

Don't Be Afraid

Julie Mars
talks to Ann Stapleton

AS: In *A Month of Sundays*, you make the point, eloquently, that dying is a terribly difficult process, that it is hard work, as hard as being born. And so, as anyone who has lost someone can attest, is the work of going on living. As a survivor, what do you now see as your most important work?

JM: Not to waste time on things that are not important. I think witnessing Shirley's death made me wake up to the demands of being in the present, instead of the past or the future. This moment, right now, is all we really have, and I don't want to be a fool and waste it on behaviors, feelings, action, or anything else that doesn't count when it's stacked up against what I know really matters. Of course, I constantly screw up, but my goal is, and has been ever since my time with Shirley, to find beauty in the moment and live it with a sense of adventure and joyfulness. I recommend taking care of a dying person whom you love. It is well worth doing. It blasts you into a more intimate relationship with yourself. You get to find out who you are and what you value.

AS: You have written insightfully about a kind of faith not governed by the concept of God the father, and about the search for a religion that is accepting and restorative and refuses to frighten with concepts like hell, which was an issue for your sister near the end of her life. What is your notion of grace, and how do you think the spiritual journey is complicated for people who do not believe in a supreme being, but have faith in something they (perhaps) can't even name?

JM: I hate the way organized (and popular) religions want to have the monopoly on faith. That's just one kind of faith, and, for me, it seems easier if you can buy the party line than if you can't. If you can't join up, it doesn't make you a less spiritual person. It doesn't mean you have less faith, either. It just means you have to live with more ambiguity. I've always felt that the ability to live with ambiguity is the sign of a truly creative person. It takes a lot of fortitude to

forge an individualized spiritual path (or a less mainstream one) because there's enormous pressure to go along with the group. It's important to remember that there are a lot of us out there, no matter what the media (and for that matter, the President of the United States) say. I think when we are true to ourselves and our own spirituality and beliefs or lack of them, we provide a service to the world. As for my notion of grace: I've had the great pleasure of being 'full of grace' a few times in my life, and I can only relate what it felt like. It was unmistakable confidence, experienced in the body, that everything was absolutely perfect just as it was.

AS: You published your first book in your forties. What was that like for you, and how do you think it was different than it would have been at a younger age? Do you have any advice for people who are coming into their own, creatively or otherwise, in midlife, but may be having trouble giving themselves permission to follow their bliss?

JM: Actually, *The Secret Keepers* came out when I was forty-nine. I thought I was right on schedule. I started college at twenty-seven, got married at thirty-eight, had my first all-time publication at forty, saw my novel published at forty-nine, and became a Barnes & Noble 'Discover Great New [emphasis mine] Writers' writer at fifty-four. No problem! However, I had a pretty serious problem in terms of writing when I was in my thirties. For a long time, my ambition and my frustration were divided exactly fifty-fifty. There was no relief from it. I was always pushing hard, getting nothing, giving up, and then trying again. I desperately wanted success, but I couldn't get it. So I would say this to people who feel that they're coming into their own creatively at midlife: Be glad it didn't start earlier when you had more energy to torment yourself and more unrealistic expectations. Don't get hung up about unimportant stuff, like how old you are. Just express yourself, have some fun, and don't be afraid of anything.

AS: You write movingly and with honesty about your difficult relationship with your father, who died not long after Shirley's death. I know as a reader I very much hoped that you would be able to find some healing for yourself in his last words: 'I'm going to tell my daughter that she loves me.' You say in the book that you don't think those words were meant for you. Have your thoughts on the subject changed at all since then? Have you been able to find any peace about the relationship since his death? And what would you say to one of your readers who might be struggling with similar issues?

JM: I know my father's last words weren't meant for me, and we're still at a stand-off in terms of our relationship. But last week I was thumbing through a sales catalog for various neighborhood businesses that came in the mail, and there was an ad for a hypnotherapist. There was a quote in her ad that went something like this: Forgiveness is giving up the hope of a better past. It struck me, even as I read it, that I have forgiven my father. And I guess, for people who are still in difficult relationships with parents or anybody else, I'd say this: Give up the hope for a better past...and maybe apply that concept to the present and the future, too. See what happens. Let me know.

AS: At the beginning of the book, you wondered whether you would be able to let go of your grief and still hold on to Shirley. The book was, in part, about your search for her. Where do you find her now? Does she, in any sense, still communicate with you? And do you believe that love is stronger than death?

JM: In the book I mention a beautiful picture of Shirley that her ex-quasi-boyfriend Jack gave us at her funeral. I framed that photo and hung it on my wall. It always seemed kind of lonely, and even though I wanted it there, I wouldn't look at it that much. Then last year Ana, a wonderful ex-student (now friend) of mine from Brazil, sent me a very rare necklace made of 800 carved snail shells that the WaiWai tribe of the Amazon use once in a ritual they perform to commemorate the dead. I hung the necklace up next to the picture of Shirley, and ever since then, I look at that picture all the time. It's like a little altar with a holy picture on it. It gives me a peaceful, happy feeling. It makes me feel optimistic, warm inside, and easy-going. It feels as if she's right there. That's the closest thing I have to communication with her. And I don't feel her love has been diminished one bit by her death.

AS: You speak affectingly of the fact that Shirley was really a mother, and a wonderful one, to you, and that she is the person who taught you about love. One of the church people you encountered, Grandmother Tommie, mentioned the need to learn to mother ourselves. Did what you went through with, beside, for Shirley make you better able to do that?

JM: I think the answer to your question is yes. When the one person, if you're lucky enough to have that one person, who was always on your side, always believed in you and trusted you and thought you

were just fine the way you were, dies, you can't help but be left with a sense of, Well, now who's going to feel that way about me? For me, the answer was, I guess I'll have to do it. Looking back, I see what a protection Shirley was, though I didn't notice that at the time. Now the protection (the mothering, if you will) is gone and I still need it (everybody does), so I'm doing it for myself. It really boils down to just being kind. Shirley used to say, 'Try a little tenderness.' It was good advice, but in a way it took losing her to inspire me to implement it.

AS: You have written that for years your only connection to your birth family was Shirley. Her hope, expressed in the book, was that this experience might bring you and your other sisters closer to one another. Has that hope been realized?

JM: It has. It's mysterious how that happened. We are all far apart in age – my oldest sister is now 69 and my youngest is 49 – so some of us hardly knew each other when we were growing up. When Shirley got sick, we all came to see her, and sometimes we overlapped with each other. We talked, tentatively at first and then more frankly, about how being born into this particular family had affected us. There were six radically different stories. Listening to them was like being inside a kaleidoscope. I think we were all awestruck. A sense of mutual respect and compassion developed. Now we're in touch – in all ways. It really is a miracle.

AS: *A Month of Sundays* benefits from a wonderful structure, with the Sundays providing (for the reader, as they must have for you) a kind of certainty and continuity in a time of emotional upheaval. The other sections are more elastic, moving us back and forth in time, the way the mind works in its painstaking process of retrieval, as they let us come to know you and your sister over a lifetime of love. How did the structure evolve and did it present any particular difficulties for you?

JM: Actually, it made things easier for me. I knew I was going to put one foot in front of the other, one Sunday at a time, for thirty-one weeks. No matter how many times I fell down or fell off the path, I got back on it by the next Sunday because I had made a commitment to do so. In what I call the 'midweek meditations,' as you point out, I went anywhere: into dreams, reading I was doing, memories, emotions, confusion. But I never went off the deep end because I knew I had to get back on the path by Sunday. I'd like to

add that in my fiction I am very plot-driven. Plots, at least my plots, rest in linear time. I think before this book I was sort of stuck in linear time. So I needed some semblance of it, and it came in the forward-march of the Sundays. But it was my first time to explore the more metaphorical, poetic, unruly sense of time that shows up in the other sections. Once I got there and realized how wonderful it felt to color outside the lines, I was hooked. I think writing this book in this way allowed me to find a kind of parallel universe – one in which time has no meaning. That has been an amazing discovery for me.

AS: In an interview about your novel *The Secret Keepers*, you expressed some interesting thoughts concerning people who are damaged in one way or another and our relationship to them. Would you expound on that a little?

JM: I think it's a mistake to dismiss or harshly judge people who are damaged. In *The Secret Keepers*, all the characters were damaged and hurt, and in the end they each facilitated the others' personal liberation. I think that happens all the time. You never know who your teacher is; you never know where your liberation is coming from. It's smart not to think you do. In *A Month of Sundays*, I talk about Leroy Begay, a Navajo man I met briefly. Leroy spent thirty-five years as a drunk in the gutter. Then, he had a small experience that allowed him to change completely – essentially overnight. And when he told me about it, he changed me. His story revised my life. If I had dismissed him or not listened, I would have missed out on one of the most profound messages I've ever received. People who have been hurt, and lived with that pain and tried to sort it out, have wisdom. Perhaps they're still working it out, so the external package – the personality, the appearance, the lifestyle – might not be in the best shape, but it's what's inside that counts.

AS: How has losing Shirley changed your thoughts about your own death? And, perhaps more importantly, your own life?

JM: Honestly, after seeing Shirley go through it, I've decided I'd like to skip the whole thing. But since that's probably impossible, I'll just remember and rely on the lessons I learned from being with my sister at the end. Death, especially from a long illness, is something you just have to endure. There is an end to it. It seems better to focus on letting go rather than hanging on. It's an adventure and an exploration, if you can look at it that way. And, oddly enough, I feel

in my heart that the right person to help you through it will show up in the nick of time.

AS: What are you working on now? Are you still teaching? If it's not too personal, did your 'eccentric union' manage to sort itself out in spite of, or perhaps because of, all you've been through over the past few years?

JM: I've just finished a novel called *Anybody Any Minute*, which I have been working on off-and-on (including the time I spent with Shirley) for ten years. It's a coming-of-age comedy about a menopausal New Yorker who bags her job, possibly her marriage, and her sophisticated city life and moves to the boonies of upstate New York to reinvent herself as an organic farmer. She meets a couple of local yokels – an ex-biker and a chainsaw sculptor – who change her life in unexpected ways. I am about to send it out and see if anybody likes it. I want to put together a week-long art and writing workshop for women who feel brave enough to dive into their own creative needs but don't know how. For a 'day job,' I teach various styles of writing full-time in a community college in Albuquerque. And yes, Robert and I are still together, still sorting it all out on a minute-to-minute basis, and still groping our way through the Big Maze of Marriage.

AS: Your book is remarkable for its unapologetic intensity, and for your willingness, both as a writer and as a human being, to remain open to experience. The journey *A Month of Sundays* records, like life itself, steadfastly resists easy summation (something I love about the book) and is, of course, still subject to revised perception. But what do you especially hope your readers will take away from this book?

JM: That there are creative ways to deal with everything. That accepting ourselves and others is healing. That we are not constrained by our roles, linear time, or our own perceptions. That it's worth it to throw yourself headfirst into the biggest questions or problems you can drum up (or life drums up for you). And most important, that love is everything.

Ann Stapleton reviews Julie Mars' *A Month of Sundays* on p. 82