

My sister was a wonderful and patient teacher from the moment I was born. After nine years of being an only child, she finally had a sibling, a playmate! Board games were brought out and taught to me years before the recommended ages on the outside of the box. While looking through pictures recently, I found one of Melinda and Julieann, her best friend in high school, and me. In the photo we are all doing some ridiculous cheer which I realized, on closer inspection, was part of the game “girl talk”. How unique, and kind, I thought, of teenage girls to play a silly game with an eight year old younger sister.

When mom, Melinda and I went to Europe in 1993, and again, when Melinda and I went to Mexico in 2000, Melinda was the one who had the foreign language skills to keep us fed and navigated. Her musical talent throughout the years was a blessing to all of us, and she often accompanied some combination of singing voices on the piano. In high school, when I was convinced Mom was being awfully mean, she counseled me.

My phone conversations with Melinda were frequent, especially these last couple years. We talked about events in our lives, decisions we had to make, challenges we faced at our respective schools or jobs. In the overlap between medicine and psychotherapy, our chosen professions, we found rich areas of mutual interest such as culture-bound syndromes and the role of self-disclosure when working with our patients or clients. We talked about how to be present with people who are suffering.

We talked about our friendships, which sustained us and sometimes disappointed us. We talked about God, and how we didn't know what to pray for. It felt too painful to ask God for her to be healed, free of this terrible disease, when we knew very well what the likely outcome would be. We settled on asking God for peace. And, of course, we talked about the Cubs.

In our telephone conversations, there were often periods of silence. While sometimes one of us would ask, “are you there?”, usually we knew that the other was thinking, processing what the other had just said. It felt like a special kind of deep listening that we offered each other.

I will miss everything about her, from her often painted toenails to the cadence of her laugh. I will miss her hugs, her wisdom, and singing together. I will miss the way she listened to me, as only a sister could.