

Aunt Eileen: *Everyone Needs a Hero*



Everyone needs a hero.

Mine is Aunt Eileen.

Some people shape your life not through grand gestures or dramatic moments, but through the steady, faithful witness of how they live. Aunt Eileen is one of those people. Her influence has never been loud or self-promoting. It has been quiet, consistent, and deeply rooted in the fundamentals of character. She has taught by example, simply by being who she is over time.

Aunt Eileen was born in Nebraska and raised in the rhythms of farm life, a world that teaches patience, responsibility, and respect for what truly matters. Work was expected. Life was not romanticized. Values were formed early and tested often. That kind of upbringing leaves a mark, and it marked her in the best possible ways. From an early age, she learned endurance, humility, and the discipline of showing up day after day, whether the circumstances were easy or hard.

She is my father's younger sister. Growing up, they were not especially close. Childhood dynamics, personality differences, and the quiet complexities that often shape family relationships created distance between them early on. But time has a way of clarifying what matters most, and life has a way of softening edges that once seemed fixed.

What became clear as the years unfolded was this. Aunt Eileen possessed a grounded optimism that did not depend on circumstances. It was not naïve, and it was not fragile. It was forged in

reality, shaped by work, loss, responsibility, and perseverance. If I had to choose one word to describe her, it would be grounded. If I were allowed a second, it would be hopeful.

Not the shallow hope of wishful thinking, but the durable hope of someone who refuses to let hardship define her spirit. She is, without exaggeration, one of the most optimistic people you could ever hope to meet, not because her life was easy, but because she learned early how to live faithfully within it.

Motherhood and Heartbreak

Aunt Eileen married Uncle Bill, and together they raised three children, Billy, Timmy, and Kathy. Our Colorado cousins. Visiting their home was always an adventure, filled with energy and warmth. They were roughly our age, close enough that time together felt natural and easy.

Aunt Eileen raised three remarkable children, all successful in their own right. That outcome was no accident. It reflected years of consistency, care, and moral grounding.

Life, however, brought a sorrow that cut deeply. For reasons the family does not fully understand, Billy broke ties abruptly with Aunt Eileen and with the rest of the family. There is conjecture, perhaps related to his marriage, but conjecture is all it is. What remains is the silence. For decades now, Billy has not spoken with her.

This has been a grave wound. It is the kind of loss that could harden a heart. It did not harden hers. She continues to love Billy. She prays for him. She hopes for restoration. We all do.

Loss, Work, and Reinvention

Aunt Eileen's life held other hardships as well. In a tragic car accident, Uncle Bill was gravely injured and ultimately lost his leg. He was a good man in many ways, but he struggled with alcoholism, and the strain eventually dissolved their marriage. It was a painful and defining season.

Later, she married Kenzie, a Marine who served in World War II at Iwo Jima. He was one of the men who drove the boats onto the beaches. A brave man. A steady man. A man who carried the wounds of war with quiet dignity.

Kenzie had a long history in commercial construction. Together, he and Aunt Eileen built a residential construction company in Grand Junction, Colorado. For a time, the future looked promising. Anticipated shale oil development brought real hope and momentum. They invested deeply, believing the work would endure.

Then the investment never came. The economy flattened. The business collapsed. They were forced to file. Years of work and hope were lost. It was devastating.

Leaning into Life

When Kenzie and Aunt Eileen came together, they also had a son, Les. I do not know Les as well as the others, but I know him well enough to say this. He is a fine man and a reflection of the values with which he was raised.

After losing their business, Aunt Eileen and Kenzie chose not to retreat. They bought a beat up little RV and spent several years traveling the country. Even as Kenzie's health declined, they made the most of every mile. They studied genealogy, stayed curious, and remained deeply connected.

They would roll through Olympia, where we lived, and those visits remain some of my most cherished memories. In the midst of loss and uncertainty, Aunt Eileen did not complain. She simply lived.

Faith, Family, and Courage

After Kenzie's death, finances remained deeply depleted. Aunt Eileen moved into government subsidized living, a modest residential community of elderly men and women living with similar limitations. What could have been isolating became connective. She found community, friendship, and spiritual depth.

In this later season, Aunt Eileen and my father found each other. Through shared hardship and shared faith, old wounds softened. They spoke openly. They listened. My father often said he had finally found his sister.

Aunt Eileen's body has aged, in part due to diabetes. She is losing her eyesight and walks with a walker. Yet her soul sees clearly. Her heart resonates with the world around her. Though she walks with assistance, she walks with courage, grounded in what truly matters.

Alaska: A Gift of Presence



In 2018, my mother gave Aunt Eileen a remarkable gift. She paid for her to join us on a trip through the Inside Passage of Alaska.

At the time, it felt generous. In retrospect, it feels almost providential.

We had the quiet joy of having Aunt Eileen with us for that journey, and it quickly became clear that we were the ones who had won the lottery. Her presence transformed the trip. Her delight, her gratitude, and her steady joy eclipsed even the grandeur of the scenery unfolding around us. And that is saying something, because Alaska has a way of humbling you with its beauty.

I will never forget watching her take it all in. The mountains. The water. The vastness. But more than that, the companionship. The shared meals. The conversations. The simple pleasure of being together. She carried herself with the same quiet attentiveness she brings to life, receiving each moment as a gift rather than a given.

There was something deeper happening on that trip as well.

My mother had recently experienced significant loss. Aunt Eileen, though actually younger, had endured that loss earlier. She had lost Kenzie first. Both women were now facing life alone after profound grief, standing on similar ground but at different points along the same road. In Alaska, there was an unspoken kinship between them, not rooted in comparison or sorrow, but in understanding.

What struck me most was how Aunt Eileen, having walked that road longer, seemed naturally to lead the way. She watched over my mother in subtle but meaningful ways. Encouraging her. Bolstering her spirits. Gently redirecting her attention toward what was still good, still beautiful, and still worth savoring.

She did this without instruction or fanfare. It is simply who she is.

That trip did not erase pain for either of them. But it built something enduring. It lifted their spirits. It reminded them, and all of us, that even after profound loss, life still holds beauty, connection, and joy.

When I think back on Alaska, I remember the scenery. But what stays with me most is Aunt Eileen's smile, her laughter, and the way her presence made the experience richer for everyone.

What an incredible privilege it was to share that time with her.

And what an encourager she has always been.



Rich Beyond Measure



We had Aunt Eileen stay with us last year. I watched her rise each morning, steady herself, and step outside. Though her vision is limited, she could still see beauty. She could feel the sun. She spoke only of gratitude. Never complaining. Never bitter.

When I need courage, Aunt Eileen is a phone call away. Her words carry weight because she has lived them. I often say, if Aunt Eileen can see the sunshine, why can't I.

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-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

If she can walk with faith, why can't I.

She may be poor by bank account standards, but she is rich in heart, rich in joy, rich in encouragement, and rich in inspiration. Those riches will go with her.

She will leave this world knowing she did not leave behind wealth, but something far greater. A legacy of love.

I love you, Aunt Eileen.

