

## A life of prayer

There are so many things I would want you to know about Melinda—but you don't have a week! She was a child in the days before cheap long-distance phone calls and the internet. Because of that—I actually wrote fairly frequent letters home. And the Christmas that Melinda was six, my sister Judy, gave to me for Christmas a hand written compilation of my descriptions and comments about Melinda from the time of her birth—until shortly after her 6th birthday. Reading through it last night I was amazed to see how so much of who she became as a mature young woman was present in her childhood. And how so much of her – her verbal precocity, her love for music, her attempts to explain the world can all be captured and understood as prayer.

Food—Her very first “all on her own prayer” was uttered at the breakfast table when she was 21 months old. She noticed that her dad and I had forgotten to say grace as we began to eat. After she reminded us of that fact, and we all holding hands at the table, she said: “Thank you food.” She had prayed before, repeating after us, but that was the first time she did it on her own.

What she was eating and what she was refusing to eat was a frequent theme in my letters home. Shortly before this prayer, I'd written that she would live on juice, crackers, ice cream, and potato chips if I'd let her! When she was four I wasn't sure she was ever going to eat anything beside peanut butter sandwiches. At that age she was in an all-day preschool and one of her bed time prayers was: “And tell them to not fix something that I don't like for lunch.” So it's been something of a miracle for me to see her transform from a child with a very narrow range of foods to an adult who loved all kinds of food and introduced them to me! When we traveled, it was her goal to get the best food we could for a reasonable amount of money. When she and I spent a week in London together the one guide book we took with us every day was “Cheap Eats—London.”

Melinda inherited what came to be known as the “Gordon need for food.” I inherited it from my dad, who told my husband-to-be that he'd get along fine as long as he kept me fed! When she was 17 months old, I reported to my parents that, “Melinda's like me and Dad. She gets real grouchy and fussy right before meal times. After supper her disposition improves 100% percent.” She couldn't understand how Steve could go almost all day without eating, and he learned the wisdom of keeping her fed!

Over the course of the last two years she and Steve were the recipients of countless delicious meals delivered by friends—many of them from this congregation. All of those wonderfully prepared meals (some of which I got to share!) were expressions of love and were in their own way prayers for her health and life.

Music—Melinda was singing songs at a very young age—many of them songs she was learning in Sunday School. She also loved being sung to. When I was putting her to bed one night when she was 20 months old—she kept saying something and I finally figured out it was “tree tops.” She wanted me to sing—“Rock-a-bye baby in the treetops.” She would also at that age sing “Go to sleeps little baby” to her doll. She started taking piano lessons when she was 5. She had been reading since she was 4. One night when she was about 5 ½ she and I were singing a song while we doing the dishes together. We

couldn't remember all the words—so she went to get the hymn book she had been using for piano to look the words up. After we were finished with that one she said, “Let's sing another hum-en.”—her phonetic version of hymn.

While she went on to love many kinds of music, “Let's sing or play another hymn” was one of the themes of her life. One of the things she most enjoyed about church was the hymns. She and Mary Beth and I sang hymns together for fun and sometimes shared them with a congregation. She told me once that it really didn't seem like Christmas was complete unless somewhere during the season she got to sing the Bach setting of “Break Forth O Beauteous Heavenly Light.” One of the highlights of our trip to London was hearing the Messiah in St. Paul's cathedral. A year ago this summer we moved the piano she'd played through her childhood and teenage years to her apartment. Greg Siler, the curate here, was gracious enough to give her the version of the Episcopal hymnal with all the music—and I remember her telling him how playing hymns had become her form of prayer. When she didn't know how or what to pray, the centuries of collected words and melodies of the church sustained and carried her.

Figuring it all out—Melinda was an amazingly observant, perceptive child (and adult) and was always thinking—and trying to figure out how the world worked. When she was four she told her Dad and me that “the moon is stuck to the sky with sticky stuff. The sun is too, but the sticky stuff melts when the sun sets.”

One evening that same fall she and I were baking cookies. She said: “All the houses are quiet. Everyone is inside doing things they haven't done for weeks.”

A few months later I wrote: “Melinda's trying to make rules about everything so that the world makes sense. One she came up with tonight is that all Daddys are taller than Mommys. Yesterday she was talking about moving—and then talked about buying a U-Haul truck to put our things in. Then she commented that we had to move our things and not our house because houses are stuck down to the ground and you can't move them.”

At the age of four she'd figured out that there were immovable objects. In her short life there were several immovable objects, with cancer being the last. She did everything in her power to move or destroy this immovable object. She called upon some of the most talented and capable medical minds to help her and Steve decide on courses of treatment. In the end there was no moving of this object.

And so she lived with it and in spite of it. As it became evident that at the end of her fellowship she was not going to be able to do the work she had been preparing to do for years—she mourned that, but began to do some things that she could do. She returned to knitting. She took French classes and this fall she began the first course in Education for Ministry at this church. She continued to read novels—a practice she maintained all the way through medical school, residency, and fellowship. (And one of the things I will miss the most is her book recommendations and conversations about the books we've read.)

And she continued to pray. She wrapped herself in the prayer shawls she had been given. She received two this summer—one hand woven from our dear friend, Diane, and one quilt made for her by the participants in a day of prayer for healing by women from this church. She was so grateful for the many prayers being offered on her behalf by so many. I loaned her a book this summer called *Praying in Color* which

offered suggestions for drawing prayers rather than using words. She commented that she wasn't sure it was for her, but that it had given her ideas about how knitting could be a form of prayer.

In the end the immovable object remained immovable. But around it Melinda knit together a community of love and concern. What we see here today is only a portion of the community she knit together. And this community is so very aware of the huge tear that her death leaves in its fabric. We will miss her gifts and graces so very, very much. But we will continue on as we lived with her—gathering together at this table and the table in the reception hall, being sustained by the hymns and prayers of many people, and facing our own immovable objects with her example of grace, perseverance, bravery and wisdom before us. And together we affirm that “love is stronger than death.”