In praise of Mary

As a young child, I witnessed magic taking place everywhere. The walls of our house were made of knotty pine and I saw the faces of animals and people in those walls. I thought that the spirits of the beings who had been buried under the trees would manifest into those branches becoming faces, a feather, or a hoof print. When I was around six, fairies instructed me how to immunize myself against rash from poison ivy. Using my mother's tweezers, I carefully rolled bits of poison ivy within plantain leaves and swallowed these like capsules. I did this every day until they told me that was enough and I've been immune to poison ivy my entire life!

I spent a lot of time with my paternal grandmother, Adeline. She was a self-described transcendentalist and said her "church" was in the garden. I especially loved when she read me poems of Emily Dickenson as well as *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley in which a poor chimney sweep child turns himself into an underwater spirit and had magical adventures. Grandma had a pink rose bush that she had grown from a cutting she had taken from my father's coffin at his funeral. She shared with me that losing my father at the tender age of 40 was the hardest thing she had endured in her life. And that it was OK to talk to and pray with that bush when I missed him, and I did.

I also had a secret friend – Elliot, who was with me at all times. I would talk to him regularly. I could only see him when I went into my mother's bedroom on a sunny afternoon with bright rays of sun streaming in. I would sit at the corner of her bed looking into a full-length mirror at his reflection behind my right shoulder. Hundreds of dust particles would become visible in the air and Elliot's outline would appear. He could not speak but I always knew what he was thinking.

My first grade teacher became concerned about me having an imaginary friend, so my mother took me to talk with our family doctor. After I told him about Elliot, he informed me that when my mother was pregnant with me, my twin brother (who was to be named Elliot) had died in November and I was born two months later in January. That was a magnificent thing because it is very rare for one fetus to live when the other is miscarried. "Elliot is dead"?, I cried! I was inconsolable, I was sure I had lost my guardian angel. I was devastated, and never saw him again. My mother assured me that I still had a guardian angel, that Elliot had been my twin brother and girls always had women as their guardian angels.

We also had a house ghost which my mother had to let out every night, otherwise we would find our door to the cellar unlocked and opened in the morning, letting cold air into the kitchen.

In 1964, along with my siblings, I was re-baptized into the Catholic church at the age of 8. We had been Congregationalists since infancy, but my mother missed her Catholic roots. She became very active in the Holy Rosary church of Russell and taught catechism. I adored my first communion ceremony and felt very holy in my white dress and veil! In 1968, my mother could no longer afford our land taxes so we sold our house and moved from Blandford to Westfield. We joined Saint Mary's church which was a huge congregation with several priests and nuns! I grew to love that church and begged to attend their catholic school, but my mother said she didn't have money for tuition, nor would she accept charity. The sisters would sing for the congregation from above and behind us in the balcony. We were not supposed to turn around to look at them. They sounded like angels to me, I loved them. I attended CCD classes and made my confirmation when I was 14. This rite-of-passage was transformational for me. I seriously considered becoming a nun. Several of the sisters I knew had served in developing countries, one in the Congo! I thought my only other option upon graduating from high school was to get married and have children. Coming from a working class background, it never crossed my mind to even think about having a career. Fortunately, in the tenth grade my

environmental science teacher convinced me to change from a general to a college bound tract and I was the first in my family to get a secondary education.

I continued to attend church on my own all throughout high school while my mother stopped attending church for two reasons: she worked on her feet at Ames department store full time and Thursdays and Sundays were her only days off. Also, the early 70's saw the development of the women's movement and she was upset that women could not become priests. I was involved in church youth group activities, volunteered at the soup kitchen, clothing drives etc. Then I went to college and didn't attend church for four decades.

I've been a content congregant here since July of 2016, but I sincerely miss the presence of Mary. Several Christian denominations regularly pray to Mary, especially the Catholics! Also the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox, as well as some Anglican and Lutheran churches. These traditions emphasize venerating Mary and asking for her intercession, rather than worshipping her, as they believe only God may be worshipped. For them, saying the "Hail Mary" is seen as a way of respectfully honoring Mary the Mother of God, and asking for her prayers on their behalf, similar to how we ask members of our congregation to pray for us or for the people we love.

Mary's status was formalized with the Greek title "Theotokos" (Mother of God) at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, and her veneration grew throughout the early and medieval Church. In 1950, Pope Pius XII officially declared the Assumption of Mary—the belief that she (like Jesus) was taken into heaven body and soul. The formal process of canonization, where the pope officially declares a person a saint, was established much later. Therefore, Mary was not canonized in the same way as other saints, but was and is considered the greatest of all saints by the Catholic church.

Mary is amazing! She keeps making appearances and sometimes the church believes this and sometimes they don't. The Catholic Church officially recognizes 16 Marian apparitions as "worthy of belief" by the Vatican, though 25 more have been approved by local bishops throughout the world, with Our Lady of Guadalupe in1531 being the earliest and Our Lady of Kibeho in 1989 the most recent Vatican-approved siting. These visions, such as Fatima in 1917 and Lourdes in1858 meet strict criteria, confirming supernatural origin and alignment with doctrine. I'll describe the top three sightings:

#1 In December of 1531, Mary appeared to an indigenous man, Juan Diego on Tepeyac Hill near modern-day Mexico City. She instructed Diego to gather roses from the hilltop. Despite the cold December weather, he turned around and found roses in bloom, these were Castilian roses which were not native to this region, but native to Spain. He gathered a bouquet and tucked it inside his robe (or Tilma as it was called) to keep them from freezing and carried them to the bishop. Upon opening his Tilma to show them to the bishop, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was miraculously imprinted on it! The image is still visible today and is housed in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world. I have visited this Basilica and it was indeed breathtaking! Within eight years of her appearance, more than 8 million Aztecs became Christians! The feast day for Our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated annually on December 12. This was the only Marian apparition in which Mary is pregnant, thus Our Lady of Guadalupe is considered "the patroness of the unborn."

Microscopic infrared examination has revealed no brush strokes or paint pigments on the cloak holding the image. Upon testing, the coloring materials were concluded to be neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral dyes. Synthetic coloring is not a possibility either, as it was not developed until three centuries later. How the image was created, and the methodology used to transfer it to the cloak, is nothing short of miraculous. Diego's Tilma that was made of woven Ayate plant fiber. Such materials typically have an expected life of approximately 20 to 30 years. Given that it is almost 500 years old, with no protective varnish, and was kept outside unprotected in the elements for its first

100 years (where it was touched by millions of hands and lips), it is unexplainable how it still exists today.

When viewed from a distance, the coloring in the face and hands is olive, but when viewed up close, it is a gray-white color. It mirrors an effect found in nature whereby colors change when viewed at different angles, such as in the case of bird feathers, butterfly scales, and on the bodies of brightly-colored beetles. This light diffraction technique would be impossible for any artist to achieve in 1531, particularly when attempted on rough fabric.

The image managed to survive an accident in 1791 when a workman cleaning the gold and silver frame accidentally spilled a bottle of nitric acid on it. It is unexplainable how the acid did not destroy any of the delicate fabric, but left only a barely discernible watermark on the image.

An intentional attempt to destroy the tilma took place in 1921, when a bomb concealed in a large vase of flowers placed underneath it was detonated. The explosion managed to break the stained glass windows of the Basilica, and even twisted a heavy bronze and iron cross that sat on the altar nearby, but did not even crack the single thin pane of glass that was protecting the image of Our Lady at the time. Additionally, while the bomb went off during a High Mass, and there was much structural damage, not a single person in the church was injured. You can research and fine many more miracles regarding this Tilma. Today, I'm wearing my Mary of Guadeloupe necklace I purchased there.

#2 In 1858, in Lourdes, France, 18 apparitions of the Virgin Mary appeared to a 14-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous. who was out gathering firewood. The first occurred on February 11 and the last on July 16, 1858. During these events, Mary appeared in the opening of a cave and identified herself as the "Immaculate Conception". The apparitions led to the creation of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, a popular pilgrimage site for the healing waters that emerged from a spring Bernadette dug at Mary's instruction. After an investigation, the Catholic Church declared the apparitions worthy of belief in 1862. Bernadette was later canonized as a saint.

#3 In Portugal in 1917, World War I raged throughout Europe, Portugal found itself unable to maintain its initial neutrality and joined forces with the Allies. More than 220,000 Portuguese civilians died during the war, thousands due to food shortages and thousands more from the Spanish flu. A few years before, a revolution had led to the establishment of the First Portuguese Republic in 1910 and a new liberal constitution was drafted under the influence of Freemasonry, which sought to suppress Christian faith from public life. Catholic churches and schools were seized by the government, and the wearing of clerical clothing in public, the ringing of church bells, and the celebration of public religious festivals were banned. Between 1911 and 1916, nearly 2,000 priests, monks, and nuns were killed by anti-Christian groups. This was the backdrop against which, in 1917, a lady believed to be the Virgin Mary appeared to three shepherd children — Lucia dos Santos age 10, and her cousins Francisco and Jacinta Marto, 9 and 7 — in a field in Fátima, Portugal. One of those children, St. Jacinta, claimed that the holy mother's most important message was: "that we should pray the Rosary every day."

To prove that the apparitions were true, the lady promised the children that during the last of her six appearances, she would provide a sign so people would believe in the apparitions and in her message. What happened on that day — Oct. 13, 1917 — has come to be known as the "Miracle of the Sun," or "the day the sun danced." According to various accounts, a crowd of some 70,000 people

— believers and skeptics alike —gathered to see the miracle that was promised: The rainy sky cleared up, the clouds dispersed, and the ground, which had been wet and muddy from the rain, dried up. A transparent veil came over the sun, making it easy to look at, and multicolored lights appeared across the landscape. The sun then began to spin, twirling in the sky, and at one point appeared to veer toward the earth before jumping back to its place in the sky. The stunning event was a direct and very convincing contradiction to the atheistic regimes at the time, which is evidenced by the fact that the first newspaper to report on the miracle on a full front page was an anti-Catholic, Masonic newspaper in Lisbon called O Seculo. As in Mexico, a steep return to Christianity in Portugal and around Europe took place because of this miracle. It seems Mary chooses to intervene when most needed to prove the existence of Christianity.

In life, Mary never hesitated to do whatever was necessary to protect her family. She left Nazareth and gave birth to her firstborn in a manger, without her mother or her friends to support her. Together, she and Joseph moved to Egypt to avoid her son being killed by Herod, without knowing the language or having any friends in that country. There, they waited until it was safe to return to Nazareth in Galilee. Scholars believe they had a few more children and that Joseph died when Jesus was around 12.
Mary was brave! Even after being “warned” by Simeon, she supported Jesus in his difficult mission. She let him go when the time came. She witnessed all his tortures without faltering. She accompanied him throughout his Passion. She took refuge in prayer, and while some disciples hid out of fear, she stayed at the foot of the cross to show her son her boundless love. Mary followed Jesus’ example and forgave those who killed her son. There’s no evidence of her exhibiting anger or thirst for vengeance; on the contrary, her unlimited and unconditional forgiveness was the antidote for her sadness, and that’s in great part why she is the image of mercy.
In the four continents I’ve traveled in, I’ve seen countless paintings and statues of Mary. When I was in Ephesus, Turkey (which in Mary’s time was part of Greece) I visited her last home that the apostle John had built for her as a promise requested by Jesus for John to look out for her after his death. It was a small, simple house of stone and when I stepped out of the back door, I saw the image of Jesus’s face outlined in a rock on the outside wall. I still regret that I did not take a picture but I was obeying the rules of no picture taking. My Turkish co-worker’s who were with me – all Muslims, were as excited to visit there as I was. The Quran holds Mary (Maryam) in extremely high regard, calling her the "most important woman to have ever lived," and dedicates an entire chapter (Surah 19) to her story, which details her miraculous conception of Jesus as a virgin through divine command, emphasizing her purity, piety, and role as a sign for humanity, and establishing her as a supreme female role model in Islam. Likewise, my travels throughout India found that the Hindi’s view Mary as a powerful, benevolent divine mother, a holy woman, and an intercessor, often fulfilling roles similar to their beloved Hindu goddess the Divine Mother Shakti, who embodies universal love, fertility, and protection.

Maybe you had the kind of mother who showered you in love and encouragement or you had one with many problems of her own so there was little time for you. Perhaps you had a non-biological mother who took you in and gave you love and guidance. Or you found mother figures in aunts or teachers. As a Catholic child, I was encouraged to pray to Mary for guidance as do countless people throughout the world. I believe that is why our magical Mary keeps coming back to us, because we need our holy mother.

The initial words of the prayer “Hail Mary” are taken directly from the Gospel of Luke in the Bible, combining two key moments. First, the Angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary ("Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you"- Luke 1:28) and words from her cousin Elizabeth who exclaimed to Mary ("Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" - Luke 1:42). The prayer's later additions, like "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us," developed from scriptural concepts with regional variations.

We will be saying *The Hail Mary* which is in your bulletin, as our benediction:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death. Amen.