

Connie's Memorial – December 17, 2016

We are gathered here to remember Connie Howard. Jeff, our hearts grieve with you. Byron, Natalie, Geoff, our hearts go out to you. To Jennifer, Joanna, David, Bijou and little Edie; to Connie's mom and dad, and mother-in-law, to Connie's siblings, Kathy, Daniel, Andreas and Martin; and sister-in-law Maureen, to all Connie's in-laws, nieces, nephews, our hearts are poured out for you. To all of us who have been touched by Connie's life, there are no words for this absence, that has come too soon—no words to fill a void so large, and still we struggle to find them—so, to bring her, somehow, near once more.

Connie and I used to meet for coffee (naturally it had to be a place with dark rich coffee and good pastry). We'd meet to compare notes on stuff we were reading, stuff we were writing. We'd discuss, complain, conspire, but soon enough she'd lean in, tilt her head and fix me with her eyes, and say, "So how are you, really? And how's Deb, how's Teryl, how's Mark, and we'd go through the list. And every time—like everyone here who met with Connie—I'd leave feeling anointed by her friendship.

Connie lived at a deeper level. When delight came, in the form of good news from her kids, or like it did 14 years ago when Jeff stepped into her life, she ran with it—her joy was infectious. That first introduction of Jeff, we all went skating, all of us fairly awkward on the ice, which, curiously, made us all rather at home with each other. Connie had this innate sense of context and occasion.

When sorrow came, as it does, she felt it more intensely. When hardship came to those around her, she suffered as though the hardships were her own; and knowing she shared our burdens, encouraged us, gave us hope.

But I can't help thinking that it cost her in ways we don't understand. Nevertheless, she wouldn't have changed a thing, and it made her beautiful to us.

Still, Connie was, shall we say, not a glass of milk. She could be dark, stubborn, prone to jealousy...and just now I hear her whispering in my ear, "Steve, you speak as though these are bad things!"

I recall a discussion-slash-argument in Earls—a weekly meeting place for the four of us—on the relative merits of jealousy—as Connie saw it, it could be a form of flattery. I think we closed the place down, and we didn't even get on to the merits of stubbornness.

Connie was not a glass of milk, she was bottle of fine Pinot Noir: complex, sensitive, rich and enticing to be around.

Every month, for the past eight years, this cohort of four couples met to ask questions about faith, about life, about meaning, (about heavy machinery), about each other. Most of these questions

could tend toward ambiguity, but Connie never let us get away with abstraction. She had an intellect like a homing device, with the ability to detect deflection or any kind of obfuscation—now she would use a better word here: one related to fertilizer. She also had a curiosity, that would push us, sometimes in uncomfortable directions.

Connie begged no deference, needed no justification for any of this. She simply said, to quote her, “I used to be a pleaser; now I simply need to speak my truth.” And so she did, valiantly—and in her presence, we became better people.

We were all influenced by Connie’s faith—an evolving, living faith. She had little interest in dogma and grand theological doctrines, she would call those a failure of vision.

For Connie, faith was about owning your own stuff; and loving yourself anyway; and giving away as much love as you could; and receiving as much love as you could; and knowing that we all do this in different ways; to different degrees; and often poorly; and being forgiving about that; and delighting in it all. That is to say, that for Connie, faith, God, Creation, Christ, are all about love, or they are about nothing.

Twenty-five years ago, I found myself in a mountain bike race with Connie. We were cycling down a side road in Kananaskis and Connie passed me, and I passed Connie—it’s one of those things that never start out as a competition, but pretty soon it’s this break-neck race to the parking lot. I wish I could say I won that race. All I’ll say is that when it came to *a race, (a journey)*, not many eclipsed the focus, the tenacity, the precise timing, the sheer pleasure of the moment, and the courage to go for broke, whatever the outcome—a courage that was so very evident in these last years of her life.

But what I remember, most vividly, was the flash of smile over her shoulder, and the burst of laughter as she passed me the final time.

Connie has passed us, has gone on ahead, but I’m quite sure this is how she wants us to remember her: the flash of smile, the burst of laughter and that inextinguishable, undying light in her eyes.

Prayer

Creator, God, we give thanks for the gift of Connie.

We give thanks that we had the privilege and the honour of knowing Connie, and we are deeply grateful for the experience of being held in her heart.

We give thanks, that while her passing has left a great shadow upon our lives, we nevertheless get to carry her with us, through our memories, that at times bring her back to us, as near as our own breath.

But we also grieve. We grieve in confusion, sometimes in anger, often in helplessness; and in our sorrow we ask for comfort, and pray that our grieving would honour her memory.

We especially mourn with Jeff, Natalie, Byron, Geoff, with each member of Connie's family, who feel the immensity of loss, and will continue to feel it—for each one, we ask for special comfort, for peace.

Too, we are grateful that her suffering is over, that her pain, which became a prison, has passed.

We know that a life so bright can't help but continue to shine, not only in the faces of those close to her, but shine, as the scribes have said, in the new heaven and the new earth.

And so we celebrate her life, and give thanks, for her being, her bright legacy, her beautiful and brilliant arch through this world. And we commend her into your hands.

World without end, Amen.