

Eulogy for my wife, Elizabeth Ann Sovis

Delivered by Edmund A. Aunger at a memorial service held at Central Baptist Church, Edmonton, Alberta, on July 21, 2012.

I am here to tell you about my wife, Elizabeth Ann Sovis. I have no choice. She was an amazing and wonderful woman, and if I remain silent my heart will shrivel and my head will explode.

I met Elizabeth in grade seven when we were 12 years old. She was beautiful and talented and independent and courageous. And I fell madly in love. "Oh sure you did," she would reply. "For three years, we never even had a conversation. All you did was smile at me and occasionally say hello. Besides, there were others, remember? What about Judy? And how about Suzanne?"

"Elizabeth, I have solid and incontrovertible proof. It would stand up in a court of law. When I was at my parent's cottage, I carved your name inside a heart on a big oak tree. I bet it's still there. And you remember Robbie Dalrymple? In grade nine, he asked who I liked the best – I still don't know who put him up to it – and I told him: 'I really, really, really like Elizabeth Sovis.' I don't know where he lives now, but he could probably provide a signed affidavit. Besides, do you know how hard it is for a young teenage boy to say hello to a beautiful girl when he's head over heels?"

Elizabeth Ann Sovis was born at the Women's College Hospital in Toronto at 4:30 on a Friday afternoon, February 25, 1949. She weighed 7 lbs 12.5 oz. and measured 20 inches. Her parents Stephen and Judith Sovis, and her sister Millie, were overjoyed. Her sister had been born almost 16 years earlier and her father was now 46 years old, her mother 40. Her father was teased mercilessly about the long interval between births: Had he forgotten how babies were made? But her sister's birth had been difficult, and the family doctor had advised her parents to hold off for a few years before having any more children.

Elizabeth always told me that her parents were so relieved when this birth went smoothly that they named her after the obstetrician, Dr. Elizabeth Wiley. But her father's mother, a woman widely acclaimed for her great beauty, was also called Elizabeth. As for her middle name, Ann, it honoured her mother's oldest sister.

My own father once described Elizabeth's parents as "the salt of the earth." They were honest, hard-working, loving, generous and hospitable. Their door was always open, their welcome always warm. They celebrated life joyously and loved their children unconditionally.

Stephen Sovis had been a stone mason in his native Slovakia before immigrating to Alberta in 1928. During the depression, he rode the rails east, finally settling in Toronto where, after many difficult years, he became a general contractor and home builder.

In 1930, Judith Galik also immigrated to Alberta from Slovakia. She too made her way to Toronto, where she met Stephen and, after a whirlwind courtship, married him. She would later work as a seamstress. She made all her daughters' clothes, of course, and dressed them elegantly. I remember my sister Heather once telling me that, in all her school years, she had never seen Elizabeth in jeans – only in tailored skirts and dresses.

Elizabeth adored her parents and she adored her sister.

“But I don't know how she put up with me,” Elizabeth would say. “Can you imagine? While Millie was going to university, she had to sleep with this little brat who kicked her all night!”

As they grew older, the age difference lost significance. They became steadfast best friends, bonded by a strong unbreakable love and by a powerful mutual admiration. And when Millie married Norm Jeffery, a wonderful new influence entered her life: Norm was like a big brother, a favourite uncle and a second father. And then there were Elizabeth's incredible nephews, Ron and Doug – more like younger brothers really. All those great times in a growing family, playing, swimming, hiking, camping.

Why is it that elementary school girls shoot up to the sky like rockets, while the boys are all stunted little runts? From what Elizabeth has told me, she must have reached her final adult size by grade six – 5 foot 4.5 inches in height and 110 lbs in weight –, full fighting form. Fortunately, she used her enormous super powers only for good, patrolling the school yard with an iron fist, keeping the world safe for democracy. I've heard all the stories about how she fought those evil boys.

“You push my girlfriend down, I break my chalk board over your head.” POW! ZAP! BANG!

And it never changed when she got older, even when the bad guys were three times as big. She was a fierce and fearless fighter for social justice. It didn't matter if the guy was 350 lbs and covered in tattoos. He just better behave himself. And as her husband, I always backed her up. That was me, whimpering somewhere in the corner:

“Please Elizabeth, don't pick on him. Don't get him angry.”

At Willowdale Middle School, she was the brightest star in my universe. What a beautiful, beautiful voice. Her parents loved music, and Elizabeth took private voice lessons from a young age. In grade nine, she played Yum-Yum in Gilbert and Sullivan's musical “The Mikado” and all the performances were sold out. I was pretty proud of that. I was in charge of publicity and media relations and wrangled free airtime on Toronto's biggest radio station.

Once during a dress rehearsal, my best friend, Jeff Bradford, let me run the spotlight. Of course, I could only see one person up there on stage, and I kept the light focused on her. “What’s going on?” Mr Bauder shrieked. And then looking at me, he shouted: “Who is that guy? Get him out of here! And tell him not to come back!” Oh well. I never had him as a teacher, but everyone told me he had a short fuse.

Then there was Northview Heights Secondary School. Wow! Of course she was brilliant at everything she ever did, but what a gift for languages! She already spoke English and Slovak. Now she studied French and German and Latin. So did I. In fact, we were in the same classes – but my aptitude paled in comparison.

In 2007, Northview held its 50th anniversary reunion, and the male teachers all seemed to remember Elizabeth especially well. Mr. Kelly’s eyes really lit up when he saw her, his all-time favourite student, the aspiring opera singer. Then he saw me, and he got this kind of pained look that said: “And you married him?” Well, Latin had never really grabbed me. And Mr. Kelly may have had very good taste in women, but in other matters his judgement was sometimes faulty. After we had studied Latin genders, he announced that he wanted three children, one of each kind. But he was a fine teacher.

Elizabeth and I dated throughout high school. We went swimming at the school pool. We went tobogganing at the golf course. We went hiking along the Bruce trail. We went dancing at our friends’ parties. We went skating at the Jolly Miller rink. Just Elizabeth and me, alone, accompanied by a dozen of our best friends. Well maybe a hundred or so best friends if you count the hiking trips. But our relationship became much more serious when we were 18 years old: we spoke to each other every day for three whole months. And then for some unknown reason, we drifted apart.

Of course, Elizabeth had a slightly different take on this very intense romance. “Are you kidding me?” she would say. “We both had full-time jobs all summer and you were taking university courses – three hours a night, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And you were going to student council meetings on the weekends. But it is true that we spoke to each other every night – on the telephone. And drifted apart? You told me that you weren’t going to make any commitments until you were at least 30 years old, had travelled around the world a few times, and had met lots of interesting people.”

I think she must have been inflicted with a photographic memory. It was one of her very few failings. Always remembering unimportant details. It clogs up the mental faculties.

One October, three years later, I had a very pleasant surprise. I was living in London, England, and Elizabeth phoned. She just happened to be in town for a week or so, and could she drop off that book I had loaned her? You know – James Joyce’s “Portrait of the Artist as a young Man.”

We saw each other every day, ate dinner together, and went to see films and plays, including “Abelard and Eloise.” The role of Eloise was played by the super-gorgeous Diana Rigg – in the nude. It’s funny how a guy remembers unimportant details like that.

Since grade eleven, the philosopher-priest Peter Abelard had been my intellectual hero, but I really hadn't paid much attention to his love for some girl – Eloise, the most beautiful and brilliant woman of her generation. Then Elizabeth was gone, off to study French at the University of Toulouse and, several months later, German at the University of Zurich.

Well, I got to thinking maybe this waiting until I was 30 years old was not the best strategy. It didn't help that my university buddies had been falling all over themselves, asking me who that beautiful woman was, and could I introduce them to her. Maybe it was time to commit. After all, we were now mature 21-year-old adults.

So I made my move. I wrote to Elizabeth and suggested that we tour Spain on my motorcycle during the Christmas holidays. Sometime later she wrote back, apologizing that she had prior commitments. And much later, I learned that she had spent Christmas in Zurich with Walter's family. Unfortunately, Walter, a young Swiss man who worked in Toronto, hadn't been able to make it. Yikes, I thought. This was worse than I could have ever imagined – jilted for somebody's family.

Still, Elizabeth put my invitation to good use. She was clever and resourceful that way. When we were 16 years old, her mother had decided that I would make an excellent son-in-law and had repeatedly sung my praises. So this was the perfect opportunity to dispel a few illusions. After all, would a nice young man with a pure heart have ever made such a proposal?

Her mother's reply was swift and to the point.

“Have a good time dear. And don't forget to put cotton batting in your ears.”

What a wise mother she was! I owned a particularly noisy motorcycle and it might have caused serious hearing loss. Elizabeth's mother, Judith Sovis, a woman with a warm and generous and loving spirit, passed away on May 11, 2011. She was 102.

Elizabeth stayed on in Zurich for two more years, working for an international accounting company. Then she returned to Toronto to finish her bachelor's degree in modern languages. This was followed by a year-long sojourn in the Yukon – a turning point in her life.

She had just finished a three-month canoe trip when she met John and Pauline Lammers, committed ecologists who operated river tours. They invited her to work with them on these tours, and then to stay for the winter months, joining them in an isolated cabin near Pelly Crossing. They owned a large library of books and she spent her spare hours reading these voraciously. She discussed philosophy and society and politics and life. She learned how to cook. She memorized the “Edible Wild” and “Audubon's Birds”. And she resolved to pursue a career as a French teacher.

But first she wanted to improve her French. So she reserved a flight for Switzerland, planning to live and work in French-speaking Geneva for a year or two. En route, she stopped for a few days in Toronto to visit her parents.

Coincidentally, I too was in Toronto visiting parents. I was headed to Fredericton, New Brunswick, where I would conduct doctoral research on the governance of divided societies. Elizabeth, I thought, was permanently established in Zurich, but I called her parents anyway to say hello. Her mother answered the phone. "Elizabeth is right here," she said. "Would you like to speak with her?"

That joyous moment marked the beginning of our life together. "It was destiny," my friend Jeff Bradford informed me. "You two were always meant for each other."

We moved to Quebec City where Elizabeth found work in a jewelry store. A year later, we were in Fredericton and she studied for her bachelor's degree in French-language education at the University of New Brunswick. Then on to Edmonton, where Elizabeth took a job teaching French and English at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park.

Our bliss would have been perfect but for one significant disagreement. I had always wanted a family; Elizabeth claimed that she didn't want children. In later years, she would explain that she first needed to be sure that our relationship was loving and strong and lasting. In 1978, on Labour Day, we visited the Devonian Gardens and as we stretched out on the grass to eat our lunch, we watched an infant crawling on the ground a few feet away.

"You know," she said, "I think I would like to have children."

"Why don't we get married," I suggested.

"Okay," she replied.

I spotted something sparkling in the grass. A flip-top ring from a pop can. I picked it up and placed it on her finger.

"Consider yourself engaged," I said.

That December, just after Christmas, we were married. We were both aged 29. So I had only marginally backed down from my plan to avoid commitments until turning 30.

Elizabeth and her parents were the only family in Canada named Sovis, and she was proud of her heritage. I strongly encouraged her to keep her maiden name. Her father may have been traditional, but he was pleased just the same. As for Elizabeth, when she went back to the classroom, her students spotted the wedding band immediately, and they clamored to find out her new name.

"It's still Sovis," she answered.

One of the brighter lights jumped in immediately.

"No wonder it took you so long to get married. You were trying to find a man with the same last name."

We were blessed with three amazing, talented, generous, loving sons. They remind me of their mother. Edmund Stephen was born in 1980; Gregory Alexander in 1983; and Richard Kevin in 1985. Elizabeth loved them unconditionally with her whole heart. She supported them constantly and celebrated them continually. And she was so proud of them. And their wonderful wives, Linda and Colette, her new and much-loved daughters.

The days were always too short, but she insisted that we needed more family time. Her mantra was: “Let’s do this as a family.”

“We’re not going to be together forever,” she would say. (Little did she know that she would be the first to leave.) “We have to create memories for the children now. Why don’t we take them to Costa Rica?”

“Elizabeth,” I would reply. “We don’t have enough money. We can’t afford it. It’s impossible.”

“It’s okay,” she would answer, “I’ll pay for it. I have enough money saved up in my personal account. I’ll take the kids. But you can come if you want.”

And Elizabeth blessed *me*. Every day. She was a rock. She was grounded. And she loved me. The more I unlovable I felt, the closer she held me. I suffered from depression; I felt utterly worthless; I was exhausted; I couldn’t make it. But she loved me: “In good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, until death do us part.” Her love gave me joy and peace and strength. It surpassed my wildest dreams and my greatest hopes. And I will be eternally grateful.

On the day that she died, I heard her confide in an English couple, who had immigrated to Canada four years earlier:

“I adore my work. I’m a speech-language pathologist. I love working with children. And I have wonderful colleagues. I work mainly in the French-speaking community. When I started, they had no one in Alberta who could offer those services in French. Now they’ve got a whole bunch of top-notch French-speaking speech-language pathologists. And they’ll take over my work, without a hitch, when I retire next year.”

Elizabeth portait en elle plusieurs identités. Parmi les plus précieuses était celle de Franco-Albertaine, par adoption. Oui, elle aimait la langue française. Mais elle aimait surtout la communauté francophone. Depuis le début, cette communauté l’avait accueillie chaleureusement et l’avait embrassée à pleins bras. Elizabeth me parlait constamment de la grande bonté, de la grande compétence, et du grand amour de ses collègues francophones. Elle n’était pas bête; elle voyait clair.

Elizabeth took up cycling when she was about 50 years old. It did not come easily to her. She was scared. Her balance wasn’t good. She didn’t feel strong. And she was especially fearful of motorized vehicles. With lots of encouragement from her sons and her friends, she decided to join me in the Multiple Sclerosis Bike Tour – a 160-km weekend trip with an overnight stay in Camrose, Alberta. So she began training. During

the winter, she rode a stationary bike in our basement. During the summer evenings, we toured Edmonton's spectacular river valley trails.

We got braver, and started planning our own tours, staying overnight in various towns in the Edmonton region. We rode to Bruderheim and back. Or to Devon. Or to Morinville. And then our first big trip: Fly to England, reassemble the bikes in the airport, throw on the panniers, and ride out. Or put them on the train and then pedal to the trail from the station. Three weeks of cycling in Cornwall and Devonshire – the home of my Auger ancestors. Doing everything to stay off the roads. Lifting the bikes over fences, and pedaling through farmers fields. Riding along equestrian paths with the horses. Pushing the bikes along dried-up stream beds -- and not so dried-up beds. Sometimes it was hard work; each bike weighed 30 lbs and carried about 35 lbs of gear.

But I was ecstatic that we could share these adventures together. I let her lead. "Go as slow or fast as you want, I would say. Stop whenever you feel like it. And you don't have to follow the route I've marked out. I'll be right behind you."

As it turned out, I was usually too close behind her. Whenever she stopped, I braked hard and then fell off my bike. Or, if I wasn't paying attention, I ran into her back wheel. Finally, we developed an intricate communications system. First, she would arm signal. Then she would say: "Ed, I'm slowing down. Ed, I am going to stop. Just a few more metres and I'm stopping. Say something, Ed. Do you hear me, Ed?"

We decided to alternate Canada and Europe. And every summer that was how we spent our three-week vacation. First British Columbia, then Ireland. Quebec, then Slovakia. Manitoba, then France. We planned and researched. We stuck to cycling trails, and the trails were glorious. For tourists like us, and for the local population.

Look at the City of Edmonton. Go into the river valley. You'll see cyclists and walkers and roller-bladers; people pushing strollers and people in wheelchairs and people walking dogs. What an amazing asset for a community! What a wonderful place to live!

In 2008, our friends David Parker and Margaret Marean joined us on a week-long self-supported bicycle tour in north-eastern Alberta. We started in Cold Lake, cycled west to Crane Lake, and on to La Corey, Bonnyville, Moose Lake and Saint-Paul, and then turned around and headed back east to Cold Lake, travelling through Elk Point and Whitney Lakes.

We already knew the area well, but Elizabeth did her homework, planning carefully, phoning local people, making notes on trail conditions, traffic levels and safety issues. Still, when we reached Saint-Paul and picked up the Trans Canada Trail, we were completely appalled and dumbfounded. The trail was loose gravel and fine sand and jagged ballast. Moreover, we had to regularly pull off to one side and make way for a steady stream of ATVs. It was dangerous. Finally, after 16 km of hard slogging, we turned on to a secondary road – there was much less motorized traffic.

Shortly afterwards, Elizabeth announced that she intended to devote her retirement years to the development of better and safer trails in Alberta – for both cyclists and hikers. She had my support, but I had misgivings. I told her:

“If this country is going to be successful in building a Trans Canada Trail, the federal and provincial governments have to get fully involved. It’s too big a project for a non-profit foundation depending on private donations and volunteer help. A foundation doesn’t have the power; and it doesn’t have the resources. Personally, I believe that building a national network of trails is as important today as was the construction of the Trans-Canada Highway in the 1950s and 1960s. And that project was going nowhere until the federal government made it a national priority and took a leadership role.”

Elizabeth began speaking to her friends and recruiting their support. And as she drove around Alberta, in the course of her work as a speech-language pathologist, she began investigating the province’s trails and their condition.

She would have been thrilled to learn that, this week, the Trans Canada Trail Foundation has agreed to establish the Elizabeth Sovis Memorial Fund. All contributions will be used for the development of trails in Alberta.

For the past several years, we had talked about doing a cycling tour in the Maritime Provinces. The Trans Canada Trail in Prince Edward Island – known locally as the Confederation – sounded perfect. As the minister of Tourism and Culture described it: “Over 400 km of cycling paths that will take you across the Province, through our serene rural landscape and our friendly villages and towns.” Exactly what we were looking for.

On Monday, July 9, 2012, we flew to Moncton, New Brunswick. I had lived there as a child, and I was eager to show Elizabeth my house, my school, my church. We cycled every possible trail along both sides of the Petitcodiac River. We cycled to Magnetic Hill. And after we had pedalled down the hill, we laughed in delight as our bikes rolled back up. My father had taken me there in the early 1950s and I had never forgotten.

Wednesday afternoon, she said: “Tell me about the route for tomorrow’s ride to Sackville.”

“Well,” I explained, “the Trans Canada Trail starts out as a real trail but then follows rural roadways. It passes through some historic Acadian villages. It’s beautiful. You’ll love it. Especially Memramcook. I once gave a speech there to the Council of Maritime Premiers. But that was in the winter time. I’m looking forward to visiting again.”

“Do the roadways have paved shoulders?” she asked.

“Um... I’m not sure. But they’re in the country. There shouldn’t be much traffic.”

Elizabeth wasn’t satisfied with this answer, so she called a local bicycle store to get more information. A few minutes later she told me that she wouldn’t be making the trip.

“The fellow I talked to said the roads have no shoulders, and they’re very dangerous for

cyclists. You know that I don't ride my bike on roads, especially when they don't have shoulders."

And she didn't. The next day, I dismantled the bicycles and put them in cardboard boxes. Then we boarded the Via Rail train and travelled uneventfully to Sackville.

Friday morning, we picked up the Trans Canada Trail again and pedaled to Malden, just short of the Confederation Bridge leading to Prince Edward Island. The last few kilometres of the trail were terrible. They were all dug up and rocky.

As we neared our destination, Elizabeth stopped, pulled out her iPhone and informed me that she'd had enough.

She checked Google maps and plotted an alternate route. We veered off onto a narrow dirt road but, after more than 40 minutes of hard slogging, came to an impasse. The road was washed out. We retraced our steps and tried a different route. Finally, after taking multiple detours, we reached our accommodation just before dark. The trip was supposed to be 50 km; my GPS showed that we had travelled 80 km.

"How was the trail?" asked our host at the Bed and Breakfast.

"Pretty rough," I replied.

"I know," he said. "They graded it this spring, but that just pulled up the rocks from below the surface. Now the trail is so bad I can't even walk my dog on it."

On the fateful Saturday, July 14, we crossed over the Confederation Bridge and then travelled all day on the Trans Canada Trail. The sky was overcast, but the trail was good and the countryside was beautiful. We had an idyllic ride. At Hunter River, a two-lane highway crossed the trail. It had no shoulders.

"This is us," I told Elizabeth. "We turn left here. Our B & B is just a few kilometres north. There wasn't anything closer."

She took out her iPhone and punched in the address.

"Google maps says the B & B is two kilometres south," she said.

"Sometimes Google maps is wrong," I responded. "I researched all the accommodations in the area, and I booked the closest. It's just north of here."

We repeated this conversation, three more times.

Finally, she said: "Okay. If you know the way, you go first."

We had been cycling now for six days, and it was the first time that I had taken the lead. The highway was not heavily travelled and most of the traffic was giving us a wide berth. We had only gone two kilometres, however, when there was a very loud bang just behind me. Elizabeth had been struck by a full-size brown van. She died almost immediately.

The previous night, Elizabeth had worn her ear plugs. She did this occasionally if it appeared that things might get noisy. And our B & B fronted on a highway bustling with transport trucks. Elizabeth had grown up in an excessively quiet home, where everyone

went around on tiptoes. (I, on the other hand, had shared a bedroom with my two brothers. It was like sleeping in the percussion section while the orchestra played the 1812 Overture. Didn't bother me – I had been virtually deaf in one ear since I was three-years old.)

“Ed,” she said, “I’m going to put my earplugs in. If you have anything to say, tell me now.”

I leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“I love you,” I declared.

“Good,” she smiled. “You can tell me that.”

And then she put in her earplugs.

And every day for the rest of my life I will say: “I love you.” And I will hear her reply: “Good. You can tell me that.”