

Keeping Shelly Alive

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It is now nearly 14 months since Shelly died. The interval between then and now seems to me like a blur. Yet, the images of her final days and weeks are so vivid in my mind that I cannot fathom that they happened more than a year ago. Her presence in my life was so enormous and powerful for so very long. The beauty of her face, the sweetness of her voice, the bounty of her phenomenal disposition – these remain with me despite the loss of her physical presence. How have I managed to traverse these many months without collapsing into an insoluble despair? I have pondered that question intently the last two months.

I believe the answer lies in my forlorn attempt to "keep Shelly alive." By that phrase I am referring to my likely motivation for the numerous activities that I pursued over the year to memorialize my loving wife. Readers of these pages will be familiar with these attempts. They include:

- A heartfelt eulogy delivered at her funeral.
- An elaborate and comprehensive memorial web site devoted to all the aspects of her remarkable personality.
- Interviews and stories about her in local media.
- Displays of her quilts in the regional library.
- A memorial garden in her honor dedicated in the development that includes our vacation home in Deep Creek Lake.
- A memorial stone at her gravesite that encapsulates the critical role she played in our family.

These activities occupied most of my time in the year following Shelly's death on July 19, 2015. But it is not like I sat down on July 20 and planned a roster of memorial activities. I just found myself doing them – feverishly, single-mindedly, almost uncontrollably. I don't recall planning any strategy or brainstorming for ideas about how to memorialize Shelly. I spontaneously started and continued to do them without guidance, as if they had long been on my agenda and I was carrying out some elaborately laid plan. As I did them, I felt the presence of my wife, as if she were guiding my actions.

After the year was up and the *yahrzeit* had passed, I stepped back and saw what I had done. I'm not sure how I got through it – since some of it was exceedingly painful to do. But in fact, some of it was helpful, even hopeful – e.g., reading 50-year old love letters, which informed the construction of the web site. Why did I do these things? What was I trying to achieve?

The answer, I've concluded, was that it was my way of trying to keep Shelly alive. Every day, for 55 years, I saw her face, heard her voice, kissed her lips, shared her thoughts, plotted our joint future. It was – and still is – inconceivable to me that this way of life, this joint journey should have come to an end. I did not want it to end. I could not accept that it had ended. I needed it to continue. I needed to keep Shelly alive! And so by throwing myself into intense activities to memorialize my wonderful wife, I tried to keep Shelly alive.

Did it work? In a way. I thought about Shelly constantly. I imagined conversations we might have about my activities. It helped me to put my life – but more importantly, her life – into perspective. To see that we had been extraordinarily lucky to live a good and happy life together. To have fulfilled the dreams we set for ourselves at the onset of our journey. To have reached the point just before her illness with few regrets, many accomplishments, much joy and a wonderful family. Above anything else, building a happy family was Shelly's greatest dream. And as I have demonstrated in other places in these pages, our success in that endeavor was largely due to the extraordinary person that my wife Shelly was: loving, compassionate, empathetic, generous, selfless and wise.

Now, although Shelly's journey is over, her family continues on. Her memory is an inspiration to all the members of our family. And if, by memorializing her, I've helped her family to appreciate the gift that she was to them; if I've guided them to a better understanding of the beneficial effect she had on their lives; if I've reminded them of the overwhelming love she showered upon them; then that is a gift they can carry for the rest of their lives, and I will consider the time devoted to my efforts over the year to be well-spent – keeping Shelly alive for me, for my children, for my grandchildren.