

Arlena Catherine (Cross) Mahaffy



Oct 23, 1917 – April 30, 2015

It's a huge honour and privilege to give, on behalf of her family, a short tribute to Mother and the impact she has had on each of our lives.

Can you imagine life back in 1917? On October 23 of that year, Arlena Catherine Cross entered a world



that was reshaping itself by forces that included the first “great war” and Einstein publishing his general theory of relativity. During the 97 years that she was gifted to live, she experienced huge changes: her first rides in Model Ts, Model As and transatlantic planes, the introduction of ballpoint pens and microwave ovens, the use of antibiotics to treat infections, electronic communication. The advent of email gave birth to her moniker MOGROW. Abandoning hunt-and-peck on her manual Underwood typewriter, she moved her correspondence to a personal computer, with an email account opening to the password “how great thou art.” There she cajoled, encouraged, and

occasionally coerced her children and others to write to her once a month, so that, after fixing all the spelling and grammatical mistakes made by children with PhD degrees, she could share their family news with the whole group, to keep family connected. MOGROW was the abbreviation for the signature she created to describe the relationship she had with newsletter recipients: With love MOGROW - Mother, Grandmother, or Whatever.

Over the past weeks, her seven children, 25 grandchildren, and 23 great-grandchildren have mourned her loss, celebrated her life, and reminisced about the ways she contributed to making the world a better place. Following MOGROW best practices for dealing with potentially controversial situations, rather than ask her permission to lovingly share some things about her at her funeral, a request that would surely have been denied because it would draw attention to **her** rather than her creator and saviour, we have decided to instead ask her forgiveness after the fact. So, as you might have done, with thanks and a request for your forgiveness, Mother, here are five descriptors we have come up with as we try to share with your many friends gathered here in your memory and honour, just a tiny bit of what you meant to us.

1. Faithful. Never one to give the written and spoken Word short shrift, Mother requested that not one, but two Pastor Johns give meditations at her funeral service. While both meditations are greatly appreciated, they simply put exclamation marks behind the sermon she lived for 97 years, modeling through what she did every day the story of the unshakeable faith that was her anchor. Mother was faithful to her Lord, faithful to her immediate and extended family, faithful to her church community, to her school families, to the students she tutored, and to her neighbours and friends.

Just two examples: She has been unconditionally loving and accepting over the past decades of her children and grandchildren, even when we strayed far at times from her hopes and dreams for each of us. And Mother has also been a faithful mentor, friend, and support for her arguably most special grandchild, Mary Bonner's son Jesse. In the early years of Jesse's life, mother was patient in letting him help her both at school and home, even when she didn't need it, giving him stimulating activities to do to help her and her neighbours. And as she has gotten older, Jesse has done much more of the patient helping – he has been her strong back, her helping hand, her listening ear, and her seeing eye – even helping her see the stop signs she might have

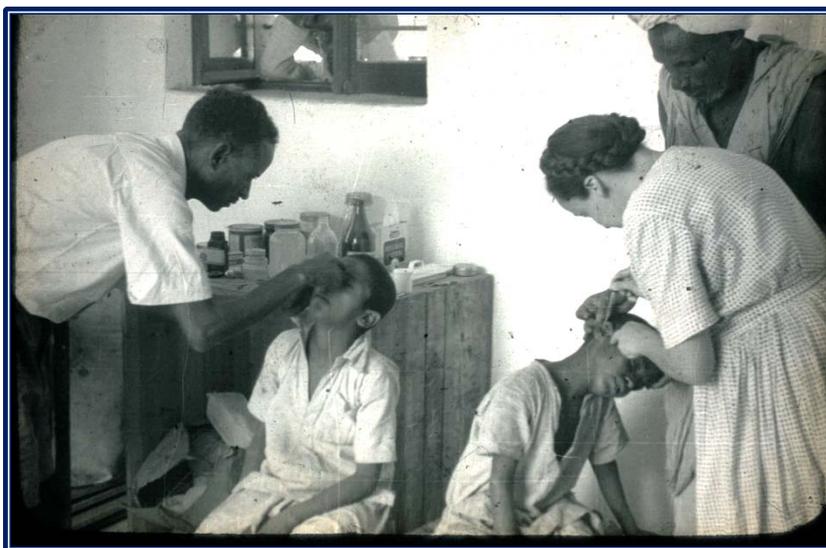


missed while driving with macular degeneration. Jesse knows things about her personality and care that no one else knows, and we have delighted in watching this special and mutually faithful relationship grow. Making a case for faithfulness as a genetic inheritance, our sister Mary Bonner and all her family members have lovingly cared for mother and been cared for by her for the past 30 years. We are all deeply grateful for the gift they have been to each other.



Knowing how uncompromisingly faithful Mother's life has always been, Cheryl and I found it disconcerting to learn a couple years ago in a phone call to our sister Mary that Mother had woken up and confessed that *"she had pushed her man out of bed during the night."* Her man, we learned, was the portable electronic device that reads the King James Bible to her every night in sonorous tones, and her man gave her particular comfort in the past few months.

2. Giving. Always looking out for those in need, Mother gave generously of her gifts and talents, and developed and nurtured new skills and talents when they were necessary to meet the needs of those



around her. As a missionary for two decades in Eritrea, this included studying Merck's Manual so she could respond, despite having no formal medical training, to needs in the village we lived in. Answering knocks on the door, she dispensed life-and-death medical care that included treatment for malaria, dysentery, abscesses and bacterial infections. When we returned to North America, her giving nature continued to show

itself in rides, visits, meals and invitations home. No matter who you were, you were always a member of her family.

3. Determined (but don't let anyone suggest the synonyms headstrong, strong-willed, or stubborn).

When something needed doing, mother simply got it done, whether that was learning how to operate a



computer at the age of 80 and adding many adaptations as her macular degeneration progressed, or getting up from a chair unassisted, driving herself to the hospital when suffering a heart attack, or making it to church a month ago after being discharged from the hospital to spend her last days at home. That determination kept her going over the past weeks as her kidneys failed her. In the hospital the transporters were slow in coming after dialysis one day, which set her to fussing about getting back to her room in time for some special visitors.

Finally, Mary said, *"Maybe God is trying to teach you patience."* Without missing a beat, she said, *"If God wanted to teach me patience, he should not have waited until I was 97."* She was also adamant about getting physical therapy in the hospital, despite her grim prognosis. She told Mary: *"I may be dying, but I'd like to go out on my feet."* And then back at home two weeks ago, unable now to eat or drink, or lift her head, she made it known that she was still determined to walk – and Mary finally had to gently let her know that she wouldn't be able to walk again – on this earth. Grandson Chris came into her room later that night, and mother returned from where she was, smiled and feebly said – *"Chris, I'm walking now – God is good!"* No-one who knew mother will be surprised – she found a way – a beautiful way - to go out on her feet.

4. Teacher and Learner. Mother has given new meaning to the term "life-long learner." Thousands of lives have been touched, directly and indirectly by mother the teacher. Some of this was in formal school settings, like the Senafe Christian Day school, where each of her children and various other missionary kids were educated at our own pace – as long as the pace met her very high standards. It was only when we returned to the US that we learned that most kids don't go to



school all year around. She also taught in a one-room school house in Illinois before leaving for Eritrea, and more recently at the CLA academy in Chicago and Good Shepherd School in Tyler. She has always relished helping with the education of students who fall through the cracks, including beautiful and specially gifted young people dealing with brain injuries, Asperger's syndrome, attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, and English as a second language. To equip herself to deal with learning needs, she became a resident expert on motor skill deficits, and for several years took summer courses so she could knowledgeably diagnose and deal with issues that might be underlying reasons for difficulties in the classroom or in life.

5. Frugal – a 12-year-old when the Great Depression came to Chicago, Arlena learned how to squeeze every penny hard enough that it flattened itself out into a nickel and then persuade the recipients of that nickel to let it do the work of a dime. All of us have benefited from her garage sales and thrift shop treasures, where she found things that would be perfect forsomeone. Often that someone never got the treasures. Yet we all benefited from her scrounging. She would walk into grocery store back rooms to bargain with the produce managers for boxes of tired fruit and vegetables... and come home with cans without labels that led to many a curious mystery meal.

But Mother was never frugal in her faith, her hope, her love.... or her humour. And often it was with dollops of humour that she lived out her faith, her hope and her love, and grace and humour helped her through deep losses in her life. So we end our tribute to our mother with a memory of visiting, with her, the cemetery in Chicago where our father was laid to rest 35 years ago last month. Several of us went with mom to visit for the first time since his burial, the place where he had been laid to rest and to see the engraving on Dad's tombstone. We worried and wondered – How would she feel upon triggering new memories of his life and difficult death from prostate cancer? The reverence of that somber moment was broken by the disappearance of MOGROW. Turning to see where she had gone, we found her lying, flat on her back, in the grass on the ground next to dad's grave. “*What are you doing,*



Mother?” Just trying out the grave for size, she answered, with facial muscles working their hardest to suppress a laugh. And so, in the spirit of the one who would turn our tears into laughter and our mourning into dancing --- and with our tongues firmly plastered in our cheeks, her children wondered out loud what irreverent words might bring a twinkle to mother's eye if she found them carved into her headstone at Mount Emblem Cemetery in Chicago. With deep love and affection, we came up with four candidates, MOGROW.

- *"I can do it myself."*
- *"My cross lateral motor skills finally failed me."*
- *"Just because I am on the other side, **that** is no excuse for your family news contribution being late!"*
- *"Actually, that coffin fits really well – but wasn't there one on sale in Jacksonville?"*

Thank you, Mother, for giving life to us and for the gift of your faithful, loving, hopeful, and determined presence in all of our lives – life will not be the same for any of us without you, and we will miss you deeply!

Deeply Loved and Missed



Peter Mahaffy, for the Mahaffy Family
May 9, 2015

