

For Mary Louise Dickson
February 1, 11 am

When I met Mary Louise Dickson, I wasn't surprised to hear her brother George call her Sis. But then I *was* surprised to hear her niece Sarah and her nephew Stewart call her Sis. Wait, she's not *your* sis, she's your aunt. Then I asked one of her close friends about her and *she* called her Sis. How people is this woman sister to? The answer is quite a lot.

Mary Louise was born July 13th, 1939. Ralph Day was mayor of Toronto. Mitchell Hepburn was premier of this province. His Majesty King George VI made a state visit here that year. And Addison and Kathleen Dickson had their first child. When they realized Mary Louise had polio, they left their mining town in northern Ontario to seek the best medical care for her here in Toronto. Lucky for our church, they moved to Warren Road, a stone's throw from here, where Sis and George grew up. Sis was hospitalized first at Sick Kids, then spent more than a year rehabbing in Warm Springs Georgia, not long after President Roosevelt died there. Her disease, I'm told, was more severe than most people realized, she had very little use of most of her muscles. But she had so many more gifts than challenges. She had a father who wouldn't let her quit, and some tough love that *expected* her to succeed. He knocked on doors and begged and cajoled to get her into Bishop Strachan School, where she excelled. She had that radiant smile that spread across her face, those endlessly blue eyes – you can see the same features in George. And she had a kind of confidence. Her niece Sarah said "she wouldn't let the chair get in her way." Sis left behind a Canada where wheelchairs don't have to get in *anybody's* way.

Mary Louise knew she wanted to study law from a young age, and was one of four women in her graduating class at Osgoode Hall, the only one in a wheelchair. The places I've mentioned – Warren Road, Bishop Strachan, Osgoode Hall, the U of T she attended before it – they were not easy places for wheelchair access in those days. She often had to be carried up or down stairs or escalators. But she had this sense that that wasn't *her* problem. She could ride on the subway like anyone else. Or go to the ballet. Or the theatre. Or to church. Or to . . . *Europe*. She studied at the London School for Economics in the 1960s, finding *there* a much more wheelchair-friendly culture, with so many World War II vets around, taxis were designed specifically for them.

Returning home, she lived independently in Granite Place, finding grace in such inventions as the *microwave*: now she could cook for herself. Even took lessons. You can imagine what a game-changer the electric wheelchair was. Her father and brother and many others had pushed her around in her older contraption, now electricity could do the muscle work. Learning about her life has made me stop and give thanks for the gifts of such technology, often overlooked by presently able-bodied people like me. Another technology we take for granted: accessible curbs. She basically did those. Think of the millions of Canadians who benefit from those daily, not just those in wheelchairs, but moms pushing prams, blind people feeling the bumps. Mary Louise wasn't so much a crusader for her own rights. She was pointing out that these little acts of making space and time for others improve our whole society. When I was working on this eulogy I was at another great

Canadian institution: Tim Horton's. And I noticed the man at the table beside me in an electric wheelchair. He went to leave, hit the button to open the door, and motored on down the sidewalk. He had no idea the name of the woman to thank for each of those gestures he took for granted. Mary Louise would have it no other way.

Mary Louise was a kind of third parent to Sarah and Stew, a kind of fifth grandparent to their kids. Their grief now is the price of love: Sis has always been in their lives. And she was the cool relative. Another sea change technologically was a vehicle perfectly suited for her to drive. That legendary blue van could get her anywhere. And that handicapped parking pass meant she could park anywhere. So she was the party bus driver. Some of the friends with whom she went out to the St. Laurence Market on Saturdays are here today. With that pass she could do more than just park at a Maple Leafs' game. She could sit in the best seats in the house, and so could those with her. She drove that van till just two years ago. Mary Louise showed the rest of us how to make time and space for those with different abilities. And that let her travel to places like Halifax or Vancouver *on her own* for meetings with the Human Rights Commission. Why shouldn't she? She showed the rest of us how much we all benefit from such access.

I've heard her legends around this church. One friend told me Mary Louise got him on the board at BSS. He'd never volunteered time or expertise like that – those were for making money. But she showed him those are also for community uplift and giving back. A major philanthropic career launched in Canada because she matched up his

skills with a place she loved. My predecessor Andrew Stirling told me of the campaign to put an elevator in this church, then to close in the atrium, which needed some \$4 million a dozen or so years ago, it'd cost some \$7 million today. Mary Louise gave him the fundraising pitch. She said 'all these years I've been at this church and I've never even seen this East Chapel upstairs that you all talk about.' Andrew asked people to give generously for Mary Louise. And they did. On the day of the new space's dedication Mary Louise was at her normal spot in this sanctuary, second pillar, on the left, and was told that was where the MP for this riding was going to sit. She made way. We all have to make space for one another at times.

Her family tells me they had trouble adding up all her honours. She didn't crow about them. Her law partners said they started getting invited to dinners around the year 2000, and those invitations just never stopped. I know folks in the Order of *Canada* who *aren't* in the Order of Ontario that Mary Louise was in. She just wasn't that concerned about herself. She was concerned for everybody else. So she would go shopping with Sarah for the whole family for Christmas, including just this past Christmas. She'd take everyone to Easter dinner at the Granite Club or the B&R. And she'd hold forth from her memory bank of stories. That same family gathered around her at the hospital after her stroke. She was her gracious self as ever, thanking everyone for the smallest things. When the nurses couldn't get her watch off – it was suited for her use, not theirs – one nurse observed the watch seemed especially "high end." "I do everything high end," Mary Louise said.

And now, today, we entrust her to the care of the God who first gave her to us. God make your face shine upon her forever. We are not worthy of such goodness in this world. But we are so grateful when it comes.