

In Memoriam Polly Holmes (1923–2005)

Joan Uda

When I was a law student in Missoula, in about 1974, a friend and I came to Helena to testify on a Polly Holmes bill. Polly was a member of the Montana House, a Democrat from Billings. The bill was, I recall, about spousal assault, and was intended to address the problem of abusive husbands raping their wives. Not the kind of thing the legislative old guard was likely to support; the traditional view was that husbands owned their wives' bodies, and that was that.

This was my first encounter with Polly, a kind-faced and diminutive woman. She thanked us effusively for making the trip and testifying. I can't recall the fate of that bill, but Polly remained in my mind, a big-hearted female David to a gaggle of legislative Goliaths.

In 1976 I became staff attorney in the Governor's office of Budget and Program Planning. By then Polly was in her third term, and I had heard about her from two sources. One was my church, St. Paul's in Helena, where people knew her because her husband was a United Methodist minister, then chaplain at Rocky Mountain College in Billings. The other source was legislators and budget office staff.

At church Polly was known as dear but a bit eccentric; in the old days clergymen's wives didn't run for the legislature. She raised some eyebrows, but that never stopped Polly.

At the capitol, Polly was not popular in many legislative circles. Remarks about her often started with, "That @%&# Polly Holmes." For one thing, she had a firm grasp of her legislative mission and couldn't be bullied, bought, or confused. For another, she violated the unwritten rule that first-term legislators should keep a low profile and not sponsor many bills. Her daughter Kryss suggests



Polly Holmes (1923–2005)

that she wasn't aware of that rule, but I wonder. I can see Polly saying quietly to herself, with that sweet smile of hers, "I'll just introduce a few little bills and see what happens."

The thing is, Polly ran for the House the first time from the south side of Billings, a district with a lot of poverty, because she wanted to speak for the disenfranchised. One of her

campaign slogans was, "Polly for Unpowered People." When she was elected, she was besieged by individuals and groups who wanted her to speak for them. She introduced twenty-one bills her first term, ranging from defense of low-income benefits to creating smoke-free work environments.

Polly had a vision. Her vision was bright, beautiful, uncompromised, and uncompromising, centered as it was entirely in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Her faith was rock-solid, and she knew what compassion looks like in daily life. She simply did everything she could to bring more of that into the world.

Polly's vision and values made her utterly incorruptible, though her incorruptibility had its cost. People got angry at her because of her staunch courage, and her Polly-way of getting in your face with the sweetest smile, the softest voice, and unshakeable determination.

Her opponents, even some who should have known better, stooped to ridicule. Polly introduced too many bills, they said, she was a do-gooder liberal, she was a lightweight, totally impractical

and a little wacky, and she refused to acknowledge when she was beaten.

Her supporters had a vastly different view. Polly was undaunted by conflict, and willing to stand patiently for unpopular causes even in the face of indignation and outrage, and to keep going as long as necessary. As a friend said, “Polly was like a glacier; she moves very slowly and she’s unstoppable.”

I wondered how Polly had handled the ridicule, since I’d never seen her angry at anything other than injustice and cruelty to others. Her adult children Tim and Krys agree. Tim said, “She thought that what people did to her was no worse than what they did to others.” She never seemed to take it personally.

One of the favorite family stories about Polly in the legislature happened when she sponsored Montana’s very first bill to ban smoking in public places. When she rose to support her bill, the opponents all simultaneously lit cigars. With that amazing Polly aplomb and sense of humor, Polly finished her pitch with a medical mask over her face.

Polly was in the legislature for ten years, 1970–1980. Montana was richer for her presence there, though not in terms that everybody appreciated at the time. As Krys pointed out, from the 1880s through the 1950s, Anaconda Copper pretty much owned Montana public opinion, in the form of owning all or most of Montana’s daily newspapers. Only in about 1960 did they sell those papers, and Montana started emerging from under the company creed. Ten years later, amidst a new wave of progressivism and promise in Montana politics, Polly showed up in Helena, where she was intent on doing, to paraphrase John Wesley, Methodism’s founder, “all the good she could, in all the ways she could, in all the places she could, as long as

ever she could.”

Polly’s vision was global as well as local, and sometimes the projects growing out of her vision of peace and justice were huge. In recent years she wrote letters to many world leaders, urging them, under the auspices of the United Nations, to establish councils of the wisest and best people in their countries who would have absolute veto power over war. Polly thought always in terms of what was possible, and this might not be likely, but it was possible.

Polly was also a writer of articles, plays, prayers, a novel, and any other form of writing that drew her interest. When her children were young, Polly wrote and produced plays, and members of Bob’s congregations provided the actors. Krys says, “Things seemed simpler in those days. Somebody would have an idea, Mom would write a play very fast, and they’d just do it.”

One of the stories I like best about Polly’s productions was the time the family plus a bunch of Rocky Mountain College students piled into a college bus and toured one of her plays to churches all through the West, ending up in Carmel, California—an instance of Polly’s positive focus coming real.

Polly’s plays always arose, like her other writings, out of the great wellspring of her faith, the prime mover in everything she did. According to Krys she looked for ways that her plays could help others, not just in their content but in how they were produced. When Bob was an Air Force chaplain, Polly saw clearly the segregation of the black members and their families. She wrote roles for blacks into her plays so that black and white families would be brought together both in the productions and socially.

Polly never seemed to pass an opportunity to do good to the planet as well, in both large and small ways. I remember how she

would save old envelopes, and by cutting and folding she would make new envelopes. In such ways her frugality became an art.

Yet with all the things she did on a wider stage, if Polly were sitting here telling me about the most important things she ever did, my guess is that she would say, “Being Bob’s wife and mother to Steve, Tim, and Krys.” In a way, the remarkable Holmes children are Polly’s greatest legacy: Steve, the United Methodist minister; Tim, the internationally known sculptor, and artist; and Krys, the poet. Steve and Tim are both part of the Montana Logging and Ballet Company, the music and comedy group that is hilarious with a bite. Anybody who hasn’t seen them on stage has truly missed out. More importantly, Polly’s children are as centered in what is good, right, and just as their mother was. She did that mother job very well.

I think there’s more to Polly’s legacy, though. The main theme I find in Polly’s life, and it’s remarkably consistent, is that she was a faithful follower of a loving Jesus, modeling her life on his. He was the source of her courage, her glacier-like unstopability, her sometimes astonishing unflappability, and her marvelous sense of fun.

Polly is one of the people who made God real for me, by showing me how a life looks when someone walks in Jesus’ footsteps. Tim commented, “I think she was a saint. Not that we Methodists have saints, but I think she was one of those people who, when you look back at her life, you know she was a saint.”

Polly was a remarkable role model for how to live close to God. Krys told me her mother’s prayer life was about intimacy with God, and that was my sense too, that her prayer life was about being wrapped in God’s love and internalizing so much of it that she was loving to everyone she met.

Another part of Polly’s legacy is legislative. Because she was in it, the legislature was a better place. Some of her bills passed, many didn’t, but Polly gave some their first legislative outings so that they could become familiar, and years later they passed. More than that, her focus on political possibilities makes her another kind of role model, of one who refused to be discouraged by opposition or defeat and just kept working.

A week or two before Polly’s death and not long after Bob’s, I saw her one day at St. Paul’s, and I said, “Polly, you look remarkably well.” “Oh, I am,” she said, smiling that lovely Polly smile. “I guess there really is something to this God thing.”

I was so grateful that, though Bob was gone, we still had Polly.

Then that virulent, fast-moving infection invaded Polly’s pancreas and killed her almost overnight, on November 25, 2005, at the age of eighty-two. I have no doubt that God was with her in her dying as in her living, inspiring her to write these words that she left by her bedside:

To our dear and trusted friends. . . . You have surrounded us with gentle, loving confidence that has made this a holy, meaningful time for our family. Thank you for all the ways you have served our physical needs and for the love and support in which you hold us all.

I have to agree with Tim. To me Polly *is* a saint, beatified not by a church process but by the way she spent her lifetime following Jesus. Her legacies are great, and many people loved her. She is sorely missed.