Columns



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> Do not go gentle into that good night.
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
> —Dylan Thomas

There are, of course, many ways to rage against the dying light. Our Sister Mary Rose Noonan exemplified one. Having lost a leg and 10 fingers to scleroderma, she still managed her camera adroitly the day she photographed a sister ensemble singing in our motherhouse chapel.

When she finished, the photographer turned around to find the chapel crowded and — where was a seat for her? Right with us in the front row. We shuffled, waved her over, and she plopped down next to me, resting her head on my shoulder.

And there we sat through song after song in the motherhouse chapel, my arm wrapped around Mary Rose. Call it the last gathering, one friend leaning on another's chest.

Before long, Mary Rose lost her other leg, was confined to a wheelchair, and looked forward to an electric model. It was long in coming. All the while, she continued her monthly notes to our community — raging against the dying of the light with stubs of fingers.

Before the new chair arrived, Mary Rose went without it into the Eternal Light.

Sister Helen Hart also raged against the dying of the light. For months she tottered with a cane in each hand. Left, right, into her car, wherever she needed to go.

Then she fell. That day her independence came to an abrupt end. An ambulance took her to a nearby hospital, and five days later to an inadequate nursing home where she raged against her deteriorating condition, the dying of the light.

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A priest friend anointed her, while three dear friends kept vigil at her bedside. As Helen's breathing slowed, one friend held her hand and prayed, until there was no more breath and Helen slipped into eternal life.

The day of her funeral arrived two weeks later. We came to church in endless numbers to say our goodbyes to Sister Helen. This turned impossible when we viewed the body. It was nobody we knew. The face was enlarged, stretched and pasty white. Her family chatted nearby to cover their dismay.

Midway in his sermon, her priest friend asked us all to stand and quietly consider our misdeeds. He then swept both arms over every last one of us in total absolution, for lapses known and unknown.

Even as we buried Helen, word came about a former member. After years of serving the poor, Mary Jo had just retired in our area. She found a beautiful, roomy, single apartment with a golf course nearby.

She was still the first to help anyone in need. And the last to leave the dance floor.

One night after a day of golf, she slipped into bed for a time of rest. And it turned eternal. No rage against the dying of the light. Only a gentle good night in her pajamas.

And so it happened: One wheeled herself into eternal life. Another wobbled on canes to meet her savior. And a third joined the stars outside her window in the heavenly night sky.

In their going, what did they leave us? There is a soft spot on my left shoulder, near my heart, where Mary Rose rested her head. Because of her, all our hearts are just a little wider.

Sister Helen left us her canes for our buckling knees, and a voice to rage against the dying of the light wherever we see it.

And Mary Jo left a brief message: Play until the end of day.

And then go gentle into that good night.