

# An Elegy for My Sister Anne

## And a Love Letter to My Mom

By Dan Ofstedal – January 18, 2026 <sup>1</sup>

*And in my hour of darkness  
She is standing right in front of me,  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.*  
—The Beatles, “Let it Be”

August 6, 2012

It was a Monday. That’s the day I got the phone call. My sister Anne was in the hospital. It didn’t look good. She had suffered a stroke—technically a brain aneurysm—earlier that day.

Anne lived on the Upper West Side in Manhattan with her husband and two children, Christina and Dustin, both teenagers at the time. She worked for a nonprofit that facilitated academic exchanges between various Asian countries and the U.S., and she had just returned from a trip to China, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

My younger sister Ruth booked me a seat on the first available flight to New York, departing a few hours later. It remains the only time I have flown first class, and the woman seated next to me was determined to consume as many free alcoholic drinks and snacks as possible. It was a fun competition between her and a friend, she told me.

Upon arrival at JFK, I took a cab to St. Luke’s–Roosevelt Hospital (now Mount Sinai West), near Columbus Circle. Anne’s husband, Lu Wei, was there. Anne was non-responsive, with a breathing tube keeping her alive. I met with a neurosurgeon who patiently explained that Anne had no brain activity and that there was simply nothing more they could do. A bit later, my brother Joe arrived, and then Ruth. Together we continued the conversation with the doctor. There were no decisions to be made, and it would take about two days for the declaration of death process to be completed and then life support removed.

It was late, and Joe and I left for the Seafarers International House in the Gramercy neighborhood, a no-frills hotel with shared bathrooms that had housed Norwegian and Swedish sailors and immigrants since 1873.

Growing up in the 1970s, Anne was two years older than I. As the oldest, she was always the one to blaze the teenage trail. She introduced me to the music of Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, and Neil Young. Like the music, she embodied an openness to new ways of thinking, well beyond that of our household.

Tuesday morning we all gathered back in Anne’s room at the hospital ICU. Lu Wei had spent the night there.

Our mother had suffered a stroke a few days earlier in St. Paul, and was hospitalized there. She was diminished by strokes and Parkinson’s—her doctors weren’t sure she should travel. But under the

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circumstances they agreed to discharge her so she could fly to New York. My parents flew to New York later that day, arriving late.

I was in the hospital room the next morning when they arrived. I stood near the door as mom walked stiffly through the door and to the right toward Anne's hospital bed. When she arrived at the bedside, she began stroking Anne's hair, touching her face, and speaking quietly to her firstborn as if she were a child home from school with a fever. Her actions were effortless, familiar. She didn't express anger. She wasn't mired in sorrow. She simply was her enduring, authentic self: mom. Nothing more, and nothing less.

I knew I was witnessing something incredibly profound, and real.  
And for years, I would ponder it.

Anne continued to blaze her own trail, leaving college early to learn Chinese and teach English in Taiwan. After returning to finish her degree and earn a master's in Chinese, she returned to Asia, this time to China, first employed by one nonprofit and then by another. Years later she would return to the States, Chinese husband in tow.

That Wednesday, a few of us—including mom—went outside for a short walk around the hospital. It was hot. After about half a block, she became exhausted and could no longer walk, or even stand. I was concerned that she might be having another stroke. There was no option but to call for an ambulance—from the hospital itself, which was at least convenient.

And so my mother was taken to the emergency room on the first floor, while my sister lay upstairs on the fifth floor, in the neurology ICU.

In 1988, I went to China and together with Anne traveled extensively. She was comfortable there, even at home. She spoke the language fluently and without any accent. Traveling in remote areas, after a night of sleeping on the floor of a packed train, she would walk into the kitchen of a restaurant to make sure it was reasonably clean before deciding we could eat there.

Fortunately mom was diagnosed with a urinary tract infection, rather than another stroke. She was treated and released later that day.

All that week, Anne's friends welcomed and supported us. Within a couple of days, they had offered us apartments to stay in, and we moved from hotels into their homes.

There was a steady stream of family and friends visiting the hospital room. People told stories, sang songs, laughed, and shared food. We even sang "Happy Birthday" to Anne—it had been her birthday on Sunday, the day before her stroke. It was a week-long celebration of life, and a slow goodbye. We were grateful for that time, knowing it would soon end.

In contrast to Anne's ICU room, most of the patients on the floor had few or no visitors. There was no one to sit with them, talk to them, be with them. At least Anne was going out with a bang rather than a whimper, I thought.

Joe and I each spent a night in Anne's room so she wouldn't be alone. On my night, the Jamaican nurse told me that Anne's spirit was present and that she could communicate with her. I didn't know whether I

believed that literally, but the nurse was caring and present with Anne in a way that mattered. Her words were comforting, and I thanked her.

Anne was living in Beijing during the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre in early June, 1989, when anti-government protesters were shot and killed in the hundreds if not thousands. She was close enough to see the protests, which had started in April, and was interviewed on CNN.

At the hospital, we began planning the funeral. My dad had spent his career as a Lutheran minister. So he had planned hundreds of funerals, and that gave him the tools he used to move through the week, and through his grief. Every detail mattered and was discussed at length. We spent hours drafting and editing the family eulogy, which I was to deliver at the funeral.

Dad and I found ourselves talking a few times, just the two of us. We agreed that wherever Anne was—if anywhere—she was OK. She wasn't missing out on anything. Only those left behind suffer. We were comforted by this.

Anne had a knack for giving the perfect gifts. Everything from clothing to luggage. Because she knew I was a classic rock fan, she gave me the biography *Pink Floyd*; because I enjoyed fiction, she gave me John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*.

Thursday at noon, Anne was declared to be legally dead. However, because she was an organ donor, life support was retained during the organ matching process. And so, for another day or so, Anne continued in her state of limbo.

Very late Friday night—actually around three o'clock Saturday morning—we followed as orderlies pushed Anne's hospital bed out of the ICU, down the hallway, into the elevator, and through another corridor, where we came to a pair of closed doors. Beyond them was a surgical bay, where her organs would be removed and transported to recipients.

There, at those doors, we said our final goodbyes.

In 1990 I took another trip to China, and Anne and I rode dusty trains and then busses deep into the Gobi Desert, where mud-rammed remnants of the Great Wall are over two thousand years old and many of the people had never seen someone with blonde hair.

It was hot that Monday in August. Fans were blowing in the Advent Lutheran Church as I delivered the family eulogy. Anne's friends and colleagues had come from near and far—from every chapter of her life, just as they had filled her hospital room all week. After the service, we carried the casket down the steps to the street, and into the hearse. Joe stood in the street and watched, for a long time, as it drove north on Broadway.

After Anne died, heart-felt tributes poured in from around the world. Her employer later assembled them into a book, nearly three hundred pages long, with chapters titled *Tributes from India*, *Tributes from Vietnam*, *Tributes from Japan*, and so on.

1991, Anne and I traveled to Asheville, North Carolina, to visit her friends—Steven and Ada—and their new baby Mara. They lived part-time in the Dominican Republic, Ada's native country. In their backyard,

between the branches of a pine tree, we gathered around the baby and sang a single note together in a droning unison. A ritual.

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I was lucky to have Anne as a big sister. She blazed the trail, and I simply walked behind, noticing the wonder along the way. And her journey, which for several years took her far and wide, literally and otherwise, eventually brought her back to where she started: to a family of her own, with children to love unconditionally. And I am comforted in knowing that her love is always with them, with her grandchildren she never got to meet, and with all of us who were part of her life. This is her final, enduring, gift.

And I was fortunate to have a mom who, even in the darkest hour, embodied true love; true maternal caring. Stroking Anne's hair, touching her face. Speaking words of comfort. With no complaints. Simply being who she always was: a mother with her child.

It took me years to understand what I witnessed that night. My mother was teaching me, one final time, what I believe Anne had already learned and lived: how to be fully present. How to meet reality without resistance, how to do what is ours to do, and how to love without asking anything in return.

Love ties everything together. It doesn't argue with reality. It doesn't demand answers or fair outcomes. And it's always available.

That bond doesn't break. It doesn't depend on words or explanations. It doesn't require both people to be conscious, or even alive. It simply *is*—the way Anne was simply present in the world, the way my mother was simply present at that bedside.

And sometimes, when I'm with my own children and grandchildren, I remember that I too am part of this. I'm taking my turn at something that has no beginning and no end—a connection that exists whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we're together or apart, whether we're alive or gone.

Thank you mom.

And thank you Anne.

