

WILL YOU...?--MARYLIN NEASE--TEXAS

“Will you give a eulogy at my funeral?” my sister Frances asks me.

“Yes, but remember I’m older than you, so you may need to give mine first,” I reply.

We’ve just completed my mother-in-law’s memorial service, where I gave a eulogy. Our thoughts are on mortality.

It’s been eight years since Frances asked me that question. A few times I’ve pondered the possibility but quickly shifted to comfortable topics. Whether I could lose my sister, then stand up and deliver her eulogy, I don’t know. But I’d try—if life should happen to work out in that order for the two of us. I’d want to keep my word and honor her life.

What would I say about my sister Frances if she, though 20 months younger, should die first?

My outline might start with telling how I happened to be giving her eulogy: how, when, and where she asked me. That should merit a chuckle from my audience.

I could also tell them how she used to pose the two of us in front of people we’d just met and, grinning, ask, “Which one of us is younger?” I could add, “Coincidentally, the answer is ‘She was younger.’ I was supposed to go first.”

Growing up, we shared a bedroom with our other two sisters—she and I are the middle ones, but my fondest memories with Frances are those we’ve made as adults.

One day in our thirties, she and our youngest sister teased me for what I felt was one time too many. I complained. Frances, meaning no harm, told me, “Put on your big-girl panties, and deal with it.” That’s sound advice for adult life. I’ve remembered her words and repeated them to myself when I needed to hear them again.

Since the 1980s, we’ve carpooled several times a year from Texas to Oklahoma to visit family. When our parents had Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s, she and I traveled together often—talking for hours and growing closer.

From 2005-2012, we ran/walked half-marathons, always together, always talking. Because of her hip and my heart, we gave up the distances. Now it’s 5Ks, still side by side, or encouraging one another to catch up.

Gradually, we’ve become more alike. Years ago, we selected the same dress—shopping separately in two cities. She returned hers. Now, we sometimes dress alike on purpose when we host family reunions. Her career was in mortgage banking; mine, in education. I didn’t move into her field, but she now subs and volunteers at her grandchildren’s school.

What I’ve most admired the last few years is her sunny disposition. Despite receiving a health diagnosis that would shake most people, she remains cheerful. I haven’t asked, but perhaps she decided to follow her long-ago advice: “Put on your big-girl panties, and deal with it.”

Yes, Frances is my younger sister. I’m proud of her and thankful she’s still teaching me. For now, we’ll enjoy the present. Our eulogies can wait!