

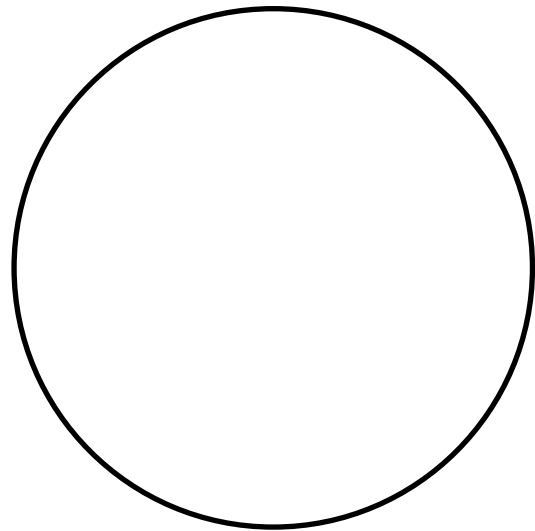
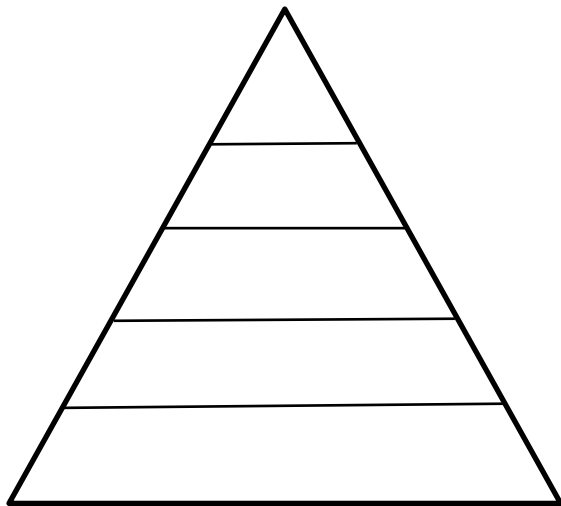
# Maureen: My Life in 3 Symbols

---

This is the shortest autobiography ever written. Here it is: Tails of the Bell Curve, Top of the Triangle and Part of the Circle.

Got it? Clear? Well, maybe a few more words are needed after all.

It may seem odd that I choose to describe myself using geometric shapes. However, I am first a communicator and I often find that the visual speaks louder to me than words. Thus, it is with the three symbols that provide a shortcut to knowing who I am: the bell curve, a triangle and a circle. They are my shorthand for many characteristics.



## **The Bell Curve**

I live in the tails of the bell curves. I am an outlier in terms of my education – PhD; my choice to belong to a church – Roman Catholic; my spirituality – a progressive blend of nonjudgmental, inclusive, love-oriented beliefs not always aligned with Catholicism; the length of my marriage – 53 years; our income – the high end of middle class; our charitable giving – a high priority; my reading choices – serious issues, historical material, primary sources and biographies; my decor choices – antiques and fine furnishings; and my recreation – reading.

Each aspect of life has a bell curve and people fall at various points along it, depending on the subject. This is an important point. People get categorized far too easily on the basis of their identity on one characteristic, whether it be sexuality, gender, politics, religion or finances. This is unfair because there are very few binary issues – if any – and most people live in ever changing areas of the curve.

I am a centrist in many things, Democratic politics, for example, and tend to see both sides of an issue. Ironically, this usually means I am an outlier, but this is nothing new. I have never been “one of the crowd”. As a young person, I was an outsider on the social scene. I lived in a household of adults and therefore I spoke and acted like one. One incident from my freshman year in college perhaps describes my personality best. My dorm mates and I were watching tv and someone said, “Are they going to leave that kid alone?” I hadn’t heard the comment and I said “Are they going to leave that child unattended?” Everyone laughed. I sank in my chair.

It took me a long time to value the things that made me stand out from others my age. When I was exposed to a larger and more diverse population of potential friends, I found others who shared my interests and found interesting those who did not. It turned out that there was nothing *wrong* with me; there just weren’t a lot of my type in my milieu. I found them and no longer felt threatened by others. Most importantly, I married a man who values independent thought and action as much as I do.

I am grateful for the experiences I had growing up. They have given me an understanding and empathy for the many people who are different in our society. I hurt with them when they are made to feel “less than” because I have been there and I know it can break one’s heart.

## **The Triangle**

I have a particular triangle in mind when I picture myself in the triangle. It is called Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and I believe it is one of the most important awarenesses of modern times. Abraham Maslow theorized that life is a process of meeting a series of five fundamental needs that are sequential. Once we accept this, the problems of living in society are easier to understand.

### **1. Physiological Needs**

The most basic and broadest need at the base of the triangle is food and shelter. Without these, nothing else matters. Poverty, then, affects every other aspect of a person’s life and therefore the lives of the rest of us. We all must have our most basic needs met or society cannot function well. It is in our interest to make sure that the poor have a home they can count on, food,

clothing, shelter and a means of livelihood. This is not a privilege. It is basic to our very nature as human beings.

I have been fortunate that I have never had to worry about my survival. I may have concerns about my health, but I have always had a comfortable roof over my head and food on the table. I thank my parents, who were both educators, for there being enough food, clothing and education to prepare me for adulthood. I thank my wonderful husband Paul for working hard at school and in the workplace. Together, we have produced a life filled with niceties and extras like insurance, investments, educational opportunities for our son Mark and our grandchildren, cars, vacations, electronics and attractive decor.

## **2. Safety Needs**

Once provisions are obtained, a person must believe that these are stable and won't be taken away by someone else. Thus, the next need on the hierarchy is for safety. We must have a reasonable belief that we are not going to be harmed. Paul and I have lived in beautiful neighborhoods amid landscapes I have loved to maintain. Beautiful flowers, shrubbery and wildlife give me enormous pleasure. Our neighborhoods have been real communities of friends for us.

Areas of town where safety is problematic are stressful to those who live there. When one's life is at stake, it is hard to think of much else. Again, it is in society's interest to make sure that pockets of poverty do not exist because society at large pays the price in terms of policing and incarceration. It makes more sense to make people's lives better.

## **3. Love and Belonging Needs**

The third rung of the hierarchy triangle is Love and Belonging. Once we believe that people are not a threat, there is the possibility of bonding with them and becoming vulnerable to them. We are irresistibly drawn to experience closeness and oneness. I have been showered with love and been able to pass this love on to others.

Paul is the love of my life and he has given me the gift of himself and accepted me as I am. Once I knew I was lovable to him, I was able to love others and to believe that God loved me. I have not had to earn Paul's love, but I desire to do whatever I can to let him know how much he is loved by me and how worthy he is of love. The joy of my life is to seek out ways to contribute to his happiness.

My life has been filled with people who have loved me. My sister Barbara always believed in me even when others did not. Our family, Mark, Deanna, Ari and Maura, are gifts and we have had friends too numerous to mention. Paul's family embraced me and made me one of their own. It has given me joy to be considered as daughter and sister. I am blessed. We have been able to be sources of love and shelter for many people over the years both literally by sharing our home and relationally by sharing ourselves.

## **4. Esteem**

Once people are part of our lives, we yearn for their approval. Maslow interpreted this as a need for Esteem. It drives many people to wear an outer mask that protects their inner selves.

However, removing that mask is essential to intimacy. It is there that we truly meet and become one in spirit. Acceptance of our core being by at least one person is crucial to our ability to reveal ourselves confidently to others. The family was designed to provide that admiration, but far too often, the family is the last place many people find it and they turn to other groups.

When Paul and I uncovered our masks, we found the freedom to be authentic to everyone: what you see is really what you get. Not so amazingly, we discovered that everyone – EVERYONE – lives with the same fears and anxieties. We all want to be loved; we all want to be accepted. EVERYONE lives on Maslow's Hierarchy. This is why I love it so much. It spells out not just my need, but your need and the need of every person on this earth. We can approach everyone confidently knowing that, deep down, they just want our love and respect and it is in our power to add blessing to their lives.

## **5. Self-Actualization Needs**

At the apex of the triangle is what Maslow calls Self-Actualization wherein the Potential becomes Actual. This occurs when people take their potential abilities and interests and make the most of them. Education, sports and performance are all avenues for this kind of exploration.

However, without the prior levels of need being fulfilled, turning a potential into an actual is harder. Learning a language or becoming adept at a sport is not a priority if a person is overwhelmed with worry about food or shelter, a relationship falling apart or a job disappearing. Again, expecting the poor to rise to the level of studiousness of those more financially well off is unrealistic. There are too many conflicting concerns.

I have had a multitude of opportunities to actualize my interests. My PhD in Communication enabled me to produce a daily cable tv interview show for the Rock Church Television Network. I wrote a winning proposal for a large Federal contract while working at Computer Sciences Corporation and taught a variety of Communication courses at Old Dominion University. While we lived in Northern Virginia, I led tours as a docent at the Folger Shakespeare Library and ran a non-profit pregnancy aid center. My church activities included leading the Gallup Organization's Living Your Strengths assessment program with Paul and our Deacon. Paul and I teamed up to teach Sunday School and volunteer in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program. We have given retreats and workshops both together and singly on a variety of topics.

One of the more challenging opportunities I have had has been to write for others. A group of social workers and I wrote a bi-weekly column called Family Matters that was published in the Diocesan newspaper. It covered issues related to communication, relationships, children and work. In collaboration with a Pastor, I produced his weekly Church Bulletin column which discussed the Sunday readings. Creating public relations materials for local businesses was always new and interesting. There was even a retirement speech for an officer leaving the Navy. It was great fun.

Paul and I wrote a book when we worked as consultants together. It is called *The Fourth Side of the Triangle* and we published it during the pandemic after it had lain dormant in the file cabinet for many years. We took Paul's management strategies for computer executives and discussed them in terms of an architectural metaphor: the Stata Center on the campus of MIT. Its openness and emphasis on communication and collaboration seemed to sum up Paul's approach very well.

Paul wrote his own story that year. We worked together on relating the growth in his spirituality. It is called *A Faith Journey* and I am grateful for the way he included me in its acknowledgements. Inclusion describes the way Paul has managed his work/life balance. He has included me in both parts and encouraged me to believe that I had something to contribute. My perspective is often different and he has valued it. Our teamwork has been a wonderful combination of left brain/right brain thinking and both of us have incorporated more of the other as the years have gone on.

## The Circle

### Joined

*I am unconnected to you!*

*Not true, not true.*

*Webs of energy*

*Bind me to you*

*Our emotions are caught*

*By longings so taut*

*That a tearing apart*

*Rips open my heart*

*By Maureen Flanagan*

The third shape is the Circle. It never ends and is totally connected. This is how I view humanity. We are not separate; we are joined. The energy binding us all together is like a powerful magnet and the pain a person feels when a relationship is broken by death or an emotional break-up is a stark reminder that the junction is real. We are literally heart-broken when we not in sync with our partner or others.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray that we be forgiven just as we forgive others. It is so important to me that all of us not carry un-forgiveness and judgment in our hearts. It is vital that we live in a world of second chances. It can never be too late for forgiveness even when, as Jesus said, the asking is as many as "seventy times seven times." The key to achieving this, I have found, is not to allow the root of bitterness to begin to take hold in our hearts. Dwelling on hurts is counter-productive because it only makes things worse.

Forgiveness is a prism, though. We can offer it out of our own smug belief that we are the superior human being for doing so. Or, we can offer it as an equal who is no better, no worse. Anytime we fail to love, we are in need of forgiveness and not one of us loves perfectly. God loves us all equally. Love is Love and we cannot parcel it out or it will then become conditional and not pure Love.

Thus, the circle. We are all drops in the same ocean. This awareness has changed my life. I wish it had come earlier, but life is a process of unfolding awarenesses. The mistakes of the past "me" are the prompts that created a better future "me". Things that seemed so right at the time, I would do differently now.

I was very hurt by some of my parent's actions while I was growing up, but once I passed through those periods in my adult life, I began to realize that they operated through the same lens of incomplete knowledge and experience as I did. They were wounded beings. As were their parents...And grandparents...And great grandparents...And...

It takes time to accept that one does not possess all the Truth. Everyone has only a part of it. And what is "self-evident" varies with the person and culture. Taking the time to look at the world from another's perspective on the circle has been the key to widening my own understanding. For instance, I look at the Muslim Burqa as an affront to women, but one day I realized that Catholics were no better. The Burqa is no different than some of the more outlandish habits once worn by nuns. I hope that one day the Burqa will begin to disappear as the more extremes of the nun's religious habit have, but the Burqa is certainly not an anomaly confined only to the Middle East. Take the log out of your own eye first, as the Biblical saying goes.

### **How Does This End?**

I am not sure how my story ends in a practical sense, but I do know that it will end in the loving arms of God. It will probably end sooner rather than later. I will go from Love here to Love there, wherever or whatever "there" is. Ultimately, I believe that our spirits will join in the oneness that we so long for in our present life. We will become Love and there is no separation in Love. Our bodies will disintegrate, but our spirits will live forever and, as the scripture promises, we will "know as we are known." The more we become Love now, the closer the reality of the hereafter becomes. We do not have to wait.