

For Marilyn Jean Beverly McMillan, My Beloved Friend  
To her Family and Friends

Marilyn saved my life.

We met during a pre-freshman weekend at Williams College.

It was a kind of casting call. While it seemed to be the usual informational exchange, it was a kind of testing and proving time, too. As we were to be in the FIRST freshman class of women, as the school was about to become co-ed, our ineffables were as subject to assessment as were our bonafides. And in the tumult of parties with young black men, psychological challenges, the lovely but bleak Berkshires, and ancient patrician dormitories, we clicked.

Marilyn was sharp, vivacious, witty, savvy, funny, warm, city sweet, my kind of friend—an uptown girl who knew how to handle herself and others.

And she was beautiful. We connected and stayed in touch. I was in a pre-freshman summer program, getting the lay of the land and she came to visit me – a preview of what we were getting ourselves into. Our friendship flourished.

She understood friendship as a bond. These are my poor words trying to express the enormity of heart, the weightless wonder of her embrace. It was inclusion, it was acceptance, it was sheer joy to be with her and to be of her. She gave me so much, assurance, a home away from home, an anchor, a grounding, a psychic protection when we were under attack, she had my back and she also would put me in check, when I wrote too many wolf tickets.

I cherish the memories of our times in the summers, released from the oppression of barrier breaking and way making, how we thrilled and sang out when the lights of New York City were visible from the bus. Our home, our heartbeat.

We had so much in common. She was a violinist at Music and Art High School. I was a cellist and bassoonist at Queen's Music and Art High School (Andrew Jackson) and had studied violin in elementary school. We were both from New York. She was from Harlem, like my parents, and I had spent the first half of my life in the South Bronx. My grandparents were blocks away from her home, down the hill; my aunt's apartment was around the corner from hers on Edgecombe Avenue.

Both of our fathers worked for the post office at GPO.

There couldn't have been a better friend - brilliant, musical, sassy and fresh and we were pioneers together in a very hostile, challenging environment. Williams College is

ranked number one among undergraduate schools in the U.S. so it's one of the top institutions of learning in the world. She was a political science major and we talked a lot about how we might change the world.

She was a brilliant Bid Whist player, a champion. She tried to teach me, but I couldn't count as swiftly and flawlessly as she could, and she could strategize and smack talk as well. Our cohorts, colleagues and competition waged war on us most times, and unlike today, there were no cheering squads to raise our spirits. We had to educate, entertain and protect ourselves in the early 70s.

This we did. Marilyn was a pioneer, a barrier-breaker having been in the first four-year class of women at Williams and among the first black women to graduate. Ours was the largest class of black graduates for many years.

Marilyn was dedicated to basketball, and introduced me to the renowned Rucker Tournament, for and on which she worked for years. For those who may not know, **Rucker Park** is a basketball court in Harlem at 155th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard across the street from the old Polo Grounds. Players like Julius Erving made their rep there. She did score keeping, set up, admin and infrastructure work. Legends were born and made there, and her work helped make the magic happen. In another era, she may have done more with pro-am basketball, as she was committed to it and happy to serve.

Marilyn danced like nobody's business and wore hot pants like a second skin. And o! She could dance in the times when dancing became a transcendent soul-channeling dimension journeying event and people formed circles around those who the spirit inspired and took personal invention and movement higher – yeah, like that.

She introduced me to the Cheetah Club and other hip spaces where we spun and dipped, touched the floor and whirled in our skyscraping platform shoes.

She shared her home space and her beautiful mother's wonderful cooking. I had the great gift of another place to be, another place to be me – I cherish these memories and am grateful for the soul nourishment.

Her spirit was a resting place for me, an affirmation for me. She knew my frailties and strengths and sustained me and cheered me. Her understanding was wide and deep – from the corporate to street, from the body to the spirit. Food and wine and song.

Every time I hear the phrase “unafraid plain talk” I think of Marilyn's wry take on things her dry, dry humor and her short, deep laugh. She did not suffer fools gladly and she was beautifully honest.

After college, she was a pioneer in Brooklyn; it was an alien land at the time when we got our first apartments. She inspired me to get a bike built and bike around as she so fearlessly did. She learned to use a clutch and then swore by it, driving her VW bug. And after she'd left it, having broken it in, Brooklyn became my last city home ground.

I remember her first gig and meeting her, after I got mine and comparing notes. Ah, the world of work. She happened to work with the husband of my play cousin, so there was joy in another circle being made.

One day I got a call from a guy, who said she met him in a club and said that he should meet me. He was a West Indian poet and she was right, as we became fast friends. O! This what we all want and she gave it --- to be loved and known.

I will miss her voice and how she would make three syllables of my name, how she would imbue the sounds she made with love, how uniquely expressive she was. And how true she was as a human being.

Marilyn is among the few and true who have journeyed to visit me – I am paralyzed and wheelchair bound in a tiny town 4 and half hours away from my beloved city, otherwise, I would be with you now, dear circle of love, sharing tears and smiles.

When she came, she brought bouquets of stories and inoculated me again with joy. We planned to meet again this summer - a trip that would include others and I thrilled at the idea that she would do some of the winery tours and see the pretty Finger Lakes.

Marilyn shared the gift of spirit when it manifested itself in her life, sending me links to those church programs she thought would be moving, telling me about her favorite gospel songs, mailing me programs. This too, I cherish and shall miss.

My profound, tear-drenched condolences:

To her beloved big sister, "I want to be like her when I grow up" Jacquie, thank you;  
To her beloved husband, Karl, thank you;  
To her beloved "mini-me" Kristian, of whom she was so very, truly, madly, deeply proud, thank you;  
and to the many others, like "Ange/Goddy" and Barbara who I've met through the lens of her love-reports, thank you.

I thank you all for sharing my wonderful friend, the woman who saved my life.

I will always love you, may God bless you and yours forever, Marilyn Jean Beverly McMillan.

Lezli Hope White