

Love is Eternal

John Agens, MD

I wrote this in the last few months of my wife's life. It is a series of journal entries, intermingled with verses from the Holy Bible, a book where I still find hope. This time has been incredibly difficult, and I share this with you so you can see that love is eternal, and that even physicians turn to faith for comfort. Not a day goes by without me missing and loving Sharon. I hope she can see from where she is how much I miss her...."

"Lazarus is dead. Now let us go to him."—The Gospel According to John

October 2009

"I am very sorry. This is the real thing." The doctor explained as I watched my wife, still sedated, on her stretcher. In her current state Sharon was unable to hear, participate, or respond in this one way conversation. Since I had just stopped listening anyway, I had no problem with the conversation being one way. I just wished we could have heard the news together.

My thoughts shifted to, "Who do I need to tell?" I was, in my heart, feeling "Please help me now!" Having delivered grave news to patients my whole career, I was woefully unprepared for my conversations with our children, my mother, and my sister. Conversely, I dreaded being alone with this secret, even for a moment.

I could sense that, in one moment, my old life was ending. I didn't know whether or not a new life was beginning. I really couldn't imagine a life without Sharon and still breathe at the same time.

"Therefore I tell you, don't be anxious for your life, what you will eat, nor for your body, what you will wear...Consider the lilies, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."—The Gospel According to Luke

Sharon knew before the surgery that everything would be OK. My faith was not yet that strong. Our parish priest said, "Don't worry." I was worried. I said the rosary, bead by bead, countless times over the 12 hour period that began with Sharon in the surgery pre-op area and ended when she finally came to the intensive care unit. Putting my faith to work over the next several days, I silenced the alarms of the pulse oxygen sensor whenever Sharon would pull the oxygen from her nose. I walked her to the bathroom, lugging the IV pole behind. I calmed her when the blues came around each evening as the sun went down. I suffered Sharon's wrath when a nurse was unresponsive

during a shift while I got some much needed rest. "Where were you?!" she exclaimed. I hurt. I had to pray for faith every day, but Sharon's was unshaken.

I came to believe, in my vocation of marriage, that my whole life preparing to be and practicing as a physician was for this purpose: to get Sharon well in order to witness to myself and others that Jesus Christ exists, forgives our sins, and has the power to bring life to us in our darkest times—as long as we have faith and do not take our eyes from the ultimate goal.

August 29, 2012

"You are a survivor," I told Sharon. Only one in five patients with pancreatic cancer is at an early enough stage to have a Whipple procedure. On the average, those lucky enough to have the surgery live a year. These statistics have been rattling inside my head for almost three years.

Sharon doesn't read medical literature. She lives. She doesn't read self-help books. She's the teacher. She is the love of my life and the purpose of my life. She isn't just my right arm, but my arms and legs. The chemotherapy since her June 2012 recurrence of cancer has sapped energy from Sharon, myself, and our children. On the other hand, we have the wedding of our daughter to live for. We have each other. We have eternity together even after death; but how precious each moment is right now!

"So husbands must love their wives as they love their own bodies. A man who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hated his own body. This is why a man will leave his father and his mother and be united with his wife, and the two will be one. This is a great mystery."—The Epistle to the Ephesians

September 22, 2012

We are one day into Sharon's favorite season. The rustle of yellowing leaves in the trees, clear air, acorns, and hickory nuts falling one by one—marking time, not waiting. She is once again in the midst of a dream. Anticipating our daughter's wedding at our home, hickory nuts are still falling, not waiting, marking new time, for two become one.

"For I know well the plans I have in mind for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope."—The Book of Jeremiah

October 4, 2012

Our daughter was a stunning bride with the smile of a Hollywood leading lady. She was marrying a wonderful hardworking man from Minnesota. Sharon slept six contented hours that night, knowing the wedding had come to pass, with a smile on her face. She has such joy for a woman who fought so hard to get to this place.

October 23, 2012

We are up at 7AM, a little earlier than expected. Hot coffee, mostly milk is Sharon's pleasure nowadays. My coffee needs be quite a bit stronger! We are trying to set up our home hospice music therapist visit to coincide with our guitar playing cantor visit to plan our funeral. Since June we have come through our most difficult time, our hearts are breaking; but we have experienced love in a way that is hard to put into words. Our intention is to empty ourselves for the other, letting the Holy Spirit into us and letting Jesus embrace us. Hickory nuts are still dropping from the trees, marking time. We express our regret that even though I have taken leave from my career (and she from hers), there is still not enough time for us to talk. The days accelerate, we have more to say, we need to embrace more. Eating, laundry, bath, body functions, and visitors are all chipping away at our time. We are praying for eternity with no tears, no darkness; but our hearts are breaking. The tears are falling. We don't fight the tears anymore. We embrace. We embrace our weakness. The tears become a torrent, a cascade, a catharsis. Even granite cannot withstand this washing. I ponder how to drink of it without drowning; without us noticing, a great fire is quenched.

October 29, 2012

"Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him."

"Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved." So then Jesus said to them clearly, "Lazarus is dead. Now let us go to him."—The Gospel According to John

"Sharon, we were just saying our prayers minutes ago and now you leave me!" Tears are streaming down my face. The nurse washes you and tells me, "She is a beautiful woman." I agree. "Sharon, I have told you how beautiful you are so many times lately. I wish I had said it more. It's too soon, my love. You are beautiful, even in death; but far too soon." Tears drop audibly, hitting the quilt, like hickory nuts dropping from the trees outside, marking time no longer. Suddenly, it is quite cold inside and outside for an October evening at 5PM. I hug you. There is more wailing this time. You are not hugging me in return. You, too, are getting colder. I have to get our daughter to sit with us as I take your notebook out and start working the call list. First, your daughters. But, fortunately, I have to leave a message for them to call back. I can't face this right now, even with Meredith's arm around me. I get their spouses. I get your aunt and uncle in Pennsylvania.... I just found the poem you wrote me in the notebook. It helps, Sharon, but I still need you.

December 2012

Sharon read me these words before she died, and left them on a recording accompanied by music. I found them after she had passed. It was like she was speaking to me from beyond the grave.

"Hello, my love.

I wanted to give you something to remind you that I am always with you.

I will always pray for you and always be there for you to talk to when you miss me or just need to talk something through.

You are the love of my life. You made me so happy, so complete; and now I hope that this music will lift you back into my arms.

When the sky is starry, I will be calling to you, and during a good thunderstorm, I will be there; but, most importantly, when you need me, I will be there to listen, to love you and to pray for you.

Our relationship began with starry nights. How could you ask for anything more wonderful? I look into the stars and see the origin of an intense love that sustains me, nourishes me, and comforts me more than I could have imagined.

God lit the fire of the stars, and the glow is in my heart forever.

I love you."

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Lightning Over Water
Ryan Humphries