

A Remarkable Woman¹

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
May 14, 2023 – The Fourth Sunday of Eastertide – Mother’s Day
Text: Proverbs 31:25-31

One of my mother’s most prized possessions within the narrow confines of the life she carved out for herself in the nursing home was a small pincushion. Shaped like a tiny pillow, about two inches square, it is made of homespun-like cloth in an ordinary shade of beige. On one side a simple design of blue flowers with trailing vines in crewel embroidery offers the only decoration, the blue of the flowers accentuated by tiny tassels of the same blue yarn adorning each of its four corners. Most likely dating back to her quilting days of 25 or more years ago, I saw that pincushion for years in my mother’s house. Usually ensconced in one of her several sewing baskets or tucked into a drawer since her move to my home a half dozen years ago, this very ordinary pincushion became a key piece of my mother’s life as it drew to a close in ways I am just starting to fathom.

That the pincushion made it through all the many moves Mom made over the years, and the downsizing of her possessions which each required, is nothing short of miraculous. The unremarkable pincushion lived a life of obscurity in the townhome she and Dad rented in central Pennsylvania following their move back from Maine. It fulfilled its intended role as a holder of pins and needles for my mother while she sewed. An avid practitioner of needlepoint in her younger years, as well as a novice quilter, the pincushion was her companion on many an evening as she stitched away at one of the many exquisite needlework scenes she created over the years. When she first began to needlepoint, my Dad was still living and they were enjoying retirement to the fullest in the small Pennsylvania town they now called home. Mom volunteered at the church as well as the local hospital, the garden club and the historical society. Dad would drive her to each, either dropping her off to return later or waiting for her, spending the time in the office supply store, the hardware store or the old fashioned five and dime lined up next to each other on the town’s main street.

My dad’s primary hobby, after decades associated with the steel mills of Pittsburgh, was model trains. He built a huge platform for his train layout in the basement of the rented townhouse where he painstakingly recreated the

¹ Excerpted from the chapter “Shifting Realities: The Pincushion” from an unpublished manuscript entitled HONOR THY MOTHER, by Ruth Shilling Hainsworth, © 2013 by Ruth Shilling Hainsworth.

Pennsylvania countryside in miniature for his trains to rumble through. He built the houses nestled into the fake hillsides he purchased at the train stores he loved and dragged my mother to on the days unfilled by her own activities. He also purchased and built his own locomotives, lovingly painting and polishing each one into life in the miniature world he was creating in the rented basement, next to the water heater and the furnace.

In short, my parents, always hard workers, loved to be busy, even or especially in their retirement years. My mom with her volunteer activities and her needlework and my dad with his trains and driving my mother around built a life together in this small Pennsylvania town that became home after their Maine adventure. It was a life they crafted together and a life they loved, a life I know they thought would just continue on until one day they would just be gone. My father, the epitome of organization and planning, made sure that all of their “final arrangements” were in place, in that they both had current wills and advanced directives. But the idea that one of them would dramatically outlive the other seemed to be nowhere on their radar screens. I’m sure each knew that one of them would outlive the other, for at least a time, but I’m equally sure they could not imagine it would be for more than a few years. Both of them probably assumed that my mother would be the one to die first as she had experienced several serious illnesses and a heart attack before the age of 60 while my father had literally never been ill a day in his life. The 38 year tenure of his career at US Steel as first a laborer in the steel mills and then as a metallurgical engineer specializing in steels used in the food industry saw him take fewer than one week of sick time. Thus it came as no real surprise when after my father’s death my brothers and I discovered that he had actually set up his pension plan and retirement health care provisions expecting to outlive my mother. But real life intruded on dad’s careful plans and, after a brief illness of only a few months, he died in his 72nd year leaving my mother a heartbroken and grieving widow at the age of 69.

Heeding good advice received from many quarters, Mom decided not to make any radical changes in her life and she remained in Carlisle, the small central Pennsylvania town my father had chosen as the place to settle for the final years of the their lives. Dad had been thinking about a move to what would now be called a continuum of care facility newly built in the town at the time of his death. Had he lived another two years, I have no doubt they would have purchased a unit and moved there but it was not to be. Sometimes I ponder

about how different everything in mom's life and mine would have been had that happened. Instead, after his death, my mother set about carving out for herself a new life in the same home where they had crafted a life together. Now she drove herself to her many volunteer activities while the car sat empty in the parking lot. Now she managed the checkbook and washed the car and dealt with the insurance companies and the pension plan and the attorney on her own. For the first time in her life, she was an independent woman. It terrified her and energized her at one and the same time.

The pincushion was there with her, with them, through it all, mute companion to busy days capped off by quiet evenings as mom sewed and dad read. When dad became ill and the routine changed to accommodate the new realities his declining health imposed on their quiet life together, the pincushion no doubt found itself set aside most of the time, picked up only occasionally as they attempted to hang on to some shred of normalcy when mom would find a few minutes to sew while dad dozed in his easy chair, too tired to read, exhausted from the battle with cancer led by an army of drugs waging war in his body. Then, after dad's death and mom's slow metamorphosis into an independent woman, the pincushion witnessed her new life taking shape. It companioned her during the long hours of needlepointing she used to fill her evenings, accompanied by the hum of her favorite television programs in the background and punctuated by phone calls from myself and my brother.

Through it all, the pincushion was there, silent sentinel to the changes in my mother's life. It was there as the years passed and she gradually became more frail physically and mentally. It sat on the sofa next to her sewing in the upstairs sitting room as she fretted over paying the bills each month, watching as the function of money in her daily life became more and more difficult for her to understand and manage. It was waiting in the sewing basket for her to return each night to the recliner my brother bought her the Christmas after dad died, ready to companion her through another round of sewing. Gradually it found itself set aside more and more often as mom's fingers increasingly found the joy of needlepointing replaced with frustration over the pain in her arthritic fingers and their increasing inability to convince the beautiful threads to find the proper place on the linen before her. It rested undisturbed in the sewing basket during mom's final years of lonely confusion in the home she loved but could no longer manage alone. Somehow, when the time came to pack up the house and dispose of much of the stuff of the lifetime my parents had built together, the little

pincushion survived the relentless purge of “junk” which preceded her move to my home in Rhode Island.

The pincushion appeared once more as she settled into the back bedroom of my small house which became her new home in her 85th year. No longer her companion for needlepointing, instead it witnessed her desire to “fix” her clothing by cutting and basting trousers, blouses, sweaters, nightgowns, really any offending garment which had the nerve not to look as she thought it should when she put it on. In its new life in Rhode Island, the pincushion spent part of its time in one of the drawers in the vanity of the bathroom primarily my mother’s, coming out to sit beside her only when the sewing demons of her advancing Alzheimer’s demanded she exact her revenge on whatever garment was offending her demented sensibilities at the moment. It witnessed two more years of her slow decline into the grasping fingers of dementia, culminating finally in a hospital stay in a geriatric assessment unit followed by six months in an assisted living facility ending at last in a shared room in a nursing home. Through it all the pincushion managed somehow to keep its place as her companion. I honestly do not remember packing it at the house in Pennsylvania, but I assume it was at the bottom of the large sewing basket I threw into the back seat of my car as I frantically grabbed for items I thought would ease her transition into my home. Snuggled into the bottom of that same sewing basket is undoubtedly how it made it to the assisted living facility also. The real puzzle I find myself considering is how it made it to the nursing home, because the sewing basket did not. I did not consciously pack it or not pack it. Frankly, it was nowhere within my frame reference as I negotiated each of these incredibly painful moves with and for mom, each against her wishes. But, somehow, this faithful little pincushion managed to stay with her, and as it did, its role in her life changed.

The pincushion returned fully to my awareness during one of my visits with mom in the nursing home after she had been living there about two years. Visiting every other day, I knew I was watching her health fail as rapidly as her dementia was advancing. Ever resistant to ask for or accept assistance from “the girls” as she called the CNA’s who staff the floor on which she resided, my visits in the last year of her life were primarily devoted to helping her tidy her living space and even herself. I had realized at least a year earlier that the pincushion was no longer functioning as a pincushion but rather as a portable miniature phone book of sorts since she had scrawled my phone number on it in several

places. Instead of one of the many pieces of paper on which my phone number was written in my handwriting or hers, she always chose to take the pincushion with her to the phone in the hallway outside her room to call me. Mom did not have her own phone on the recommendation of the facility and her doctor since she had no real understanding of the passage of time and would have been calling me at all hours of the day or night. And she would have been calling my brother when she couldn't reach me. Her own phone would thus have only deepened her frustration and anger at her situation, and, the experts thought, hold her back from acclimating to life in the nursing home. Like so many decisions before it that I had already needed to make, this was a difficult one. But I made it, and then lived with the unique reality it created for her and for me.

I am not sure why she found the pincushion a more reliable receptacle for retaining my phone number, except for the obvious explanation that it was too big to lose easily. I also find myself wondering if its companionship for so many years also made it seem a trusted friend in a world increasingly strange and alien as the death grip of Alzheimer's encircled mom's world ever tighter. Mom had confided tearfully to me that she had had several experiences of waking up in her room not knowing where she was or how she got there. She admitted that there had been times she did not even know who she was, let alone why she was where she was. In her confusion she looked for me and found me somehow in the numbers scrawled on the side of this old, worn pillow of a pincushion.

This all became clear to me one day as I was cleaning the basket attached to her walker and I had to pick up the pincushion permanently nestled into one corner of the basket to set it aside so I could clean up the week's detritus of spilled drinks, half eaten cookies and melted candy. As I did, I felt a sharp sting in my finger. Intent on the task before me, I quickly set it aside and continued with my cleaning. When the basket was once again ready to reclaim its usual occupants, I reached for the pincushion only to be stung once again, this time more sharply than the last. "Ow!" I said out loud.

"It does that to me all the time," mom responded. "I don't know what's wrong with it."

"It probably still has a few pins in it," I answered. After my two episodes of being "bitten" by the pincushion, I decided I needed to remove those pins so that mom would be safe with her portable pincushion phonebook, so I set to work.

“What are you doing with that?” mom asked sharply. “I need that. Don’t get rid of that! It’s my treasure! Please! It’s my treasure!” She was worried it too would land in the wastebasket since she had seen me throw into it much of what had been in the basket because the drink she had carried from the dining room had spilled all over everything, soaking her collection of old crossword puzzles, dining room notes, wipe cloths and old candy in flat gingerale.

“I would never throw it out, mom. I know how much you love this,” I soothed. “I just don’t want it to bite you like it just bit me!”

“Oh, well, that would be good,” she responded and then returned to her own fussing with some papers she had taken from the drawer of her night stand. So, thinking the task ahead of me would be a simple matter of extracting a few pins and needles, I gingerly started pulling at the sharp points protruding from the pincushion.

“That’s odd,” I thought to myself. “All the points are coming from the inside of the pillow. No one wonder it keeps sticking me, and no doubt mom too. But why are the pointy ends sticking out of the pillow? Shouldn’t it be the flat ends?” Clearly it wasn’t, so I set to work to rid the pillow of its booby-traps. In a matter of one or two minutes I extracted two or three pins and at least two dozen needles of all sizes. That was surprising enough. More surprising was that there were clearly many, many more needles embedded inside the faithful old pincushion. I’m not sure how much time passed as I became more and more intent on the task at hand, gently squeezing and kneading the pillow to force the long interred needles to the surface so I could pull them out. At one point I realized that one particularly large embroidery needle was literally entangled with a smaller one inside the pillow. It was no easy feat to disentangle them, removing first the small one which had managed to thread itself through the eye of the large one. I don’t know how many needles I ended up extracting from the old pincushion. I stopped counting at 40. The more I kneaded and folded the little old pillow, the more the deeply embedded needles made their way to the surface. Finally, after almost a half an hour, it seemed as though I could fold the pillow totally in half with my fingers and not get bitten, so I guessed I had gotten them all. Mom meanwhile had been watching me intently, but without comment except for one “oh for heaven’s sake,” her standard statement of exasperation. Now as I finished, she renewed her pleas that I not do anything to her “treasure.”

“I won’t, mom. I promise. I just want to make sure it’s ready for you, just the way you like it,” I assured her. Thus, my gentle ministrations continued with the old pincushion which itself had been doused in the stale gingerale that had remitted its fellow occupants of the walker basket to the trash. I took a wet washcloth and gently massaged the gingerale soaked portions of the pillow. Then I took another towel and rubbed it as dry as I could. Finally, I took a pen from my purse and carefully retraced the numbers of my phone number which had become faded, almost worried into oblivion as my mother clutched it during her frantic phone calls to me over the last three years. Then, I made one addition – my name in big bold letters – “R-u-t-h-i-e”. Satisfied with my labors, I handed it back to her, now settled comfortably once again into her freshly tidied easychair, herself also refreshed by our recent trip to the bathroom where she allowed me to help her into fresh undergarments and let me brush her hair, now so thin and yet incredibly soft.

“There it is, just like I promised,” I said. “Good as new. And see, there’s my phone number and my name.”

She took it in her hands and cradled it, her treasure and companion through so much of her life. “Your name! How wonderful! Now it’s even better!” she smiled. Now each time I visit, she shows me the pincushion and how good it still looks, even as she reminds me how I fixed it for her. She has no idea it was once a pincushion. She has no idea she somehow stuffed it so full of needles that it was literally stiff and biting to anyone who tried to pick it up. And yet she picked it up and cradled it in her hands as she made her way to the phone in the hall to call me. It had to have pricked her as she stood there. It is simply not physically possible that it didn’t. And yet she still carried it, still grasped it in her hands, heedless of its bites in her overwhelming desire to call me. Sometimes the call was to scold me for whatever had happened that displeased her that day. Sometimes it was to plead with me to help her find another place to live where she could somehow be the person she once was, the person she desperately still wanted to be. And every once in awhile the call was just to tell me how much she loved me. All the while the little pincushion which she saw as her lifeline to me was biting her hand because of all the needles she had forced inside it.

The little pincushion, I realized that Thursday afternoon I spent pulling out the dozens of needles forced deep inside its gut, had been, along with myself, the one constant in my mother’s life. The little pincushion stuffed full of painful

needles was so like my mother herself at this point in her life, filled to overflowing with the constant jabs of confusion and fear as her ability to understand and control her own life slowly ebbed away. It is little wonder that all of our visits had begun to circle around her constant questioning of “why can’t I die?” And although I understood the question and where it was coming from, each time I heard it, a pin pricked my heart. Mom’s question was a sincere, heartfelt question and one no one could answer, least of all me. It was odd that our conversations in those days had become grounded so much in my reassuring her that all this could not go on indefinitely, that God had not forgotten her, abandoning her to a life eternal here on earth in a living death she just couldn’t bear. It was odd to give comfort to one’s mother by assuring her that death was not far away. And yet this was precisely the kind of comforting, precisely the kind of honoring she needed at this point in her life. So it is what I did, time and time again, pricking my heart even as I soothed hers.

So the little pincushion continued its faithful companionship of mom through the last days of her life. It saw her through some of her happiest days and was waiting for her at the end of the saddest. It survived upheavals and moves and even my mother’s dementia driven erratic behaviors to be at the end of her life her “treasure.” The pincushion remained faithful to its job as Mom’s treasured companion until her death and now it sits on top of the bookcase in my study at home, reminding me of her every day.

Amen.