

Love letter: To Harriet

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 23, 2004](#) issue

Dear Harriet: After we cried over the recent death of one of our heroes and friends, John Tietjen of (Lutheran) Seminex days, we also smiled to read that at the 50th anniversary of his ordination, one week before he died, unsentimental “John told that a year ago at Christmas he had purchased the most expensive gift he had ever given to [wife] Ernestine—and then he broke down and continued ‘because I love her so much’—a diamond pendant. ‘I didn’t know how much longer I might be alive. Now this past Christmas I purchased two diamond earrings for her’—and again he broke down as he said ‘because I love her so much.’ His next words were classic John: ‘Show them your earlobes, Ernestine.’”

Harriet, since you and I were both widowed and each has spent long hours at the bedside of a terminally ill spouse, we can understand the John-and-Ernestine transaction.

This is your “diamond” year. When I tell people this is a “Big 5” year for you, as in 55th or 65th, you inform them: “75th!” Harriet, I love you so much, but, for now, no diamonds.

Six years into retirement I get questions such as, “How do you get so much done?” My answer is “deadlines and Harriet.” Deadlines are burdensome. Harriet is delightful. Daily to come from and return to a fulfilling marriage in a gracious home is spiritually satisfying. That you, often busier than I am, nevertheless have things purring along so creatively saves me hours and provides “up” time for us to spend together. I hope that I also help make your life easier.

Our treasured times begin daily before dawn. John Milton’s line to the effect that an “apt and cheerful conversation” is integral to a good marriage fits us. We start that conversation as we share our morning coffee and four daily newspapers by the fireside. The energies you put into parish choir, tending to friendships, running errands, accompanying singers, serving as impresario and mentor for young musicians, cooking imaginatively, hosting, playing tennis, and being a generous mother, stepmother and grand- (and great-) grandmother dazzles.

This “diamond” year is a time to recall our beginnings: how 55 years ago my roommate and I heard you play your master’s piano recital. Your review: “I must have played well, because I married them both!” That you and my wife Elsa had been close friends made transitions easier after her death, just as my closeness to your husband Don helped you and me start our story together 25 years after his death.

When I was courting you, your brother sent an endorsement: “You’ll find my sister curious about everything!” Right! The range of topics in our “apt and cheerful” conversations is enormous. Your then 91-year-old pastor-father sent me a note mentioning that though the Koenigs had produced pastors in each generation through 450 years, none were “famous” as book writers. “So what no Koenig achieved by consanguinity, Harriet will achieve by elective affinity.” And then, reminding me that I was the one getting the treasure, he spelled out your virtues.

I proposed to you with our now-framed and autographed Bergman-LeGrand song, “What Are You Doing the Rest of Your Life?” We’ve both known tears and laughter, disappointments and successes, downs and ups in our graced lives, but as we light the candle for intercessory prayers, I light one in gratitude for you. Keep making music and letting me in on your world. Congratulations on your achievements, thanks for your partnership, and a toast: “To your health! Happy Birthday.” Love,
Marty