

Many of you have known my mother for years. Some of you, I know, have known her longer than I have.

But today I would like to share with you a fact about my mother that you may not know:

My mother liked to count. Everything.

For example...

My mother believed that 10 pairs of pants made a perfect load of laundry, but that if you were washing lights, you needed 15 items to perfectly fill the machine.

And, she believed that the unpleasant task of unloading the dishwasher was best completed 12 items at a time (silverware, obviously, excepted).

These numbers, certainly, are a strangely specific way to think about household chores. But – after more than a decade of adulthood, I can assure you, her numbers are solid. I use them myself.

Equally certainly, however, I am not planning to remember my mother by speaking about laundry.

Today, I would like to remember that she counted more important parts of life.

First, you should know that Mom liked to count the pages of books. She marked her sets of pages with little bookmarks, and she moved the bookmarks as she progressed through the book.

What strikes me about the counting of pages, though, was that there was never an end. As soon as she finished one book, there was another waiting to be filled with bookmarks and consumed.

Our homes and our lives were filled with books. And Evan and I spent many childhood afternoons at the library and many childhood evenings nestled next to Mom while she read. As we grew older, of course, her bookshelves supplied our own independent reading habits.

Mom read, I think, because she was endlessly curious. In sharing her love of reading, Evan and I both learned that reading enabled us to better understand the world in which we lived. We also learned that the words themselves were beautiful and powerful.

When Evan and I chose to make our love of reading and writing our lives' work, we had Mom's – and Dad's – blessings and encouragement.

As I now live my life of counting – 7 pages in a lecture; 40 pages in a chapter; 80,000 words in a manuscript; 10 more essays to grade before bed -- I am thankful for the tremendous gift of having a mother who loved books.

And while I'm speaking about books, I think it's important that I remind you that back in the days before GPS, members of AAA could order personalized books of maps, called TripTiks. A traveler could plot out a trip in advance and then use the TripTik to keep track of the journey.

This brings me to my next memory: that Mom also liked to use the TripTiks to count miles.

And, much like when she counted book pages, there was no particular end to the miles. When one journey ended, she began meticulously planning the next.

As many of you know, my parents were of the opinion that living in Kansas was a blessing – it meant that you could drive to and from almost any destination in the United States and Canada in three weeks or less.

And so we did. One TripTik page at a time.

48 states. Nine provinces. Two oceans. Dozens of National Parks. One sinking river in Wyoming. Three eruptions of Old Faithful. Countless rocks thrown into mountain streams.

It seems to me that early trips that took me along the Oregon Trail in the West and to Civil War battlefields in the East might have nurtured my love of history.

So this is how I remember my mother: a woman who loved the journey of learning – who was creative and thoughtful and curious.

If she were here with me counting today, I know she would agree with me that 55 years is too few.

But I am immensely grateful that she filled the first decades of my life with wonderful memories as she prepared me to enjoy the journey of life – one mile and one page at a time.