

Kathy A. Fitch  
Long-Form Essay  
August 7, 2018

## A Saint Mary's Woman

Recently, I was wandering the aisles of the local big-box hardware store, searching for nothing in particular--I just find enormous hardware stores interesting and oddly comforting. There's something reassuring about a place in which one can acquire everything from bedding plants to light bulbs, from batteries to camping equipment, and from cinder blocks to ceiling fans, to say nothing of groceries, books, candles, welcome mats, and even bubble bath. I figure that would be the sort of store to be trapped in, if trapped one must ever be.

Details	
Words	1,117
Characters	6,667
Sentences	43
Paragraphs	17
Reading Level ?	11-12th Grade
Reading Time ?	4 mins 4 sec
Speaking Time ?	6 mins 13 sec

And I have been feeling rather trapped as a divorce odyssey that has spanned over two years, now leaves me anxious and fatigued. It didn't help at all that, on this particular day of meandering through rows of lighting fixtures and patio furniture, I was staring my first (and, with any luck, my last) ever deposition right in the face. Since I've been busy being an ordinary suburban mom for many years now, there's nothing particularly scintillating about my life--certainly no skullduggery afoot--but I still really wasn't looking forward to a legal grilling set in motion by the very same guy who stood before an altar wearing a tuxedo on a sweltering day in late May over thirty years ago, joining hands with me and looking into my eyes as we spoke what were, to me, meaningful words about forsaking all others.

I did; he most definitely and apparently with distressing frequency didn't. Nonetheless, I was being forced into the hot seat, and--deposition virgin that I was--imagined the worst. Maybe there was something metaphorically appropriate about pondering all of that while gazing down a long row of assorted screws and nails.

It's pretty easy to feel friendless and abandoned in the midst of the life experience known as a high conflict divorce, and I have certainly not been impervious to those feelings. There's lots of injustice involved in being the betrayed partner, particularly in a long marriage: your longest adult relationship gone in a poof, the immediate and permanent disappearance of all extended family relationships, the sudden threat of economic insecurity after years spent contributing to and sacrificing for the success of the family, and the dawning realization that you've very probably been unfairly scapegoated and

entirely replaced for a long while, and that even though lots of people--a stunning number of people, as it turns out--absolutely knew that, you weren't one of them. Add in the skewed cultural narrative that values immediate individual happiness above all else and regards abandoned spouses with deep suspicion (surely, this line of self-protective thinking goes, only someone unattractive, frigid, mean, or otherwise undeserving of loyalty could be left that way), and it's pretty much the perfect storm.

A few too many new entries have appeared in my "character building experiences" log, of late. Replaced by a current paramour twenty plus years younger than me? One who would not have been old enough to babysit my first child? One who was not yet even born the first time the cheater declared love for me? Check. Discovering lies upon lies that unfolded over many years, and realizing that many more lies will remain forever undiscovered? Check. Single and suddenly contemplating an empty nest alone at nearly 56? More checks. A disheartening tangle of black marks to contend with.

Apparently, the powers that be want me to have lots and lots of character before I'm through. Often. I glance toward the heavens to protest that it's all too much. The incorrigible heavens do not hesitate to respond by sending things like depositions, discovery, crotchety old lawyers (who might, alas, seem appealingly tweedy and professorial in any other setting) and pretrial meetings my way.

But other things come my way, as well--saving things, moments of grace, reminders of who I am and what keeps me going in times of trouble.

Thus it was that while I was standing in the household cleaner section of that big store wondering if my kitchen counter-tops would best be served by application of a cleaner, a polish, or some combination thereof, I was stopped by a man with iron gray hair, piercing blue eyes, and a wonderfully weathered face, who peered at me for just a moment, and then said, simply and without hesitation or doubt, "You are a St. Mary's woman."

I recognized him at once as one of the regular ushers who used to serve at the Saturday evening services I prefer to attend. We chatted for a bit about the new church we are building, the departure of our priest, and the growth and changes in our parish. It was nice to see a familiar face in a moment of inner turmoil, but mostly I loved everything about how he identified me, and so sincerely and spontaneously, too. With such certainty. With such unwavering conviction.

A Saint Mary's woman. It delighted me. I texted a very brief description of the encounter to my daughter, commenting that it was not such a bad way to be known.

She said, and I quote, "Oh my goodness--that made my heart happy."

Then she said, "I can't think of a better way to be known."

As is so often the case, she captured it exactly.

Even there in the sprawling hardware store licking my assorted wounds and contemplating what I was certain was my impending doom, someone stopped me, named me out loud, reminded me that I am a woman of spirit, helped me recall that I am routinely the recipient of grace, and made my heart suddenly and unexpectedly happy, just because.

On the drive home from the store, I thought about Mary and all she symbolizes: motherhood, sacrifice, compassion, love, family, intercession, presence and steady faith through every difficult moment. I also thought about all of the beautiful memories I have of our church and the grade school it used to house: Christmas cookie walks, live nativity scenes, international feasts, Fat Tuesday celebrations, children singing, awkward but charming plays, kick balls flying and voices suddenly unleashed at recess, sunset light streaming through stained glass windows, shimmering bells ringing during the epiclesis of the Eucharistic prayer, the wafer dissolving on my tongue and reminding me to ask what feeds my spirit best, hymns and responses that I absently sing or hum for hours after every service attended, familiar faces, warm greetings, connection, community.

There really is nothing better to aspire to, and no better way to be known. As long as I am a St. Mary's woman at heart, I am--even when wandering the vast expanses of a store that, despite its myriad riches, offers no tool that can repair my current troubles--never truly lost or alone.