

Eulogy for Shelly Lipsman

First, let me express my gratitude to each of you for coming today to honor Shelly. Shelly Lipsman was the most beautiful, compassionate, caring and understanding woman that I have met in my 72 years on this earth. Shelly had the rare gift of empathy. In her dealings with you, whether you were a loved one or a casual acquaintance, a family member or stranger, neighbor or co-worker, she had the amazing ability to see matters from your perspective, what would please you and what would cause you discomfort, and she unfailingly chose a course of action that would enhance the former while diminishing the latter.

Because of this precious innate gift – which, incidentally, I believe she recognized and always sought to improve upon – she was a superb wife, mother, relative, friend and co-worker.

To wit, Shelly was the ideal wife. She created a warm and beautiful home, not only exquisitely but comfortably decorated – and remarkably well-equipped – but full of love, stability and camaraderie. She was supportive of my career, and tolerant of my idiosyncratic sport and politics interests. She had her own successful career and still found time for child-rearing, household finances and planning and managing virtually all family affairs. During our 25 years in Kemp Mill she ran a kosher home that provided warmth, comfort and spiritual nourishment to me and my sons. Her love, our love was strong and faithful and we never had any difficulty in our marriage – well, save one period that I shall mention momentarily.

Shelly was an extraordinary mother. She bestowed upon my sons a deep and all-embracing love. But she also taught them to be self-reliant, kind, loving, generous and self-confident. Kenny and David are the mensch's that they are today thanks in no small measure to the wisdom, empathy and devotion of their beloved mother.

Shelly was also a remarkable grandmother. The bond that she forged with each of her three grandchildren was extraordinarily strong and abiding. It wasn't just that she was remarkably generous in buying them clothes, toys and books. She took them on trips, played games with them, soothed them when they were hurt and encouraged them to develop their talents and pursue their interests. It gives me some comfort to know that Shelly will live on in their memories deep into the twenty-first century.

And finally, so many of you know very well what a pleasure it was to have Shelly in your lives. Always cheerful, eager to hear about the events in your life, cautious and reserved about offering her opinion – but always helpful and on point when she did. I am sure that you appreciate what a special person she was and how grateful you must be that Shelly was an enriching part of your life.

Part of what made Shelly so special was the Jewishness that infused her life. Absorbing a strong Zionism from her father and classic Eastern European Yiddishkeit from her mother, Shelly was the quintessential American Jewish gal: although not especially religious or observant, she had a deep appreciation for Jewish history and tradition; she truly enjoyed being part of the rituals associated with our most important festivals; and she embodied the ideals of tzedakah, chinuch and tzedek. And of course, as many of you know, her Seders and holiday dinners were legendary. She took great pride in being an inspiration as the Jewish matriarch of our family.

Since I am talking about how special Shelly was, let me add something that I wrote just this morning. In the slew of email consolations that I have received over the last two days, it is notable how many of you refer to Shelly as a "great lady." Not a wonderful woman or terrific gal or beautiful person, but a great lady. It is a term, I believe, of deep respect and admiration. How unbelievably fortunate for me that I got to live my life in partnership with greatness! In America, we have great hitters, great actors, great statesmen and great soldiers. Well we also had a great lady. How wonderful is that!

I met Shelly 57 years ago this summer. I was 15, she was 14. You may doubt the phenomenon of 'love at first sight,' but God's honest truth: I am living proof that the phenomenon is real. I remember with great clarity the moment that I met her. The overpowering emotion that swept me off my feet that day has remained with me throughout the years and will remain with me until the day I die.

It has been said to me by more than one person that 'Shelly has a smile that lights up a room.' Indeed I loved her smile. During her pain and suffering, she continued to favor me with smiles until nearly the day that she died. But I won't try to impress you, or torment myself, by reciting all the extraordinary aspects of her personality and nature that were such a delight to me for more than 50 years. Instead I will focus on one – a trait that complemented and flowed from her unique empathy – namely, her compassion.

I cannot count the instances in which I saw it displayed; but let me focus on a very personal one. Truth be told, I had an extremely difficult early childhood. I won't describe the details except to say that it left gaps and flaws in my personality and nature that have haunted me all my life – especially as I did not understand until relatively recently how the defense mechanisms I developed as a youth to cope could prove – let us say, unpleasant – to those with whom I interacted. Shelly understood this decades before I did. But, because of her compassion, she never let it impinge on our relationship, our love, or our family. Alas, when I retired, some of my "mechanisms" flowered more transparently. And naturally the burden fell on Shelly. But, as she explained to me, her compassion for and understanding of what made me tick impelled her to forgive me and to help me understand and overcome my demons.

Shelly and I were extremely happy together the last few years. She gave me the gift of her love for more than half a century. I am grateful that I finally came to appreciate and fully reciprocate that gift. I only regret that I did not have more time to continue doing so.

Finally, I would like to recall some of Shelly's more specific accomplishments in her lifetime. Shelly's parents emigrated from Palestine to New York in the late 1930s. Shelly's cradle language was Hebrew. She grew up in a very poor neighborhood in the South Bronx. Shelly's parents separated in her teens and when her mother was stricken with breast cancer, Shelly left school to support the family. She worked as a high-level executive secretary for the head of the American branch of Rosenthal China, a career she continued in Boston (in a prominent legal real estate firm) while I attended graduate school. After I received my degree, Shelly took 10 years off to conceive and raise our two sons. She returned to her secretarial career in 1977 and used the opportunity to become one of the earliest users – I dare say experts – in office computer software (do you remember WordPerfect and Lotus?). She parlayed that expertise into a major position in computer training in Marriott Corporation where she trained all the senior executives – including Mr. Marriott – in computer usage. She retired in 1999 and then finally fully indulged her life-long interest in the creative arts, esp. the needle arts and in particular quilting. Largely self-taught, Shelly quickly became an innovative quilting expert. The walls and beds of our and our children's homes are adorned with the fruits of her labors. She was told numerous times that her work was commercial quality, but she preferred giving her quilts to family and friends – and displaying them in our home – rather than selling them. A few representative samples are displayed here today. It is another comfort to me that Shelly retired early and had the opportunity to devote 15 years to a creative passion that warmed her heart and enriched her and her family's lives.

Benjamin Franklin said: *A long life may not be good enough, but a good life is long enough.*

According to Socrates: *Not life, but good life is to be chiefly valued.*

And our own Talmud proclaims: *Man has three friends on whose company he relies: First, wealth, which goes with him only while good fortune lasts; Second, his relatives: these go only as far as the grave and leave him there. The third friend, his good deeds, these go with him beyond the grave.*

Any of us, as we approach the end of our lives, wants to be reassured that we have lived a "good life": that we have been good and loving children, siblings and parents; that we have been kind and considerate to friends and co-workers; that we have done far more good deeds than wicked ones; that we have had a positive impact on the lives of those around us. In her final days, I tried to reassure Shelly of what she certainly knew – namely, that she had indeed lived a good life.

Tragically, it ended too soon and in a difficult fashion. But Shelly bore her suffering with grace, dignity and a certain calm in knowing that her untimely passing did not diminish -- in fact highlighted the truly good life that she had lived.

Like all of you, I am going to miss her terribly. My heart has been ripped out and life without her will be tortuously incomplete. But I will honor her memory by trying to be a better father, grandfather and friend; by trying to emulate the good life that she so epitomized.

God bless you Shelly. I will love you forever.

Ron Lipsman

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