



# THE PROMISE OF LIVING

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# Introduction

Life, complete with unexpected turns and shifts, creates surprising twists and contradictions. We can prepare for it, but we cannot control the seemingly constant state of disequilibrium that sometimes borders on chaos. Nothing is ever static. Things are always in flux, sometimes very subtly, and at other times with unexpected power and swiftness.

Inexplicable events happen in life, many contrary to our belief in the natural order. Our rational plans and sense of equilibrium are upset. Chaos seems to reign in both our internal and external worlds.

Ups and downs and gains and losses occur sometimes simultaneously. Our plateau of certainty evaporates and the terrain transforms into peaks of joy and valleys of loss. Metaphorically, there are times when we glide gently through life and at other times we crash into painful circumstances—some small and others overwhelmingly deep and difficult.

Sometimes good fortune shines on us simply because we happen to be in the right spot at the right time. Through seemingly serendipitous events, we meet our lifetime partner in an unexpected place at an unplanned time. But then there is the difficult twist of fate, and we face a health emergency, an errant driver crashes into us,

or a family member dies suddenly. In an instant, we can fall into the darkness of loss without warning or reason.

All losses, however, are not the same. Some we expect. Growing old and letting go of youth is one. We understand each phase of life from childhood to old age and foresee it for ourselves. Other losses we determine and accept. At some point or another we realize we are not going to play professional hockey, be a ballerina, or become a jazz musician. Letting go of childhood dreams is a part of maturing, and as we reach middle age, we adapt to activities that are in harmony with the changes of our body, metabolism, and wisdom.

Death is the ultimate loss. It is absolute. But all deaths are not the same. The death of a loved one raises fear—of a cloudy future, of how we are going to get along, and of not being able to find that safe harbor of unconditional love that we need to thrive.

The death of a child, regardless of his or her age however, has a unique, devastating power all its own. The very essence and spirit of our lives change: relationships, dreams, hopes, connections, perceptions, values, beliefs.

Loss fused with fear can cement us to the past, looking into the rear view mirror of life, searching for comfort, and dreaming of what might have been. Facing “what is” becomes daunting and uncertain. Anger and sadness can freeze us in place. The energy we need to live our own lives evaporates because death steals the future.

In these most difficult of times, we can lose the drive and spirit to live as we numbly walk through each day with our hearts fractured and souls deadened. For some, the will to live and carry on diminishes and the mind becomes non-rational. We dwell on the devastation this death causes and fantasize about a future that never will be realized. We hope to wake from a dark dream, and we

make magical deals with God trying to barter our lives for the return of our daughter or son. But no deal is possible.

The question is, what will we do when we face inevitable losses and death? This book is the story of an ordinary life filled with some successes and failures and quaked by stark losses. A formidable challenge for all of us is how we move ahead with our lives, fulfill our destiny, and find happiness and wholeness again, all while honoring those we loved so deeply who died.

We must face losses alone in the quiet of our hearts and souls, while living in a community with family and friends—no easy task and one immune to clichés and glib platitudes.

## Good-byes

To say good-bye is to live.

We learn from our first breath

To the time of holy departure

The impermanence of everything

Except saying good-bye

Good-byes come with ashen faces

Or dressed in the winds of time

Good-byes swim in the well of love

And drop as tears from the eyes of sadness

Good-byes live in the noble castle of hope

Or walk the stony path of loneliness

Good-byes fly on the wings of opportunity  
And tumble on the corners of dice

Age teaches us youth's delicateness,  
Love discovers hidden valleys of the heart,  
Time spins like falling leaves, and  
Fear fractures the spirit and will

The good-byes we experience  
Show in the lines of time  
Sculpted on our faces  
And live forever seared in our soul

The poetry, good, bad, or indifferent, is mine unless stated otherwise. These poems are reflections of my feelings and disposition at the time they were written.

When my daughter died, I wrestled with the beliefs and principles I learned throughout my life about happiness, living, religion, purpose, and meaning. Inevitably, it seems, I went through a quiet metamorphosis about these things. In the poetry, my views on "God," for example, may not be consistent as my feelings or perceptions changed with events. They are presented in the text because that is what I thought at that time. My religious beliefs and principles were challenged as I moved through my individual journey in coming to peace with the death of my daughter, and I am still challenging and working to resolve my beliefs to this day.

## March 9th

*There is no tragedy in life like the death of a child. Things never get back to the way they were.*

—Dwight David Eisenhower

March 9th was going to be a great day; in fact, it was to be a bellwether day that we would remember and celebrate for years to come. My first grandson was finally arriving. He did arrive, but with an unexpected turn to the other side of life's spectrum.

Some days come in softly, caressed in an aura of love and optimism. That's the kind of day it was supposed to be. But it mutated into a surreal clash of life and death and joy and grief in a matter of hours.

Intense moments like this scorch themselves into our very being. They burn themselves into our psyche and memory and are resurrected by the simple, mundane ringing of a telephone or the flair of a spoken phrase. March 9, 2004, is a day that lives with me every day without exception.

The day before was filled with anticipation and excitement tinged with curiosity. Luke was going to be born. We

knew the baby was a boy because Betsy and Bill found out from the doctor via the marvels of modern medicine. I wondered what he would look like and, over the long term, what kind of person he would be. Quite an occasion, I thought—my first grandson.

On the morning of the 9th, I met with my business partner, Lou, who proves that a guy can find a best friend after the age of 55. We discussed where we were with a client contract. After two and a half hours of planning and kibitzing, I decided to head home because, as I told Lou, “Today I’m going to be a grandfather for the second time!”

Lou and I laughed and he wished me well. “Congratulations, pal,” he said, “It’s a great day for you. I can’t wait until I’m a grandfather.”

“You know, Lou, there’s nothing like it,” I added. “Joy, complete joy.”

While driving the 40 minutes back to my place, I thought about my granddaughter, Claire, and how excited she was to have a baby brother. As a four-year-old, she had a puckish sense of humor. When asked what she wanted to name her new baby brother, she replied “Spot,” and then let out a hearty laugh.

Betsy went to the hospital early that morning to be induced. I expected a call when I got home, but when I looked at the answering machine—no word. I didn’t think anything was unusual and figured the call would come soon: after all, some births take time.

I worked through that afternoon and expected my son, Curtis, to call. He and his wife, Jennie, were visiting Betsy in Florida to spend some time with her and also to help out with the baby. Late afternoon bled into early evening, and a subtle sense of uncertainty was beginning to slowly creep into my consciousness. Babies function on

their own schedule, I thought. Time really doesn't exist for them. I checked my phone every 15 minutes and tried to call Curtis but to no avail. Finally, he called me and simply said, "The birth is going slow. I'll call you as soon as I know something."

That call broke the deafening afternoon silence and provided a bit of relief from the leaden ambiguity I was feeling. However, thinking about Betsy struggling with labor caused an aching concern that began to darken my mind. It was over eight hours, but I remember women telling stories of births that were real marathons.

The tempo of my impatience increased, raising a quiet fear of separation. What could be taking so long? Then, at about 5:30 p.m., the phone rang. I dashed to pick it up. It was Peter, my neighbor, who asked me to go to a movie, *The Fog of War*, because his wife was not interested. I told him I had to get out of the house, "I'm getting stir crazy waiting for a call from Florida about the birth of my grandson. A two-hour movie may get my mind off things."

We got back at 9:30 p.m. and met Eileen, Peter's wife, in the driveway. I told her that Betsy was in a long labor and that I was getting a bit concerned. Always a positive person, she replied, "There's probably a call on your answering machine now telling you that your grandson has arrived."

"Yeah . . . yeah, you're probably right," I replied, hoping she was.

I hustled into the house expecting to see a flashing light on the answering machine. Nothing! I didn't know what to think. The anxiety intensified, and helplessness swelled in my chest—a condition that was strange to me. I always believed I was "response-able"; capable of reacting to situations. I always felt that I could do something

in most any circumstance. I hoped whoever came up with the phrase, “no news is good news,” knew what he was talking about.

I called, but still couldn’t reach Curtis. My sense of detachment was troubling and growing arduous. I felt frustrated and impotent. My rational side thought, she’s in the hospital with good doctors and giving birth takes time. I recollected stories of long deliveries from friends and thought, Betsy’s going to have a real tale to tell when this is over.

I sat in my leather chair, flipping through golf and news magazines and watching CNN. Waiting. Occasionally I put my head back and rested my eyes as the minutes dragged by slowly. I looked at the clock. I called Curtis again. No answer. Anxiety was evolving into anger at being snubbed. It was 11:20 p.m. I took my cell phone to bed with me, and I made sure the house phone ringer was on high volume; I didn’t want to sleep through the call, if I was able to sleep at all.

In bed, I was unsettled; a flood of thoughts rushed through my mind. My eyes were wide open. I bunched up my pillow and turned on my side to look out the window at the full moon. I stared at the moonlight reflecting on the utility shed across the driveway. The light glistened off the golden shooting star weathervane at the peak of the shed’s roof. I hoped it was a positive omen that everything was all right.

Feeling out of the loop, I thought, maybe they are all exhausted and will call first thing in the morning. Fear produced restlessness that agitated mind and body. Even though I’m not a religious person, I said a prayer for Betsy and my grandson, Luke. In troubling times, I guess even people like me who have not been in a church for years

might have a prayer drop from their lips. Maybe even the prayers of heathens are heard and answered, I thought. Eventually, I fell into a light, fitful sleep.

The ringing phone shocked me totally awake out of my sleep. It was 3:52 a.m. When I think of that day, I can still see those illuminated digits on the clock. I jumped to my feet, rushed to my office, turned on the light, and answered the call breathing heavily from the dash to the phone.

“Dad, you have to get down here right away. Betsy’s in trouble,” Curtis’s voice wavered as he shouted into the phone.

“What?” Stunned, I could hear his words but I didn’t understand as disbelief and panic began to explode in my mind. “What?”

“Just get down here as soon as you can!”

“Is she okay? Is she okay? Alive?” Fear overwhelmed me. How could this happen? What’s happening?

“It’s bad, Dad. You can’t wait. She may not make it.” Curtis’s voice cracked and the intensity of the moment struck me like a bullet in my chest. My body shook uncontrollably.

I hung up, totally disoriented, my heart pounding, and literally walked in circles from room to room, panicked and not knowing what to do. I yelled to myself, “Hang on Betsy . . . hang on! Fight! Don’t die. Don’t die!” as if she could feel my words across the miles. Somehow, in my haze I called my neighbor Peter to let him know that I had to catch a plane to Florida because Betsy was having difficulty with the birth. I needed help.

Panic and confusion took over. I had felt this state once before. When I was a school superintendent in the Midwest, one of my associate principals was shot to death

in the hallway while school was in session. Not knowing if the perpetrator was still in the building, we were locked down for three hours. In crisis, sequences get confused, I forgot some details, and remember others starkly. This time, however, the shock struck me so much harder; I felt my chest tightening as I felt my personal world dissolving. My body and my legs were weak and shaky. The emotion was blinding.

Somehow Peter or Eileen called the airlines and got me a 6:15 a.m. flight to Fort Myers, Florida. I shot through downtown without regard for stop signs or traffic lights. I called Jennie, my heart pounding, and my fingers tightly gripping the steering wheel as I flew down the highway.

“Jennie, what’s happening?”

“I’m not sure,” she said.

“Tell me the truth, God dammit! Is she alive?” I yelled into the phone.

“I don’t know . . . I really don’t know,” she said, her voice quivering.

“I’ve got to know! I just can’t fly the two and half hours to Florida wondering if my daughter’s alive. She’s my daughter . . . she’s my daughter, I’ve got to know!” I said, “Just find out and have Curtis call me.” I hung up and hit the accelerator.

About a mile and a half from the airport Curtis called. His voice betrayed the message before the words came. “Betsy died, Dad. Get here right away.” He broke down in tears.

Stunned and speechless, I stammered, “I’m on my way. I got a 6:15 flight. What about the baby?”

“He’s OK. He’s OK. Just hurry.”

I hung up and bolted through the stoplight, crying out at the top of my lungs, “NO!!!!!! NO!!!!!!” Every time I’m

on that road, the rush of memories and feelings bubble up and my heart pounds. Those feelings are chiseled in my soul and bones.

I rushed to the airport at breakneck speed, got to the ticket counter and told the agent to upgrade my one-way ticket to Fort Myers to first class regardless of the expense. The thought of being at the back of the airplane, standing in line, waiting to disembark was excruciating.

I headed for the TSA inspection line. I carried no luggage, just my sport coat and personal effects. I showed the TSA inspector my “official government-issued photo ID,” passed through the checkpoint, and headed for the inspection line, took off my shoes, my sport coat, and walked through the metal detector doorframe. As my shoes and sport coat came through the x-ray machine, a TSA agent said, “Are these your shoes and sport coat?” I looked at my watch. It was 5:37 a.m.

“Yes,” I said assertively. “I have to catch the 6:15 flight to Fort Myers.”

“Can I see your boarding pass, please,” the agent stated authoritatively. “A one-way ticket?”

“Yes, I have to catch this flight to Florida.”

“May I see your wallet?” I looked at my watch again to see the minutes ticking by, and fears began to overtake me that I could miss the plane. I couldn’t fathom spending hours sitting at the airport while my daughter lay dead in Fort Myers.

“Yes, but make it quick! I have to catch this flight!” I barked. “I have a family emergency.”

“Well, you should have gotten here two hours ahead of your flight,” the inspector said. “Then you wouldn’t have to worry about catching the plane.” He started picking

through my wallet . . . credit cards, receipts, insurance cards . . . one by one. I thought I was going to explode.

I physically reacted and took a step toward him and said in a demanding, hoarse voice. “Two hours ago, I didn’t know my daughter had died. GET ME THROUGH THIS DAMN LINE!” I commanded.

“Just be careful what you’re saying,” he warned, “if you want to get on that plane.”

“Just hurry up. I must catch this flight!”

He looked at my ID, compared it to the ticket, examined my shoes, and inspected my sport coat. After what seemed like an eternity, he handed my ticket back.

I put my shoes and coat on, turned, and said to him, “If I miss my flight, I’m going to come back and find you!”

I ran to the gate. The airline agent welcomed me and told me to quickly get on board. I took my aisle seat in row 1 next to a well-coiffed, blonde, middle-aged woman. I sat trying to catch my breath and compose myself when a curious numbness came over me as I saw my world explode in disbelief. How could this happen? I thought.

I was angry and couldn’t understand why; if there was a God at all, how he could he have a mother die at the time she was giving birth to a child? “What the fuck kind of God is that?” I thought. Betsy had been studying the Bible and seemingly coming to terms with religion. What irony, I thought, reading about a merciful, loving God and then dying without ever seeing your son. What a sick joke!

Like any parent, I would have given my life in exchange for Betsy’s. I felt I had lived life, experienced highs and some devastating lows, had given it a shot and could leave without regret. What more could I contribute? I thought to myself. Betsy only lived 34 years and she certainly had greater responsibilities raising two young children. To this

day, I still wish I could make that exchange. But magical thinking is just that—a delusion.

The well-coiffed and neatly dressed woman in the seat next to me broke my emotional trance and asked, “Are you going to Florida on business or pleasure?”

“Neither. Unfortunately, this is a sad trip.” I hesitated a moment to say more. Then I turned to her and said, “My daughter died this morning giving birth to my grandson.” In that conversation and moment, Betsy’s death became a part of my new reality—that she was gone, just like that, in a blink.

She looked at me and said what most people say, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” There was an awkward moment of silence between us and then she confided in a quiet voice, “I lost my son two years ago. He was only 22 years old when he became seriously ill. I am so, so sorry about your daughter. People just don’t realize the impact of losing a child—no matter at what age.”

I was stunned, but in a strange way, the compassion in her voice and the look in her green eyes provided me with a brief moment of solace that someone understood the beginning of the journey I was taking. We had an instantaneous connection and we spoke about our dead children as we flew above the clouds. I thought, “What are the chances that I would sit next to another parent who suffered the death of a child?” It was almost mystical. She gave me some sense of comfort in that panic-filled flight, because her story was not unlike mine. She understood my pain and sensed the frantic nature of my flight to Florida and the heaviness I felt.

She asked if I had a place to stay while I was there and said that I could stay with her and her husband because they had a large house on Sanibel Island. I thanked her and

said that I appreciated her kindness but that I had arrangements with my family. Her sincere presence and her compassion helped calm my panicked soul. She knew . . . and sat by me through the miles, a stranger, being there, with an understanding soul.

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## **The Weight**

Sometimes you have to be buried in the solitude of your grief . . . Alone. Without others . . . to feel the intense pain of loss and isolation from those you love so deeply. Only then . . . only then can the sadness of loss become the agent of true change. There are no words others can say to lift the weight of death.

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We landed and I thanked her and flew out the door. I dashed through the airport to the exit. Jennie was waiting for me and we drove most of the way to the hospital in subdued thought, skipping the usual small talk about the flight and the doings of our lives. I was oblivious to traffic, street signs, or highways. I can't remember much of the limited conversation we did have. I think we talked about who was at the hospital, the time that Betsy died, how Luke was, and how Bill was coping. I asked if my former wife, Mary, had arrived. But overall, silence was our companion: my mind was buried in pounding disbelief.

I remember the left turn we took at a stoplight where I first saw the hospital, which was a smaller satellite facility for "minor" surgeries and procedures. What an irony, I thought, a facility for routine medical procedures. Were they equipped for life and death issues?

We parked the car and I hurried into the hospital, Jennie trailing behind, where I saw Curtis at the elevator. We hugged tightly and Curtis's voice cracked as we talked. I saw Mary for the first time in years and we embraced, bonded by love, but this time by a mutual love for our daughter. Any differences we had had in the past disintegrated in the burning sorrow of Betsy's death. Mary looked ashen and exhausted, her big brown eyes sunken and dim. She looked smaller and more fragile than the last time I saw her.

We went to the room the hospital provided for the family, and three of Betsy's friends were there helping with Luke and consoling Bill. I wanted to see my grandson, and I felt a twinge of discomfort and frustration because of the chatter and the crowded room. I needed quiet, space, and privacy. I wanted the friends to leave so I could hold Luke and sit with Bill, Mary, and Curtis. Bill's mom and dad were taking care of Claire at home, who, at that time, was not yet aware that her mother was not ever going to come home again.

My bones ached as I looked into Luke's little face. What a surrealistic moment: the confluence of life and death occurring simultaneously. He was totally unaware that his life was different, almost from the time of birth, because he was motherless within an hour of his arrival. I thought of Claire and the incomprehensible loss she was about to experience.

At times, I didn't know how to feel. Holding Luke close, I felt a deep sense of subdued joy tinged with sadness for him and Claire. I vowed to ensure that he would find happiness and meaning in life and not feel as I did as a four-year-old child after the death of my father. I always felt different from other children and I was fearful that

something would happen to my mother, leaving me alone and abandoned. Insecurity was a companion of mine, along with a fear of being abandoned—rejected.

The hospital administrator came in and asked if there was anything more that he could do. He said they would do anything to make us comfortable at “this difficult time.” I stared at the tray of sandwiches and the soft drinks sitting on the table. My natural skepticism toward large organizations made me think that the hospital would do anything now to avoid any type of lawsuit or legal action having to do with the death of a woman giving birth in their facility, particularly, when there was no prior indication of any problem with the pregnancy or birth.

Sandwiches, I thought, were no solace. Although I was numb about the events, a part of my mind veered off, rationally, to finding out what happened and whose responsibility it was. I wanted to get all of the facts. I was always good in those moments of profound crisis and maintained a very logical edge because I knew about legal matters and lawsuits from my past professional experience. My cynical point of view, in part, was the child of the anger and disbelief I was feeling.

The administrator said that we could go to the intensive care unit to see Betsy before they performed an autopsy to find out what had transpired in the last 12 hours. I wasn’t certain I wanted to see Betsy in the ICU. The tension built in my stomach as we all went down the antiseptic-smelling elevator to the first floor. No one said a word, even though we were all feeling the same pain—we just all stared at the bland stainless steel door.

When I walked in the room filled with medical equipment, medicine stands, and a surgical-type light, I saw her. Her body didn’t seem like Betsy’s. The truth of the

situation hit me hard as tangible reality struck home. There she was—her lifeless body looked like a facsimile of my daughter, not the real thing. Something was missing.

Her hair, which was flowing over the pillow, was longer than when I saw her last. She had a breathing tube coming out from her mouth that had little scuffs of blood around it. She looked so different to me. Vacant.

Her spirit was gone and the body no longer looked like the person I remembered. Her face was void of all the life force and vigor that she put into everything she did. Her lifeless, expressionless face, still beautiful, almost looked like a wax replica of who she was. I guess the human spirit, while intangible, fills our body with distinctive energy. When it is gone, the dead body becomes an empty receptacle of who we were, devoid of our character and vitality.

Betsy's uniqueness was gone, although her body remained. I realized then the beauty and vigor of the human spirit. Maybe scientists are right when they profess that the universe is made of strings of energy. If that is the case, I hope that her energy will live in Luke and Claire and will live on scattered throughout the universe.

Betsy's death had so many dimensions to it, not only for Mary and me as parents, and Bill as a husband, but also for her children. Little Claire was at home, unaware of the day's heartbreaking events. Sometime in the early evening, Bill said that he had to talk to Claire and let her know what was happening. Mary and I went along with him. It was around 7:30 p.m. Claire was already in bed. The stairway leading to her second-floor bedroom was dark and the house was quiet and still. Bill said that he wanted to tell Claire by himself.

Mary and I stood on the stairway as we heard him whisper to her that "Mommy died" and was not going to

come home. That “she is in heaven.” To this day, I can feel that moment in the pit of my stomach and I can still hear Claire’s soft anguished sob and cry. The impact of Betsy’s death became clearest in Claire’s small, almost squeaky whimper. The deep sorrow of a child was overwhelming. Claire didn’t totally understand, and I’m sure she didn’t know what or where “heaven” was. It was simply up there, in the sky.

Claire and Betsy were two peas in a pod. The joy in Claire’s eyes when she was with her mother is something I will never forget seeing and it is reflected in the many photographs that I saved. Betsy loved Claire so very deeply and took great delight in being a mother. Together, they epitomized love and harmony—parent and child. Claire was looking forward to little Luke and Betsy had told her how much fun she would have with her little brother.

Death is such an abstraction to young children. We tell them that their mother “is in heaven,” and they think of angels, clouds, and “up there” as they point to the sky. They don’t really know that death is permanent and that things will never be as they were. As a child, I experienced this same grief and fright. Only in retrospect do I realize the crushing impact of a parent’s death on a child. What went on in Claire’s mind was hard for me to imagine, even though I experienced it myself. I just thought my dad had disappeared.

When Claire saw Luke for the first time at the hospital, a sweet smile broke on her face as she held her little brother, while Mary cuddled them both. Simultaneously losing a mother and gaining a brother must have been confusing to her. Her resilience and fortitude then and now are truly astonishing and heroic to me. I feel a deep connection to her, my first grandchild, and also to Luke,

who through the innocence of infancy was totally unaware of what occurred and that life as we know it changed in an instant.

Mary and I stayed with Bill at the house and Curtis and Jennie went to a small, family-run motel. I slept on the downstairs couch, and Mary stayed in the room with Claire. Claire and Mary were very close. The physical resemblance of Claire to her grandmother was uncanny. Everyone who saw them together knew they were related, and some thought Mary was Claire's mother. Both have beautiful, big brown eyes and wonderful, enchanting smiles.

Exhausted, I lay on the couch and the gray moonlight shone through the sliding doors of the lanai. The pounding thud of death finally cracked opened my emotions and I broke down, crying and sobbing without control, saying, "Betsy, Betsy, Betsy." Death's grim truth struck and the grief was unbearable, just pouring out of me. I thought of the last conversation I had had with her, and of her upbeat enthusiasm about Luke's birth. I was so glad that my last words to her the day before she went to the hospital were, "I love you, Betsy."

Mary heard me crying downstairs and she came down and asked if I was all right. For the first time in years we held each other—joined by our profound sorrow and the shock of disbelief. The loss dispelled any anger or disillusionment that had accumulated between us over the years. We weren't ex-husband and ex-wife. We were just grief-stricken parents with broken hearts, clinging together in a flood of grief, trying to comprehend the incomprehensible worst fear of parents.

On March 10th, the whole family walked in a daze. Bill, Curtis, and I picked out a casket, we went to Barnes

& Noble to get a copy of “Simple Gifts,” the Shaker hymn that was a favorite of Betsy’s that we wanted played at the church service. Then all of us flipped through hundreds of pictures of Betsy to include in the ceremony. It was a strange day: people were together but locked in their own fog of loss and grief. Other family members were making plans to gather in Florida from Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana for the church service on March 12th. The minister also visited and made the obligatory gestures to try to help us deal with the circumstances—a prayer and words about God’s will and love—and then we discussed the components of the service.

The church service included eulogies from Bill, Mary, and me. I wanted words to portray Betsy as a person, what she stood for and what gave her life meaning. I summed up her eulogy by saying:

The light within her served as a beacon of warmth for others and it also guided her on her journey through a principled life of meaning.

- She sought out people everywhere she went—from Oconomowoc, to Madison, to Europe, to Birmingham, to Florida—she made great and lasting friendships.
- She sought out goodness and saw God’s humanness in all people, regardless of their standing in life. She befriended those without friends and reached out to others, developing deep relationships. Goodness—respect, kindness, empathy, acceptance, and understanding—always marked her relationships. She had a great hearty laugh, a keen sense of humor, and a wonderful smile.

- She learned life's hardest lesson—the ability to forgive. I am the biggest recipient of her forgiveness here today. And for that, Betsy, I am so deeply, deeply grateful.
- Finally, she sought to be a loving, nurturing, and compassionate wife and mother. We love Bill, her husband, very much, and we profoundly cherish Claire and little Luke, Betsy's last gift to us all—for they are the greatest and most lasting reminders of Betsy's spirit and goodness. She loved her family so totally and intensely.

Curtis was not going to speak at the funeral service. He was not as gregarious as his sister and was somewhat shy about speaking in front of a group. But after Mary gave her touching and moving comments, Curtis whispered to me if I thought he should say something. He hadn't prepared a written text.

I said, "Sure, this is the only moment you will have. Just relax and say what's in your heart."

His heartfelt impromptu comments about the importance of his sister in his life were the best of the eulogies—simple, clear, and loving. Spontaneous emotion and love are powerful. His sincere tribute still rests in my heart for its genuine tenderness. We then showed a slide presentation with pictures of the phases of Betsy's life—her smile radiated through most of them.

Religious platitudes do not give me much comfort at all—God's love, God's will, and God's plan always fall short. It is more fairy tale to me than any mystical grounding. However, the ritual of people coming together in a community and sharing common connections to honor Betsy's life was somewhat consoling.

I was never one for funeral services, but they do have two virtues: they give people the ability to demonstrate respect for the person's life, passion, and achievements; and they give people the opportunity to express their feelings. For me, it was touching and gratifying to see the impact of Betsy's life on others. She never achieved fame or great fortune, but those intangible things in life—respect, friendship, honor, compassion—meant so much to the people she touched. Although she was gone, her character remained.

As I looked at her broken family, I had nothing but compassion for Bill, Claire, and Luke. But fear whispered softly in my mind. I was worried about losing contact with my grandchildren. I'd heard stories of that happening and, while there is geographical distance between us, I did not want emotional or relationship distance to develop with the kids because Betsy was gone. I think the fear of losing those connections related to the feeling of isolation I had, at times, from growing up fatherless. This fear brought with it an intense obligation to remain a part of the kids' lives and to help Bill raise them in a positive and supportive manner.

Death sometimes walks in the velvet slippers of compassion, but at times, it marches in the hobnail boots of tragedy. Unexpected and chaotic events occur far from our ability to control or understand them. Although we all would like to live lives of consistent happiness, death emphasizes the fact that we do not control much. Our lives are not flat plateaus of happiness. Although we do experience the mountaintop of success, achievement, and joy, we also are going to experience the dark valley of sorrow and loss. March 9th was the epitome of crushing sorrow—a sorrow so deep that it flushed away everything else in my life.

## **One Day**

One last day  
the same number of minutes and  
seconds ticking in the familiar rhythm,  
living them as if there will be  
another tomorrow with time  
being our stable friend.

But one day, some day,  
our last day will come,  
slipping into our lives  
on the invisible and deadly mists of destiny,  
capping our time in a finite hourglass.

One last day lives with me  
month after month, year after year  
branded into my soul  
and burned into my heart  
by the clock that stopped  
the ninth day of March.