

Eulogy for my wife, Elizabeth Ann Sovis

Delivered by Edmund A. Aunger at a memorial service held at Central Queens United Church, Hunter River, Prince Edward Island, on July 14, 2017.

On this day, five years ago, abruptly and without warning, my wife, Elizabeth Ann Sovis, aged 63, died a violent and horrific death. As we pedaled our bicycles along Rennies Road, faithfully following the white fog line, she was struck from behind by a drunk driver. The impact severed her brain stem and catapulted her body fifty metres.

Enfeebled by trauma and grief and despair, I fought with all my strength to stay alive. I didn't want to die – at least not at first – but my heart had been brutally ripped from its moorings and my life force was trickling away through every pore.

Over the ensuing months, however, I recognized that my heart was still beating and my lungs were still inflating. I was alive. But, cruel irony, I now wanted to die. The emotional pain was too great, too unrelenting and too unbearable, and I prayed for a final release. A peaceful passage into some dark underworld of oblivion and nothingness.

Love had been murdered. Joy had been vanquished. Hope had been destroyed. Who can continue living in such a world?

We all can. I now understand that true love never dies. It is enduring and eternal. Once that love has embraced us, we are set on fire forever, and we transmit a holy flame from heart to heart to heart... until our world is ablaze with wondrous light and joyous warmth. Dark is dispelled, cold repelled.

When Elizabeth and I first met in grade seven at Willowdale Middle School in Toronto, we were twelve years old. She was beautiful and I was awestruck. My best friend, Jeff Bradford, remembers those days and recounts an event that took place two years later.

“The Mikado was the school production,” he recalls, “and Elizabeth had the lead role – she had an exquisitely clear singing voice. I was operating a big spot light at the back of the gymnasium, and making a complete hash out of it, too. During the dress rehearsal you were with me and as Elizabeth was singing one of her solos you said, ‘She’s beautiful, isn’t she?’ What I remember especially, as we stood in the darkened gym, was how you said those words, so differently from the way you had always spoken before, less youthful, certainly not like an infatuated teenager. I remember turning my head to look at you because your tone of voice was so different from the Ed I knew. I’m glad you married Elizabeth; no one else would have been able to evoke that emotion from a teenage boy.”

In keeping with the popular dictum, many people believe that beauty is only skin deep. They're wrong. Real beauty has its home in the soul and radiates outward through bone and sinew and flesh before surfacing along its privileged pathways, the eyes and the mouth. The eyes are uncurtained windows, revealing our inner light – or darkness –, while peering out at a mottled world. The mouth is an amplified speaker, broadcasting our inner music – or noise –, while our ears take in the feedback.

My friend Jeff understood, and he told me. “Every time we spoke, Elizabeth would look directly at me – and directly through me, as if she knew how much of an inept teenage boy I was. There was a greater presence about her than any other girl I knew in high school, and this made her choice of you to marry so important to me.”

Elizabeth had many fine qualities – and I admired them all. Her sense of justice. Her strength of character. Her mastery of pragmatics. Her firm yet supple body. Her brilliant and cultured mind. Her love of learning. Her spirit of generosity and hospitality. Her honesty and authenticity. Her dedication and compassion. Her sweet voice and warm smile. Her determination and independence. Her unfailing courage.

I could go on. But this sounds too much like a heavenly grocery list. And it doesn't explain why I loved her.

I had no choice. It was meant to be. And I will never understand how or why. As a devout sceptic and dedicated empiricist, I instinctively discount stories of divine intervention and supernatural planning. But I can find no other explanation.

*Dearest Elizabeth.
Our hearts were molded, crafted for union.
With jig-cut forms fitting husband to wife,
Synchronised chimes praising in unison,
And hallowed winds breathing clay into life.*

*Dearest Elizabeth
When choppy seas becalmed and retreated,
Great lofty peaks emerged and pierced the mist.
When mighty winds cajoled and entreated,
Rich fertile lands sprouted life, and we kissed.*

So, what happened next?

When we were 18 years old, I asked Elizabeth to marry me and she accepted. Standing together at the altar, we swore oaths of undying faithfulness and fidelity, and consummated our vows with a passionate kiss. I was immediately transformed from an ugly toad into a handsome prince. We ran to the chapel door where an ornate carriage pulled by four prancing white horses awaited and carried us off to our castle. We lived happily ever after.

No, my children. Not even fairy tales spool off so smoothly. There are always obstacles and broken hearts, wrong turns and fearful destinations, innocent errors and prideful mistakes.

So, what really happened?

When we were 18 years old, we said good-bye and parted ways. Our separation may have been related to something or other I said. But that's pure speculation. It was a long time ago and it's impossible to remember the details. Though I do have a faint recollection.

"You know, Elizabeth," I pontificated one evening, "no intelligent person should ever get married before they're 30 years old. And I certainly would never want to be tied down before then. I need to be free to travel and explore the world. Meet interesting people, enjoy new experiences, and undertake great adventures. You know, be free to experiment with life."

Strangely, after that evening, and for no particular reason, we just seemed to drift apart.

And then, three years later, I had a very pleasant surprise. I was living in London, England, and Elizabeth called on the phone. She just happened to be in town for a week or so, and could she drop off that book I had loaned her?

"What book was that?" I wondered.

"You know," she said, "James Joyce's 'Portrait of the artist as a young man.'"

We saw each other every day, ate dinner together, went to see films and plays, and spent many hours talking... and gazing into each other's eyes. Any doubts vanished. She was the woman I loved with all my heart. She was the woman I wanted to live with for the rest of my life.

I didn't tell her that directly of course – that wouldn't have been cool – but she knew. She could read my mind. And that always gave her an unfair advantage.

But she also would have retorted: "You silly man, who are you trying to kid? When I arrived in London, you were busy with your adventures chasing after English women. And besides, I've already told you I'm dating someone else."

Ah yes, someone else. Several years later, I learned that Mr Someone Else was named Walter. He was a nice Swiss guy – from Zurich – that she had met in Toronto. But it didn't matter; I wasn't worried. I could see the big picture. Elizabeth was the only woman for me; and I was the only man for Elizabeth. That's just the way it was. Our love had no rivals.

And then she left London and travelled to France to begin her studies at the University of Toulouse. She promised to write me as soon as she found a place to stay. Moreover, she

pledged to repay my hospitality if I would come visit her at Christmas time. Something I looked forward to with great pleasure.

Elizabeth did write regularly although, regrettably, we had to postpone our planned reunion. She had accepted an invitation from a Swiss family to join them for Christmas. I was disappointed but understanding. Spending time with a German-speaking family would be a wonderful cultural experience.

And then, in January, British postal workers went on strike and it wasn't until mid-March that I received an urgent letter from Toulouse that, to my great consternation, had been posted two months earlier. Elizabeth was profoundly troubled and distressed – I'd never thought it possible! – and she poured out her heart before concluding:

“I'm not asking for advice. In fact, I'd appreciate if you didn't say any more about this. Just write to me – tell me about your holidays – if you found an apartment – if your future is miraculously becoming clear to you – write and make me feel sane. But please no condolences.”

I was severely shaken. In a moment of crisis, Elizabeth had cried out desperately for help, and I hadn't responded. It was horrible. By now she might be dead. And if not, how could I reach her? She didn't have a phone. She was no longer living in Toulouse. Her plan had been to move on to Tübingen University in Germany.

In a panic, I frantically scribbled out a quick note, addressed it to her last known address, and raced to the post office where I demanded their fastest delivery service.

“Please tell me where you are,” I had written. “I'll be there as soon as possible. I'm not leaving London until I hear from you. I love you.”

Then I returned home and waited. Uneasily. Anxiously. Fearfully. Until ten days later, when a telegram arrived from Zurich. Unpunctuated and in big capital letters, it read: “CANNOT SEE YOU EXPLANATION COMING.”

Her letter came two days later. The crisis was no more, Elizabeth explained apologetically; it had been a false alarm. But her life had taken an unexpected turn, and she was now headed in a new direction. She was going to marry a Swiss man and settle down in Zurich. She put on a brave front, but her cheerfulness seemed forced, as though concealing defeat and resignation. And then, in a final paragraph, she said goodbye:

“Now I leave you swimming in all the opportunities offered by higher education, and I head towards my little rut. Don't run too hard – but no I wouldn't want to ever see you get narrow minded and fat bellied.”

I was shattered. Our relationship was not supposed to end this way. Or any other way. Ever. It wasn't in the script.

Shortly afterwards, I heard a new song recorded by a talented young singer named James Taylor, and I listened to it over and over and over, until the words were permanently engraved in my mind. Titled “Fire and Rain,” Taylor expressed his devastation at the

sudden death – by suicide – of a childhood friend.

*Won't you look down upon me, Jesus,
You've got to help me make a stand.
My body's aching and my time is at hand,
And I won't make it any other way.*

Four years later, at the ripe old age of 25, I stopped over in Toronto en route from England to New Brunswick. I was still broken and despondent, but then I received astonishing news. Elizabeth, too, had just arrived in Toronto to visit parents; she was travelling from the Yukon to Geneva. Furthermore, after a short and unhappy marriage, she and Walter had separated and applied for a divorce.

Elizabeth and I soon reunited, never to part again. My friend Jeff simply smiled and said: “It’s destiny. You two were always meant for each other.”

Elizabeth’s failed marriage was a painful subject and she rarely spoke about it. And I never asked. Once, somewhat playfully, I teased her by saying: “I thought we agreed to wait until we were 30 before we got married.”

She stared at me, eyes ablaze, and wagged her finger. “YOU said that YOU were going to wait until YOU were 30. But YOU didn’t say that YOU were going to wait for ME.”

What could I say? She had a knack for being right about many things. So, I never raised the subject again, even in jest. Discretion is the greater part of valour.

Two years after Elizabeth died, Walter discovered her memorial website and sent me an unexpected but gracious email.

“Yes,” he wrote, “I’m the ‘young Swiss man’ you talked about in your beautiful eulogy, the crazy Yukon enthusiast, full of ideas, seriously opinionated and probably entirely unsuited to share Elizabeth’s life for even a short period of time, yet it is always with fondness when I look back to the early 70s and can only hope she didn’t hold too many grudges herself. Allow me to say that it is a great consolation to me that, with you, Elizabeth has found real life-happiness.”

At the time her marriage was coming to an end, Elizabeth had decided to pursue a career as a French teacher and had begun mapping out strategic steps, including immersion in a French-speaking community. Although she had previously been awarded a bachelor’s degree in modern languages – English, French and German – at the University of Toronto, and then studied in France, she feared that her French was rusty from lack of use.

So, we went to Quebec City, and Elizabeth took a job as a secretary/receptionist with a jewelry manufacturer, meeting and greeting clients, answering the phone and handling correspondence. (In reality, her French was still quite fluent and the customers, thinking she had just arrived from France, took to calling her “la jeune Française.”)

A year later we moved to Fredericton where she completed a bachelor’s degree in French-language education at the University of New Brunswick. And then, on to Edmonton, Alberta, where she accepted a job teaching English and French at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park.

She spent only four years at Salisbury Composite but, in 2012, former students and colleagues flocked to her funeral service. Caroline Adderson, a brilliantly perceptive and widely acclaimed novelist, now living in Vancouver, wrote to convey her sympathy: “She was my French teacher more than thirty years ago. While we did not keep in touch, I remember her so very fondly when so many of my high school teachers have faded from memory. She was the epitome of sweetness. I can picture her now practically twinkling, and so unflappable. I also remember how scandalized I was that she did not shave under her arms (in Alberta!) and yet a few years later I would become a feminist myself and finally understand what an understated role model she was. A wonderful, wonderful woman. The whole world and all her former students feel your loss.”

Elizabeth resigned from Salisbury Composite in order to care for our children, first, Edmund Stephen, and then, over the next five years, Gregory Alexander and Richard Kevin. She loved them completely and unconditionally. In their memorial tributes, our sons described her as their hero and protector, a larger than life figure, talented and courageous, impassioned but respectful, an inspiration and a model. And they fervently proclaimed their gratitude that this amazing woman had been their mother.

Permanently blessed by Elizabeth’s devoted and unfailing love, our sons now share this blessing with their own families. With beautiful and loving partners, Linda, Colleen and Colette. And with beautiful and loving children, Hannah Elizabeth, Helena Rose and Edmund Paul.

When our children were preschoolers, Elizabeth had worked evenings as a French-language tutor in distance education at Athabasca University. But when Richard, the youngest, started elementary school, she returned to her own studies, and completed a master’s degree in speech-language pathology at the University of Alberta.

Soon afterwards, she accepted a contract with Alberta’s newly-established French-language school boards and set up speech-language programs for preschoolers and young school-aged children right across the province. She later became a clinical instructor at the University of Alberta and supervised the practical training of many French-speaking students in the speech-language pathology program. In this, as in all her activities, she gave generously of her exceptional talents and her indomitable love.

Impressed by Elizabeth’s East-European origins – her parents had immigrated to Canada

from Slovakia – and by her leadership role in the French-Canadian community, a close colleague, Patricia Rijavec, described her as an inspirational Slavic heroine:

“J’ai eu la chance de travailler avec chère Elizabeth plusieurs années au Réseau provincial d’adaptation scolaire. Combien de fois n’a-t-elle pas su m’encourager et m’inspirer avec un gentil mot et un sourire toujours chaleureux. Aussi humble que sage et intelligente, Elizabeth est une de mes héroïnes slaves, une femme forte qui embrasse la vie avec énergie et une équanimité tranquille. Sa présence parmi notre équipe a su me transformer à jamais.”

At the funeral, a despondent parent told me how Elizabeth had diagnosed and treated his two daughters and, upon learning of her death, they had wept inconsolably. He expressed the conviction that, throughout the province, disheartened children had burst into tears at the tragic news.

In a ceremony televised by Radio-Canada, an Edmonton public school named their library – a huge rotunda also used for general assemblies and community events – the Elizabeth Sovis Memorial Library. And the University of Alberta named four federal government bursaries, offered to speech-language pathologists, the Elizabeth Sovis Memorial Scholarships.

Elizabeth was uncommonly frugal with herself, but unusually generous with others. As a student, living abroad, she had often done without basic necessities – including food – and never complained. When she began full-time employment, she was more likely to spend her money on teaching supplies and educational materials than on personal clothing. And for many years, her most expensive piece of jewelry was a simple gold wedding band.

I am quite thrifty too, but still capable of sudden bursts of extravagance. Shortly after our marriage, at a time when we had no money – only student debts – I bought a pearl necklace for her birthday. She was not happy.

“It’s too expensive,” she announced crossly, “and I don’t want it.”

“At least try it on,” I protested, “it’ll look beautiful on you. And it’s versatile. It can be dressy or casual. You can even wear it with jeans.”

“No,” she snapped, “I’m never going to wear it, so I’m certainly not going to try it on. I don’t like pearls. Take it back.”

But I could be stubborn too. “I won’t take it back,” I declared sharply. She simply shrugged and said, “Well, I’ll take it back then.” And she did.

Fortunately for our marriage, she mellowed; and I became shrewder. For example, I would take her out shopping – she hated shopping – and then watch patiently as she tried on dresses for an hour or so. She rarely liked any of them and so we would leave empty handed. Then I would go back later and buy a couple or three. She would keep them and wear them. And she always looked stunning.

I also discovered that she had a weakness for silk. So, I bought her silk blouses, silk underwear and silk pajamas. The saleswomen loved it. They all wanted to marry me.

When our children left home and I began feeling more affluent, I purchased a diamond wedding ring to replace her gold band. And then, the *coup de grâce*, a beautiful pearl necklace. We had come a long way.

After Elizabeth had returned the first necklace, she used the money to buy a bicycle. A cheap Sears 10-speed bicycle that never worked properly and, although used sparingly, soon fell apart.

I was annoyed and said so. “Why didn’t you tell me you wanted a bicycle?” I complained. “I would have bought you a nice one.” I was tempted to add, “instead of this pile of crap,” but I had the good sense to bite my tongue.

In those early years, Elizabeth was simply asserting her independence. As our relationship matured, she became more confident and more trusting. And she allowed me to buy her a decent bicycle, one she could actually ride, an 18-speed Nishiki Expedition with Shimano grip shifts. Unfortunately, this bicycle, loaned out for winter use and ridden in slush and snow, met with an inglorious end. So, I gifted her with another birthday present, a 27-speed Cannondale T800 touring bike.

Elizabeth needed a reliable bicycle because, at about age 50, she had agreed to some serious cycling – bicycle touring –, starting with weekend trips and then advancing to three-week holidays. This was an act of love, pure and simple. Not love of cycling, of course, but love for me.

I had ridden a bicycle since childhood and had long dreamed of pedalling across Europe. She, on the other hand, was apprehensive about cycling. Her balance was not good and she was afraid of falling – with good reason. She sometimes took tumbles, especially on loose gravel. Still, in spite of her misgivings, she was willing to give it a try. (She was gutsy that way.) She set only one solemn condition. No roads. Too dangerous.

We travelled in Europe – England, Scotland, Ireland, France and Slovakia – and, in alternate years, our home country, Canada. I loved sharing these adventures with her. It was magnificent. I would carefully map out our itinerary in advance, but – once we had mounted our bicycles – she would cautiously lead the way. I contentedly followed close behind – too close.

On our 25th wedding anniversary, she gave me a beautiful hand-made card, each page illustrated with a photo of our times together.

“From the shy beginnings,” it began, “to the passion, I have followed you to mountain tops and to faraway lands.”

The “mountain tops” page showed us hiking together in Alberta’s Rockies, and the “faraway lands” cycling in Cornwall, England.

In Canada, we travelled on the Trans Canada Trail, widely advertised as a safe and scenic coast-to-coast-to-coast greenway, but where, much to our dismay, the official guidebooks repeatedly took us on perilous journeys along motorized thoroughfares and highways. In 2008, for example, Elizabeth and I had tried to ride Alberta's longest stretch of "operational" Trans Canada Trail, 177 kilometres of former rail bed running from Wasketenau to Heinsburg. But it was composed of loose gravel, soft sand and rough ballast, used only by off-road motorized vehicles, and we were forced to abandon our plans and ride on nearby township roads.

Shortly afterwards, with undisguised indignation, Elizabeth announced that she intended to devote her retirement years to the development of better and safer trails for cyclists and hikers in Alberta. I was startled and surprised and warned her: "You would have to get involved in politics, and that's going to be frustrating and futile. Don't do it." But she wouldn't be swayed, and I reluctantly promised that when the time came I would do my best to support her.

Elizabeth and I had fond memories of New Brunswick – its welcoming people, its bilingual culture and its scenic beauty – and for many years we longed to make a return visit on our bicycles. But a quick look at the Trans Canada Trail map revealed that we would have little choice but to ride on highways. So, in 2012, Elizabeth quickly vetoed our New Brunswick travel plans, insisting instead that we take our annual cycling holiday in the neighbouring province of Prince Edward Island.

Tourist publications described "The Gentle Island" as a safe and tranquil "cycling paradise" for visitors of all ages and abilities. The Trans Canada Trail – known locally as the Confederation Trail – was a top quality 435-kilometre trailway with a hard-packed stone-dust surface. More importantly, as far as Elizabeth was concerned, it was advertised as completely non-motorized, and dotted with villages, such as Hunter River, that provided "a convenient selection of accommodations, food, and services." We could pedal the Island from tip-to-tip without ever travelling on a road or highway.

Nevertheless, not content to leave well enough alone, I adjusted our vacation plans so that we could fly first to Moncton, New Brunswick, – where I had spent my childhood – and then follow the Trans Canada Trail to the Confederation Bridge. Unfortunately, when we arrived in Moncton, Elizabeth discovered that the first 50 kilometres of the "trail" were on a two-lane highway. That night, she wrote in her diary: "Ed is ticked that I don't want to do this part on roads. I'm ticked that he doesn't listen when I say avoid roads." And so, after a somewhat strained discussion, we disassembled the bikes, packed them into cardboard boxes, and boarded a VIA Rail train to Sackville.

From Sackville we pedalled northeast along the Trans Canada Trail – a former rail line –, struggling through minefields of jagged ballast and swampy potholes until we reached Malden. Then, on Saturday, July 14, 2012, with huge sighs of relief, we loaded our bicycles onto the shuttle bus that carried us over the thirteen-kilometre bridge to Borden, Prince Edward Island.

That afternoon, as we continued our ride towards Hunter River – the overnight destination recommended in the provincial cycling guide – the trail was smooth and flat, peaceful and idyllic. But when we reached the turn-off for our Bed & Breakfast accommodation, we could only stare at the designated route – the only route – in stunned silence and shocked incredulity. Rennies Road was a two-lane highway. There was only an intermittent shoulder, and it was sandy and gravelly, often down-sloping, seldom rideable.

Elizabeth argued that there must be some mistake. This couldn't possibly be the right route. And then finally, after considering the options, she said: "Okay. If you know the way, you go first." It was an odd request. I never take the lead. Nevertheless, I pedalled cheerfully on ahead for about a kilometre before stopping at the top of a hill.

Elizabeth had fallen quite far behind and when she caught up, I said, "Why don't you go first now." But she shook her head and murmured, "No, keep on going." A few moments later, there was a very loud bang just behind me. Elizabeth had been struck by a brown Chevrolet Express Van and flung down the highway like a floppy doll, until her lifeless body came to rest, head askew, near a dirt driveway.

In the aftermath, I sat in shock, overwhelmed with guilt, despising myself and my actions, sobbing uncontrollably, and crying out over and over again: "I should have been behind her. I never ride ahead of her. I should have been behind her." An angel of mercy clasped my hands tightly and, after every wail, responded compassionately: "It's not your fault. It's not your fault."

Now, after five years, I finally understand that it was not my fault. I could never have saved her or protected her. I had always followed so closely, my wheel almost touching hers, that even if the van had hit me first, it would also have killed her.

Nevertheless, when overcome by darkness, I have often wished that we had died together. That I hadn't been left to bear this terrible pain alone. But then, the memory of her undying and unselfish love restores and revives me.

Since our beginnings, her love gave me life. The more desolate I felt, the closer she held me. I suffered depression; I felt worthless; I was exhausted; I couldn't go on. 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.

*Dearest Elizabeth,
Our souls are wedded now and forever,
With love-strong bonds that Death cannot sever.*