

# THE POWER OF A GOODNIGHT SONG

*by Loretta Pehanich*

I can still see the silhouette of my father in my bedroom doorway, backlit by the hall light. He is singing “Good Night, Dear Jesus” to me and my sister to end our bedtime routine each night.

Dad’s singing comforted my childish heart and prevented the scary open closet door from terrifying me with hidden specters. His deep yet soft voice reverberated with love. I didn’t know that Dad was praying as he sang. I simply heard it as a sweet tune that moved me one step closer to sleep.

But when I began singing the same song as a mother, the ritual had new meaning for me as I interceded for my four children. Every night, after the whole family gathered for bedtime prayer, the youngest would be tucked in with the familiar lullaby:

Good night, dear Jesus. Guard us in sleep.  
Our souls and bodies in thy love keep.  
Waking or sleeping, keep us in sight.  
Dear, gentle Savior, good night.

My dad’s paraphrase of a song by Fr. James B. Curry is now a family tradition, and all nine grandchildren know it and how Dad sang it to me.

Family prayer was important in our house growing up, and so was music. To this day, God frequently communicates with me through song. My siblings and I often sang together after dinner, usually a variety of folk songs accompanied by our guitars. Dad and Mom usually requested their favorites: “Amazing Grace,” “How Great Thou Art,” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” Even now, hearing those tunes is like an arrow directly into moments of past consolations.

When my sister learned to play piano, Dad often requested “Gentle Woman,” which he said reminded him of our mom, and he’d get choked up listening. Mom would come into the room and smile, and perhaps my parents would hug each other. I loved seeing my parents hug.

My sister sang “Good Night, Dear Jesus” to her two children, and my brother sang it to his three.

When I became a grandparent, I began to understand how fervently my grandparents must have prayed for me, because I pray passionately for my children and grandchildren now. I had no idea when I was young. They were seldom-seen figures in life’s background.

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Now, when visiting my grandchildren, it's a privilege if my adult children ask me to tuck in their munchkins. Usually we talk about what we're most grateful for that day. Then I turn out the light and end their bedtime ritual by singing the same song Dad sang to me. I pray silently, "Into your hands, Lord," I commend their spirits.

My younger daughter lives across the country from us, and I called her for a video chat one evening, forgetting the three-hour time difference. The call was answered and quickly disconnected. Not getting the clue, I called back. This time, three faces cuddling under a sheet told me that I was interrupting their bedtime ritual. After a brief chat that undid all the quieting my daughter had just done, I offered to sing to them. They all gladly assented, and Helena and Preston settled under the covers once again. My daughter dimmed the lights, and she teared up as I sang softly the song that spoke of my love for them and my deep desire that they will always know our Divine Majesty: "Good Night, Dear Jesus." When I finished, I said a gentle good night and hung up. Awe filled me as generations past seemed to be present, smiling. I sat still for several prayerful moments.

More recently, we drove to see our other daughter and her three girls with my mother-in-law, who was ready for bed early. My granddaughter Julisa gave up her bed to her great-grandmother. When I walked in to say good night to the youngest girl in bed across the room, Julisa was singing "Good Night, Dear Jesus" to her great-grandmother, who held Julisa's favorite stuffed toys in each arm, and Julisa had neatly tucked the covers around her. My husband's mother was smiling in evident ecstasy. And I was in awe of the power of song, the power of family ritual, and the power of faith.

I was looking at the outline of a nine-year-old girl, and I was humbled by the knowledge that faith was growing in a third generation through the powerful medium of music.

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