeping. It was soft-spoken Janice, younger sister of Linda, my former college roommate and close friend.

There had been an accident in Europe, near Berchtesgaden, Germany. Linda had been hit by a train. She might have lost several limbs. She might not live. Dave Hodgens, her husband of less than two years, had minor injuries. Linda's parents, brother Albert, and Janice were going to Europe as soon as passports and travel arrangements were in order. They would call me again from over there.

It was as if the point of a long knife blade had been shoved into my stomach, drawn through, and twisted. I doubled over and screamed into my lap. I shivered as I imagined a gigantic locomotive lumbering down the tracks. Goose bumps covered my arms. I was so afraid for Linda. For all of us. I awakened Barry, my husband, told him the news, and cried for a long time. In the morning, I called the school where I taught and asked that officials there find a substitute teacher for a few days. It was a personal emergency.

Then, I began navigating my way through the Valley of Waiting, a place haunted by familiar places and activities in a surreal light. I continuously heard organ music, big throbbing chords and arpeggios, because I used to go with Linda to hear her practice on the church organ late at night. I also did what Linda and I had done countless times together when we needed a break from studies: I went to a stationery store. We'd spend hours

looking for cards—cards with stunning photographs, art reproductions, or howling humor.

But I was stumped. Should I be looking at sympathy cards or get well cards? No, I'd better look for blank cards so I could be prepared for any outcome. But I had to flee the store before I found anything suitable. The rows and rows of cards celebrating birthdays, new babies, anniversaries, or a new home brought on too many tears for what now might never be. I decided Hallmark should develop a line of cards for people facing The Unknown.

As an alternative, I went to the Berkeley post office and bought a dozen blue aerograms. Writing would be my chosen therapy until I figured out something better to do in order to deal with the panic, fear, and grief. This was my version of praying without ceasing. The words poured onto the blue paper as I talked about anything and everything, just like we always did. Weather, sports, politics, books, work, weekends. As soon as I received an address, I'd send everything I had written so she'd know I had been thinking about her continuously. Between writing sessions, I took long walks with my dog Star to pass the time and nurse the sadness until I heard more news.

The call I needed finally came a few days later. "Juli?"

"Linnnnnnnnnda!" She was still alive.

"What are you doing?" She always asked me that. In that very tone of voice, as if always suspecting I might be having more fun than she was. After all, she was in radiology residency training at the White Memorial Medical Center in Los Angeles.

"What do you think!?" I said, returning the challenge. Neither of us was able to speak for a while after that. But I understood at that moment the power of simple, direct communication in keeping hope alive. As long as Linda and I could talk or laugh with each other—no matter what her permanent disabilities—we'd be okay.

When I was younger, I had often wondered what my personal Moment of Truth would be. Stories of Ruth, Moses, Joan of Arc, Sir Thomas More, Martin Luther, the Boston Tea Party, the French Resistance, the Underground Railroad, and D-Day left me wondering if I had what it took to stand up for something, to die for something, to live passionately committed to something. Yes, I longed to paint my life in vibrant colors on a large canvas. Though I was a fan of Thoreau, I wasn't quite ready to head for a Walden Pond. Hemingway's life as a war correspondent suited my restless and romantic imagination much better.

Yet, after graduate school and marriage, I meandered innocently into what would later be identified as the “yuppie” life. I didn’t take the road less traveled. Barry and I moved to the San Francisco area where, attired in suits and carrying bulging briefcases, we both climbed corporate ladders. We were also casually building “net worth” through the real estate magic of the late 1970s. We moved every year in order to take advantage of the amazing appreciation of residential property. When we weren’t buying, selling, or installing track lighting or wallpaper on weekends, we skied, climbed rocks, fished, or hiked. We drove a BMW, snacked on Brie, and soaked in a Jacuzzi. One of my graduate school classmates who visited me said, “Juli, you really have lost it. You’ve sold out.” His words stung me for months.

Linda’s call from the hospital in Europe echoed with enriched significance. It connected me with my earlier readiness for a unique call to action. However, I sensed my mission would be on a very tiny and private stage, and it was going to be a long engagement.

Confirmation came in the form of a letter written to Barry and me on August 30, 1979, in which Dave detailed the tragic accident and gave us progress notes on Linda’s condition. She had been taken to a trauma hospital in Salzburg and plans were being made to fly her home to San Diego “where we will begin again. Goals that have been ambiguous or nebulous to us before have become straightforward and clear-cut, and I think, Juli and Barry, that with the help of friends, and with our combined strength, we can make it. Please write soon, or come down and see us when we get back. We love you and need you.” Next to Dave’s signature was Linda’s new one, written with her remaining limb, her left arm.



Linda, Boulder Mountains, Idaho, 1991

Linda could have perished. We could have attended a heartbreaking memorial service. And then most of us would have eventually gone on with our lives as we did before, though there would have been terrible grief packed away inside somewhere.

But she was alive. This was a far bigger and deeper challenge. It required deliberate and conscious actions. “With the help of friends. . . .” Enough of corporate ladders, net worth, and weekend adventures. This was the timeless and profound call to friendship.

Fear settled into me, deep and heavy. I didn’t know how to help a severely disabled person just a year younger than me. I had no idea what I would say or do. But I was not going to run away. I would show up for practice, as it were. Linda would have to coach me. I would trust her to only throw me balls that I could return, one at a time.

And so we have kept the rally going for about twenty years, one stroke at a time. We have gone from being sharp young thirty-somethings to being dependent on Advil and canes, but we both keep showing up. And we never keep score.

From Tuna Sandwiches to Champagne

I flew down to see Linda soon after she was brought back to San Diego. There was so little of her left, and I was scared as to how she would get around in the big, fast world without getting run over. Her wounds were so fresh and frightening for me, but I vowed not to close my eyes or refrain from touching Linda. I was determined to learn how to help her put on her artificial legs someday and get her in and out of the shower as soon as she was ready. But would she let me? I had lived with her: I knew how stubborn and independent she was.

I wanted to learn how to take care of Linda so we could someday take road trips together again, just like we did so often in college. Supplied with a few cans of sardines, a sack of apples, a couple of books, and our sleeping bags, we would head out Friday afternoons for a weekend in Death Valley, Monterey Bay, Yosemite, Palm Springs, or Lake Arrowhead. The dean, Mrs. Cushman, always shook her head as she registered her concern for

our safety when we turned in our campus leave slips.

Everyone left us alone for a while when I first arrived at Dave's parents' house. I sat on the bed with Linda as she proceeded to tell me her plans for a different future. She took up no more room than a regular pillow. I felt so gargantuan in comparison. She had already drawn up goals on four pieces of paper labeled with the headings "personal," "professional," "rehabilitation," and "social." Always the list maker, always the one to lay things out clearly. I was stunned by how often she laughed as we talked about goals, but ever so grateful that she did.

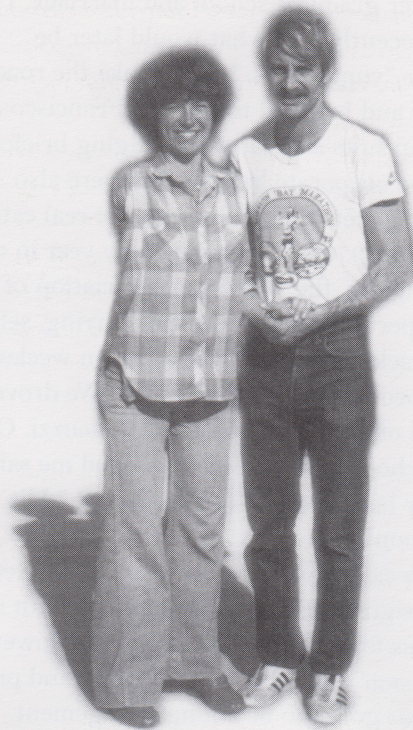
After we talked for an hour or so, she suggested we go down to the beach, just as we would have done before the accident. We packed tuna fish sandwiches and books, and headed to the surf and sand, Dave carrying Linda like a new baby. Linda and Dave refused to dwell on what had been lost. They fiercely focused on what remained to be discovered and enjoyed. I was learning by their example. In the warmth of the sun, we talked about the rehabilitation program she would begin soon and the promise we would make to each other to stay in touch no matter what it took, no matter how bad things might get at times. Ever since that day, I cannot see a can of tuna without remembering us huddled together in front of the waves, talking ourselves through the ocean of sadness that almost drowned us.

Linda wrote regularly with her left hand, sharing details of her new life, establishing a new penmanship. The letters were direct and detailed. I always felt a surge of energy and purpose after receiving one. I mopped floors or took out trash with real joy because I could still do it. I cast out green fly-fishing line while wading in a river, skied in cold white powder up to my neck, or played a Bach fugue—for the two of us. I practiced fixing my hair, getting dressed, preparing a meal, opening mail, or working at my desk with just my left hand in order to better appreciate what she was up against.

December 12, 1979

It's Friday again. Starting my fourth week of living at home. We've developed a comfortable routine. The alarm goes off at 4:30 a.m. It has barely stopped ringing before Dave is out the front door for his seven-mile run. Meanwhile, I manage to stretch out in the middle of the bed, encase myself between all the pillows and sleep on my left side for the last hour. It's awkward to sleep on my left side because my arm is pinned underneath me and I can't keep my balance.

Dave always returns between 5:29 and 5:31. Then I have the distinctive pleasure of being picked up by a cold



Linda and Dave, January 1980

sweaty runner. It does make one wake up quickly. I sit on a seat in the shower while Dave washes my hair and soaps me up. I'm able to do all this myself but Dave insists on doing it for me. He gets an early morning charge out of it. One morning I thought I'd be helpful and squirt the shampoo on my head. The only problem was that I couldn't tell how much I had on my head until I put the bottle down. At that point I discovered the shampoo completely inundated the entire top of my head. It took five to ten minutes to rinse my hair because it kept sudsing.

January 4, 1980

I thought I'd write about my prostheses today. I've found that depending on my mood, I call them "my legs," "the legs," or "my prostheses." Technically, my residual limbs are called stumps but I dislike that term immensely. It sounds like a forestry term. Even though it is only semantics, it just accentuates the image I see as being a chopped up person.

I have a real "love-hate" relationship with the prostheses. Now I understand why Rancho Los Amigos said that I'd give up. Physically it would be much easier to remain in a wheelchair. It's tedious to put the prostheses on and get them dressed. They're hard to walk with and they require so much energy and strength that you're apt to travel greater distances in the wheelchair than by walking. Up to this point, it's more comfortable to sit without them on than with them. The reasons I use them are really all psychological. If I never learned to walk a single step I think I would wear them in the

wheelchair just for the sake of appearance. It makes interaction with the general public much easier and gives me some respite from feeling that I am always on display or from feeling that I always am having to sell myself.

... I don't remember the exact date [we looked it up—Oct. 16] I got my legs but it was a Tuesday night. There was a World Series game being played. That night I was propelled around my room by Dave and John Webster. It was very emotional for everyone—none of the hospital personnel had ever seen me standing up. My excitement was somewhat tempered because it quickly became obvious that it was going to be a lot of work.

The next morning when I tried to stand up on my own between the parallel bars, I thought it was next to impossible. I was drenched in five minutes. In ten minutes I was so exhausted that I had to quit. . . . For the first couple of weeks I perspired so much that my hair was soaked. Sometime during the first week I remember sitting down and feeling like this should be all over. It was like someone had given me the prostheses for some consumer rating. I had tested them and now I could give them back and my own legs would return.

After a while, the prostheses were cosmetically covered. When Linda saw that for the first time, she was upset.

The ankles were thick and they had support hose on. It hit home that these were going to be my legs and yet were never going to ever be like real legs. It was one more of those places along the way that confirms the permanency and magnitude of my loss.

Linda and Dave flew to northern California that fall for dinner with Barry and me. Observers would not have understood the significance of the four of us walking the short distance from the entrance of Narsai's, the trendy restaurant in the Berkeley hills, to our reserved table. This was the first time after the accident that Barry and I saw her walk. Those steps were as monumental as Neal Armstrong's steps on the moon. We ordered a bottle of very fine champagne to celebrate those twenty steps. All eyes were moist as we raised our glasses. "To friendship, to the future," we toasted.

Standing Happy

Linda was very realistic and practical about her progress, just as she had always been about life before the accident.

January 4, 1980

At Christmas time, I cut physical therapy down to only once a day. . . . After observing the "separation anxiety" of many PT patients, I wanted to make sure I was prepared to make a clean break. It's very hard for many patients to accept the fact that they're not going to regain 100% function. They become angry when they are discharged from PT and accuse the staff of having given them inadequate care. Leaving PT often is the first realization that they will always be disabled. Also it's nice to be able to be a patient and work every day and receive the staff's praise for working so hard, having such a good attitude, and making so much progress. It's a lot more difficult to be on the outside where people tend to wonder what's wrong with you, and praise is usually lacking.

February 5, 1980

The enclosed picture was taken the first week of January. I love looking at pictures of me standing. . . .

Sunday night we attended our third class reunion in Pasadena. . . . It was very informal but it wasn't until after dinner that most of them felt comfortable to come talk to me about the accident. . . . There are two unknowns: how Linda will react and how each person will react. Most of them are scared of their own reaction the most.

In the first place, when they see me the first time, they have to finally accept and believe that it's really true—we had an accident. Then they express their reaction and finally they quite often state that they've felt guilty. . . . It's part of the reaction that I don't understand.

The final part of this process usually includes people saying that they've seen something between Dave and me that they're jealous of.

It surprised me at first but so many people have said it by now that there must be something to it. They all feel that somehow we've found out what life is all about and we seem outwardly happier about it. And that's the saga that I know is true. We really are happy, in fact, we think we're even happier than before. That's what I like about this picture—it's happy.

Onward

After a period of rehabilitation, Linda went back to the White Memorial Medical Center to complete her residency in diagnostic radiology. An apartment was remodeled to accommodate her needs, and the radiology department made whatever adjustments they could to support her training. Meanwhile, Dave completed his training in radiation oncology at the Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. They saw each other on weekends.

On Wednesday, July 23, 1980, Linda called early in the morning to tell me she was pregnant. This was as magnificent as the rainbow after the flood. Not only did this baby symbolize the powerful love between David and Linda, but it also gave us all something wondrous to look forward to that had never been. We were freed from always being reminded of what had been lost.

September 25, 1980

On Sunday I had my second OB visit. They did a real-time ultrasound and boy was it amazing. That kid was sitting in there just punching away with both arms. You could even see its fingers. Dave re-named it Christopher Muhammad Ali Hodgens.

Undated letter

This child-to-be of ours started making its presence known two nights ago. It didn't kick hard enough for me to be sure of what it was for over an hour. I had to sit here with my hand on my abdomen for an hour to be sure it wasn't gas. I called San Diego, woke up Dave and his folks and told Dave that his kid was kicking. . . . It's a real wonderment to me that there's actually a little combination of Dave and me growing inside of me. I think it would be a real treat to have a little Dave around!

February 17, 1981, from Dave to Juli and Barry

I am now preparing myself for hermaphroditic fatherhood and am installing bottle warmers, cradles, and other accoutrements of infancy in my bedroom (out goes the stereo—in comes the sterilizer).

March 5, 1981

It was amusing to see Dave's bedroom last night. The cradle at the foot of our bed (with a "running" teddy bear sitting in it) and all the books on the bookshelves replaced by baby clothes, blankets, sheets, and towels.

Tiffany Marque Hodgens was born on March 12, 1981. When I arrived the following week to meet my godchild, she was in the kitchen sink smiling as



Linda and daughter, Tiffany, 1997

Dave gave her a bath. Later that day, we drove out to the lot where Dave and Linda were going to build a home equipped with an elevator, rails, and other features to give Linda the most independence and mobility possible. It would also have a yard where Dave and his precious little girl could play catch and he could share his passion for baseball. I was going to have the distinct pleasure after all of sending Linda cards congratulating her on the birth of a child, Mother's Day, a new home, and many more birthdays and anniversaries. "Normal" moments or passages of life were now never taken for granted. They were major celebrations.



Brian, Linda, Dave, and Tiffany, 1998

August 25, 1981

I'm sure it will be a long time before the full impact of motherhood is realized. I'm so caught up in work from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. that sometimes I forget I'm a mother. But once I walk in the door and see Tiffany smile, I enter a totally different world.

In three days it will be two years since "the accident." Believe it or not I may go through the day and be too busy to give it much thought. I know my disability is still obvious but I feel now that people are really reacting to me as Linda, a good radiologist who's fun to work with and who's reliable. Life for me is continuing its upward swing.

Linda eventually became a professor of clinical radiology at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine. There she also received the Distinguished Teaching Award and the Silver Spoon Award, a recognition from the radiology residents that means a lot to her because of the unique relationships she developed with many of her students. The American Association of Women in Radiology honored her with the Marie Curie Award in 1991, and she was the

Honored Alumnus of the Loma Linda University School of Medicine in 1994. She has volunteered much time to educating the public about breast cancer and training mammography technologists. She is renowned for compassion, dedication to patients and students, and excellence in diagnosis.

On the home front, a son named Brian was born, and Linda and Dave have raised their two smiling children to love chocolate, classical music and art, and the San Diego Padres. As a family, they have spent more time camping in the wilderness and participating in outdoor activities than most of their friends and colleagues.

Side by Side

While Linda resumed her professional and personal life, I made some adjustments in mine because my frame of reference was forever altered. I listened to people more carefully because it could, after all, be our last conversation. I no longer wasted time wishing I were somewhere or someone else. I became grounded in the present tense. The past and future were history and fiction. I'd better do a good job NOW. I didn't put off until another day what could be done today. Above all, I made time for our friendship.

We have canoed and kayaked on rivers and lakes in Montana and Idaho, fishing for trout along the way, leaving her legs on shore because it's easier without them.

I have put on cross-country skis and pulled Linda on a mountaineering sled through the snowy wilderness, nearly dumping her a few times on tight downhill corners. I always worry about her getting too cold; she always reminds me she's usually too hot since her blood doesn't cool down very much without the missing extremities.

We have picked huckleberries high in the Montana mountains and gone home to bake huge pies that we devour immediately. At lower altitudes, we usually mix up a batch of chocolate chip cookie dough or apple pie filling made with just the right amount of cinnamon. Neither ever gets into the oven since we prefer to nibble the raw stuff. Steamed artichokes served with mayonnaise and a splash of lemon are our signature hors d'oeuvres, a tradition dating back to our days in the dining commons at La Sierra University.

I have surprised her in places like the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., or the Santa Café in Sante Fe, walking in just in time for dinner when she's

attending medical conferences. We've eaten sushi in San Francisco and Orlando, and we've shared pizza in Denver and scones in Ashland, Oregon. She and two other friends surprised me with an incredible fiftieth birthday party at the Sundance Resort in Utah, bringing in very special people from around the country. Silly me thought the two of us we were going there to attend a medical conference. Her present to me was a can of Crown Prince skinless and boneless sardines. Perfect.

We have an autumn ritual of watching the World Series together and exploring towns and art museums as our husbands take the dogs duck hunting. We share our war stories from work and our latest family concerns or celebrations. We swap books. We confess our insecurities, our grudges, our quiet truces.

Her two children have "grown up" on my refrigerator door, and we have shared many of the highlights of their lives. Linda and Dave get photos of our dogs in exchange.

We do what friends do.

My Turn

Then, one spring day in 1995 while flying my Cessna 210 over Mt. Shasta, the engine of the plane blew up. Luckily, I was with a friend, a flight instructor, who had far more experience flying. Together, we made our Mayday calls, worked through the emergency checklist, selected a landing zone, and tightened our seat belts as the black lava and trees loomed closer. Then we crashed. A flight of F-16s on their way to Anchorage spotted us and radioed our position to Seattle so that a rescue helicopter could be sent. I thought about Linda many times as I lay in the lava for several hours with a broken ankle, a hole through my chin, and blood spurting from my eyebrow. "You still have your arms and legs," I reminded myself. "You're in America. Piece of cake."

It was Linda's turn for a call. Barry phoned her saying that I had been in a plane accident somewhere near Mt. Shasta and that my condition was unknown. He immediately began the four- to five-hour drive, unaware of the nature of my injuries. Linda began calling all the hospitals in that region of northern California until she found the one where I waited on a gurney after x-rays for my face to be sewn up.

"Hello," I mumbled, my throat dry and swollen.

"Juli!" she commanded. "What are you doing?!"

And so I knew everything would be fine. We had contact. She supported me during those difficult first

weeks with continual calls, cards, and surprises. We did our usual autumn trip four months later, but this time we each used a cane. It was a bittersweet moment when we saw our shadows, two crippled friends off to have fun. The new scars on my face were reminders of what could have been.

Last year, I had major hip surgery because of congenital hip dysplasia. It just so happened that the only surgeon in the West that could do that particular procedure was in San Diego.

Linda took care of me the first week after I left the hospital. She drove me to my medical appointments, she brought toast and the newspaper to my bed in the mornings, she took me to the movies and out to lunch, and she let me use her elevator, her special shower, and her extra wheelchair. When we took her son and one of his friends to the bowling alley, we received some very strange looks as we went in with crutches, wheelchair, and cane. Her kitchen was a dangerous place that week when we cooked dinner, our two wheelchairs flying around without turn signals or backup beepers.

The Journey

For us, getting older is not a tragedy or terrible ordeal. It is a sweet victory because we have each looked death in the eye. We have many plans of how we're going to take care of each other and what we're going to do when we get even older. Needing help from others to get around or recognizing how much slower we are now is not uncomfortable for us. It's just part of our ongoing routine. We are both so thrilled to be alive. And to be sharing the journey. Accidents happen to all of us. Friendships don't. There is no time to waste. Each of us two must keep showing up for the other.

And so I shall indeed send in my AARP enrollment form.

Juli Miller is a marketing communications consultant in El Dorado Hills, California. Before there were microwave ovens, ATMs, and laptops, she received a B.A. in political science, journalism, and public relations, and an M.A. in English from La Sierra University.
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