

# Mary Ann

*Marti Dickey Esplin*

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE CRISP NOVEMBER DAYS in Hershey, Pennsylvania, when I heard the news. Snuggled under a quilt, I was reading to my two young sons when the telephone interrupted us. It was my brother calling midday from Texas. Has something happened to Mom or Dad?

"No," he assured me, "the folks are fine." There was a long pause. Slowly, struggling, Ridge told me. "It's, it's Mary Ann. She's dead, Marti. She shot herself last night."

My sister, Mary Ann. Only thirty-nine and now dead. Beautiful complex Mary Ann.

The next thing I remember is three-year-old Eric clinging to me, sobbing, "What's wrong, Mommy? What's wrong? Mommy, Mommy!" I realized I had screamed. I was able to control myself long enough to call a neighbor to take the boys. Fred was out of town. I was frantic. How could he be? I needed him right then!

I was stunned, confused, panicky. What confused me most was recognizing that I also felt betrayed. Not by Mary Ann, but by the Holy Ghost, I think. Why hadn't I sensed something? My *sister* had been desperate the night before, yet I had slept peacefully. An inner-voice should have warned me that someone I loved was in terrible danger.

Mary Ann was the firstborn in our family of four. Growing up she had had a few good friends, but compared to the rest of us kids, she kept mostly to herself. Grades were important to her. She was always on the honor roll. Biology was her favorite subject and her teacher adored her. And no wonder. Besides her grades, her talent in art made her lab illustrations the best in the class, probably in the school. Six years later I had the same teacher but I was a mediocre student. He practically ignored me. On parent night, when I introduced him to Mom and Dad, he spent the whole time talking about Mary Ann.

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*MARTI DICKEY ESPLIN is a student at the University of Utah and resides in Salt Lake City with her husband, Fred, and four children.*

As a teenager Mary Ann was pretty, tan, and happy. She had beautiful legs, tanned year-round, it seemed to me. I thought Mary Ann was wonderful and desperately wanted to be like her.

Because of our six-year age difference we were never really close while we were both at home. Yet there were moments. When I was about ten I asked her what *sex* meant. The details are foggy, but I remember the feeling of kindness coupled with her uneasiness with the role. Thanks to Mary Ann, Mom responded to my curiosity with a discreet Ann Landers book, which I was soon sharing with my friends.

When Mary Ann left for college two or three years later, I was entering that frustrating, joyous, and selfish time known as puberty. I was so wrapped up in my own world of friends, school and fun (mostly fun) that Mary Ann slipped to the back of my mind. When she came home for visits Mom fixed her favorite foods and catered to her for the first few days. I didn't mind. I catered to her, too. I figured I'd have my turn eventually.

After two years of college, which was all Mom and Dad expected of us girls, Mary Ann married and moved to New Mexico. A year or so later she delivered a beautiful baby girl. Little Louann, a blue baby, died within three months.

That night a friend had convinced me it would be great fun to stay out all night with our boyfriends. We planned to go to a drive-in movie, do a little necking (making-out was the term then), and drive around all night. We told our parents we were going to a slumber party at another friend's house. This other friend's parents were out of town, so if our parents tried to reach us, there would be no answer. We figured they would just assume we were outside and the girl's parents were out for dinner or a show.

We went to the movie, drove around a lot, then parked for awhile. It got very boring and I was sleepy. I longed to go home to my warm bed. The boys let us off at my house sometime around two or three in the morning. We hid in the bushes by my house until six-thirty when we heard Dad leave for work.

Shivering from cold and apprehension, we went in the house and, oblivious to Mom's expression, I burst ahead with a story we had concocted. She gave me a second chance to come clean with the truth, but I stubbornly held to my lie. Then she finally told me what had happened — Louann, the phone calls to reach me, the exposure.

I was crushed. More crushing still was my father's reaction.

My father is a kind man but a stern disciplinarian, and I had a healthy respect for his temper. I dreaded his reaction all day. Finally when he came home, my mother sent me in to the kitchen to face him. I timidly walked in, head down. He was quiet. I slowly raised my eyes to his and saw tears. This was too painful to bear. I wanted him to lash out at me, *do* something to me so that I would be able to be angry at him. But I couldn't be angry at his tears.

Thirteen years later, holding my own precious newborn, I wept for Mary Ann's loss and understood my parents' grief.

A year or so later Mary Ann had a son. He was operated on twice shortly after he was born. Her last son was born two years after that. He had a learn-

ing disability that was a constant source of stress for her. I believe it was during this time that she started her bouts with depression.

Evidently part of the problem centered around the fact that her husband wanted Mary Ann to be different. He was an attorney and expected her to join certain clubs and do a fair amount of entertaining. She never quite fit the mold. I believe the constant pressure of trying to please her husband coupled with the ever-present strain of her son's learning disability proved to be too much for her.

When the boys were still in grade school, Mary Ann and her husband divorced. It seems she finally tired of trying to live up to his expectations. She tried being a single parent but simply could not take the pressure. She decided it would be better for the boys if they lived with their father.

She had always regretted not finishing school so she went to Louisiana State and worked very hard to get her degree in two years. She was extremely proud of this accomplishment.

After getting her degree, she moved back to Fort Worth and married again. Her boys visited her from time to time but she never seemed to be happy.

I don't know what brought Mary Ann to the precipice or what pushed her over. I can only look at her personal sorrows — the ones I know about — my dealings with her, and conjecture.

We were so different. Through her high school days, Mary Ann was a serious student. I wasn't. She worked during the summers and holidays. I played. She saved her money. I squandered mine.

When Mary Ann was about thirty-three, prior to her second marriage, we began to establish a fairly good relationship. I had joined the Church when I was twenty-five and had married Fred two years later. She intensely disliked my new-found religion, and I think she was surprised to discover how much she liked Fred, a fifth-generation Mormon. When I reached my thirtieth birthday, Mary Ann was glad — said she could relate to me better.

Most, if not all, of the constraint in our relationship centered on my church. When the conversation turned to religion I was constantly defending my position. I tried to avoid the discussions. Mary Ann was volatile. She loved me but hated my Mormonism. "You're being brainwashed," she snapped more than once.

It wasn't until after Mary Ann's death that I found out why she was angry with the Church. After her second child was born, Mom had flown to New Orleans to be with her. Missionaries tracted them out and taught them some of the discussions. After several lessons the overzealous elders told Mary Ann and Mom they had a choice of accepting the gospel or going to hell. Mary Ann picked up the Book of Mormon and threw it at them.

Mary Ann never told me about that experience; but I had a disturbing glimpse of her religious ambivalence when I went with her to the cemetery where Louann is buried. Not far from the little grave stands a beautiful statue of Jesus. I loved it with its feeling of a loving, benevolent older brother. Mary Ann said that she liked to look at the statue but didn't want it to be Christ. The statue

gave her a feeling of peace, the thought of Christ did not. This saddened me. I can't think of a more loving person than the Savior. Did she believe in him and blame him for her hurt? Did she feel the statue of Christ mocked her disbelief?

I refuse to believe that Mary Ann was given her burdens, seemingly one after another, by God. Certainly not by the loving Father in Heaven I believe and trust in.

It made no sense for her to take her life that particular night. She was planning to start a new business, had had business cards made up, and seemed to be looking forward to her life. The night of her suicide, she had had dinner with friends. She had some wine at dinner and *queludes*, a mood changer, some time during the evening. The wine, the drugs, and her unstable personality made, in my opinion, a fatal combination. But her death must have been a fluke. We know she had contemplated suicide in the past because we found several suicide notes in her personal papers. But she had not left a current note. I believe that the combination of drugs and alcohol helped plummet her into a nightmarish depression, giving her the courage to follow through with what she had threatened to do in the past.

After her death, we found an incredible number of empty prescription bottles for *valium* and *queludes*. The same doctor had prescribed them all. As far as we know, he had no idea of how many she was taking. I lay part of the blame for her death at his feet.

For months after she died, I dreamed about her, waking up convinced that she was still alive. In my dreams we always discussed her suicide. In several I was frantic because we had given away her clothes. In one eerie but not unpleasant dream I went with her down into the grave. I looked up and saw a rectangular sky. She said she was ready to go but needed my help. I helped her lie down and crossed her hands over her breast. I awakened with tears streaming down my face.

When I began to think about what suicide meant in an eternal context, I worried about Mary Ann. Where was she? Had she found peace? I pictured her with Louann, now a mature woman, embracing and talking. I pictured her with my grandmother, one of the most righteous-without-being-self-righteous people I have ever known. I could see her surrounded by other loved ones as well. But would Mary Ann, who had committed the sin of murdering herself, be allowed to be with these righteous people?

I was afraid to ask these questions — afraid of the answers — so I kept them to myself for a long time and prayed. I finally called a Mormon friend I trusted and asked her my questions. I know now it was a terrible position to put her in. I said, "I want the truth about what happens to people who take their own lives. What will happen to Mary Ann? Where is she? Is she at peace?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes."

"Marti," she began slowly, "when a person takes her own life it's self-murder and she has, in effect, sealed herself to Satan . . . to outer darkness."

“No!” I wanted to scream. Instead I mumbled something and hung up. I never asked anyone else. I continued to pray, but I fretted so much during my prayers that I must have blocked any answers. Also I know now that I was angry with God. I assumed his answer would be the same as my friend’s.

I finally found solace in a most unlikely place. When I was a new convert someone suggested I buy *Mormon Doctrine* as it was a must in every LDS library. I did; but the longer I was in the Church, the less I relied on Elder McConkie’s theology and the more uncomfortable I became with his dogmatic approach to the gospel. I hadn’t touched the book for years before Mary Ann’s suicide. Now, with considerable reluctance, I picked it up. I gathered my courage to look up “suicide” and found myself weeping with gratitude and relief. What I found was what I think I knew all along: mercy . . . charity. . . . “Obviously persons subject to great stresses may lose control of themselves and become mentally clouded to the point that they are no longer accountable for their actions. Such are not to be condemned for taking their own lives. It should also be remembered that judgment is the Lord’s; he knows the thoughts, intents and abilities of men; and he in his infinite wisdom will make all things right in due course.”

I guess it’s inconsistent that I chose not to rely on Elder McConkie except when he happened to agree with me, but in this case, that’s what I did. I felt a calming of my spirit. I felt sure that Mary Ann was within that protective circle formed by loved ones receiving the acceptance she needed. And, most importantly, with Louann. It took months of prayer to reach this conclusion. Fred was a source of strength to me. He listened to my nightmares, my fears, and my speculations. But he couldn’t give me the answers. I had to find them for myself. And it was vitally important to me to find the answers within the Church for the simple reason that I wanted to remain in the Church.

Ours was not a very religious family. We all attended church as children, but I stopped going completely during the seventh grade. I don’t remember when my parents stopped. My feeling is that they have come to terms in their own way and received comfort about Mary Ann. They were deeply grieved — they still are — and though my parents will never be truly at peace with Mary Ann’s death, they seem to feel that she is.

I am one who needs the assurance that there is a God — not only of his existence, but of his goodness, compassion, and love. And I have this assurance. If I didn’t feel sure that Mary Ann has found peace, I would have no religion. I would not need or want such a God.

I still dream about her, but rarely. I think about her almost every day. Sometimes I feel anger for what she did to herself, to Mom and Dad, to all of us. Suicide seems so selfish. The void she left will always exist. But mostly I feel love for her — love and sadness.

Mary Ann’s death has affected me in other ways as well. For one thing, I take the subject of depression seriously. I no longer feel that the solution is to look in the mirror and tell yourself to shape up — or just live the gospel. With the suicide rate increasing nationwide and also within the Church, I believe we

must look seriously at depression and choose carefully those who help the depressed. I also believe that most bishops are not equipped to handle many of the problems of a seriously depressed person. Unwittingly he may add to their feelings of guilt and isolation.

As members of a church which claims Jesus Christ as its head, we need to recognize our responsibility to bear each other's burdens. Some of us are lucky enough to find nurture and support more easily than others. Some of us never find it.

Mary Ann's death, so unnecessary, has shown me how fragile humans can be. I fear for my children, for myself as their mother. Am I meeting their needs, helping them become strong enough not only to withstand life but to celebrate it? Am I showing them enough love? Or smothering them with too much? We're told that if children just know they are loved then they'll be all right. Surely, I tell myself, they *will* be fine. After all, my children are loved and cherished.

But so was Mary Ann.