

## Did I Set the Pedestal Too High?

*Ron Lipsman*

Those of you who have been following my posts know that I have exalted the stellar qualities enjoyed by my dear, departed wife, Shelly. It has been suggested to me – obliquely of course – that I may have exaggerated. No one could be as uniformly wonderful as the person I have depicted Shelly to be. “OK, she was a fantastic gal, but the picture you have painted is one of a perfect creature, a specimen devoid of any flaws or character faults. It’s just not possible!”

Well, I suppose not. And if I put my mind to it, I can think of a few instances in which I thought Shelly was wrong about something, or that she had made a mistake, or that she could have treated someone better, or that I was disappointed in an opinion she expressed. Yes, these occasions occurred – but they were very rare; and upon further reflection I think that, among them, in many instances, I was wrong in my interpretation of Shelly’s thoughts or actions.

No, Shelly was not perfect. But damn close! And I am going to profess boldly: Among the thousands and thousands of people I have met and dealt with in my life, I am certain that there was not one who was more kind and gracious to the people with whom she interacted; not one who was more giving and helpful to her friends; not one who was more solicitous of her co-workers; not one who was more generous, inspirational and devoted to her children and grandchildren; and not one who was more loving, supportive and faithful to her spouse. I know of only one person who matched Shelly in the empathy department.

You might suggest that I am so torn up at Shelly’s passing that I have idealized her beyond reason. In fact I do have all the classic symptoms of a bereaved widower – rendered thus after a long, loving marriage – namely: the constant and gnawing feeling of emptiness and lack of purpose; incredulity and inability to accept the fact of my wife’s death; intense sorrow at the cruel injustice of her premature demise; anxiety and confusion about what I am supposed to do with my life now that Shelly is gone; and a painful and persistent longing for her presence.

None of this is uncharacteristic for anyone in my position. However, I am experiencing one sensation that I have not seen described in the “bereavement literature.” Namely, when I interact with someone who did not know Shelly, I feel an impassable gulf between us. It is as if there is an impenetrable barrier, which the other person cannot ever cross – because without a knowledge of Shelly, said person cannot understand me, what governs my thoughts and actions, what rules my soul. I know it’s bizarre. Sometimes I try to broach the gap by relating to my interlocutor something of the nature or history of my wife. And in fact, the barrier has been crossed by the members of my bereavement group – who have learned a great deal about Shelly from me. But to others whom I meet, the barrier is present. The lack of Shelly as a common reference renders us as if we were from different worlds, speaking different

languages, without a common frame of reference, unable to communicate with and meaningfully relate to one another. I believe I have effectively concealed these feelings so that the people I meet do not sense them. But it explains why I try to spend as much time as I can with my family and with dear friends of Shelly and mine.

Might this unusual eventuality be the result of my setting the pedestal too high? Perhaps. Or is the implication in the reverse direction? I don't know. But, in fact, I do not believe that I've set the pedestal too high. I will try to justify that assertion by citing a few stories (some, but not all of which, are told in other places in these pages) that highlight what an extraordinary person Shelly was.

- **Driving with her son.** In the winter of 2015, when Shelly was already sick, but before she was diagnosed, my son encountered some family difficulties and was in a bad way. His profession requires him to do a lot of solo driving. Shelly suffered from motion sickness and was never very happy in the front passenger seat on long drives. But she was so concerned for our son's welfare that on many days that winter, she rode with him (sometimes for many hours) just to ensure that he would not be alone during his long drives on those difficult days for him. A perfect example of Shelly, despite great personal discomfort, putting the needs of others before her own.
- **Lee Ladies.** Shelly participated in a social club comprised of co-workers in the school where she had her first job upon returning to the workforce in 1977. This club (called the Lee ladies—the name of the school was E. Brooke Lee), met for nearly 40 years. During her quilting career, one fall Shelly decided to quilt a personal hand bag for each of the ladies in the group. Each was beautifully designed and expertly executed – no two of them the same. This extraordinary gesture was not atypical of how Shelly always was thinking of others, being kind and generous to people, and going out of her way to help.
- **Coolfont.** In 1991, I was passed over for an administrative position at the University that I had been aiming at for a long time. I was very disappointed and upset, and I was dubious about the future of my career. Shelly reserved a cabin in a mountain vacation spot in West Virginia (called Coolfont) and took me there for a week of consolation, encouragement and advice. It was one of the most moving and intimate times of our life together. The care she devoted to my fractured and fragile pride, the wisdom she bestowed on my wounded psyche, the suggestions she imparted for my future career were so wise and helpful; they allowed me to restore my positive outlook and reset my sights. Some years later I landed an even better position and spent the last decade of my career in a high position, which I enjoyed and in which I believe I made significant contributions to the university. My dear wife helped me to see the foolishness of allowing the setback to destroy my morale and she opened my eyes to the possibility of

future success. Man was I lucky to have a wife like that – who completely understood my personality and helped me to improve it.

- **Tea Parties.** When my two granddaughters were young, Shelly would invite them for tea parties. The three girls would dress in costumes and enjoy tea and cookies together for several hours. Shelly had quite a few gorgeous porcelain tea sets that she would use. The girls would help her prepare and they would sit for several hours and Shelly would encourage them to tell about themselves, their family and friends. It was so special and beautiful to behold. Shelly's love for and devotion to her progeny were never on greater display than during her tea parties.
- **Selfless.** Near the end of her illness, dear lifelong friends came from out of town to see Shelly for a final visit. The four of us spent a few hours together. Shelly grew weak and our friends left. At which point Shelly turned to me and said, "That must have been hard for them." Astounding! On the cusp of the end of her fatal illness, she was thinking of the welfare of our friends.
- **Picture in a wallet.** As I have recounted, I met Shelly when she was 14; she was introduced to me by a causal friend. Shelly was his girlfriend. A year later, he broke up with her and we began our lifelong relationship. However, this fellow continued to call Shelly on her birthday every year. This ceased about five years later when we were married. However, two years after that, on a street in Boston, we bumped into him. Note that this is nearly seven years after their relationship had ended. And damn it if he doesn't pull out a picture of Shelly from his wallet. He knew what he had let get away. One of many who realized what an extraordinary person my beloved Shelly was.

I trust you are convinced now of the legitimacy of my idealization of Shelly. Those of you who knew her need little convincing. But to those readers who did not know Shelly, this is my way of conveying to you a knowledge of one of the finest ladies imaginable. If you take the time to wander the pages of this web site, you will understand that the pedestal is justifiably high.