

Rememberance of Melinda K. Gordon

Church of Our Saviour

October 27, 2007

As many of you know, Melinda and I met here at this church. In October 2001 we both happened to join a group of people from the church who were going out to brunch. As we were all walking to the restaurant, I chatted with her and learned among other things that she had grown up, at least through grade school, in Iowa City, as did I, and so we discovered that we had both lived there at the same time for several years.

I began talking to her more and more. I quickly discovered that she was a completely fascinating person to talk to, that I could talk to her for 10 minutes and then I would wish that I could talk to her for another hour. I was drawn to her wit, her thoughtfulness, her extraordinarily insightful mind. I also thought that she was **really really** pretty.

I knew that she was dating some guy – who I could tell was not good enough for her – so I bided my time. In late May of 2002 I was one of two people in charge of sorting books that had been donated for a Book Sale that the church did as part of the neighborhood Antiques Fair. Melinda volunteered to help sort books. So as we were sorting books and chatting, she ran across a CD by a folk artist, Gillian Welch. She let it drop that the guy she had been dating had a lot of CDs by this artist, and that she had unfortunately failed to copy his CDs before breaking up with him. As she later teased me, I demonstrated great restraint at that point. I waited all of 20 minutes before asking her out. For the next night.

We dated for a little over two years, and were married September 5, 2004. Prior to the wedding we met over in front of the Lincoln Park Conservatory for photos, which was where the photo on the front of the bulletin today was taken. Just before that photo was taken, Melinda's smile was starting to look pasted on and forced,

and she seemed to be getting tired of all of the picture taking. In the photo taken just before the one on the bulletin, her lips are pursed together, she looks extremely annoyed, and she seems to be thinking “Get me the HELL out of here.” At that moment I blurted out “Honey, you look really HOT in that dress.” She burst out laughing and the photographer was able to capture that laugh.

After the wedding, we had the reception at a small restaurant a few blocks from here. Melinda and I were going to do a first dance to a recording of “Our Love is Here to Stay” by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald. But the restaurant’s sound system could not seem to play the CD that I had burned with the song – they kept starting the song but after a few seconds it would stop. About the third time the CD started and failed, all of our reception guests began singing the song to us. So we danced to our families and friends singing “Our Love is Here to Stay”. It was not at all how we had planned things, but it was a beautiful moment.

It took about six months for us to figure out how to BE married.

But the Spring and early Summer of 2005 were enormously happy and in retrospect seem to have been practically care free. We began talking about starting a family.

Then in July of 2005 Melinda was diagnosed as having breast cancer, and an especially aggressive form of it. While her cancer did not define our marriage, it certainly provided the context for the rest of our marriage.

Melinda began chemotherapy almost immediately, as her cancer was inoperable unless it could first be shrunk by chemo. She was on chemo from August through about December of 2005. While she was getting chemo, she took and passed her Oncology Board exam. She said that while she was studying for her exam she told herself that it was no big deal that she was taking the exam while on chemo, but at the moment she completed the exam she was so proud of herself she wanted to cry. It meant a lot to her to be able to do something so significant related to her work even though her

clinical and research work were on hold because of her treatment.

She had a mastectomy a few days before Christmas, 2005.

After her mastectomy, she was extremely unhappy with the standard silicone prosthetic breasts. She thought they were sweaty and uncomfortable. Her sister pointed her to a web site with a pattern that could be used to knit a prosthetic, and she knit her own prosthetic breasts, experimenting with different kinds of yarn and stuffing until she had perfected it. On an internet message board for young women with breast cancer that she frequented, she called herself “Dr. Titty Knitter.”

While she was on chemo, she liked to watch bad television. She used the reality TV shows *Project Runway* and *So You Think You Can Dance* to get her through chemotherapy. I am a big fan of the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and for years had been trying to convince her to watch it with me. Finally while she was on chemo she was too weak to resist that suggestion anymore, and over the next several months we watched all seven seasons of *Buffy* on

DVD. Early in 2006, while she was getting radiation, she would visualize little Buffy radiation waves chasing down and slaying the evil cancer cells.

Early in 2006, when she was done with chemo, mastectomy, and radiation, we began thinking about what to do next. We knew that it was highly probable that her cancer would recur, and if it did recur, at that point it would be incurable. So we investigated our options and eventually settled on an experimental study at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda that had had some success with her specific form of cancer. It was a far from perfect option, but it seemed to us to be the best option we had at the time. It involved three doses of chemo from about April through June of 2006, followed by a stem cell transplant as an inpatient from mid July through mid August.

In the Fall and Winter of last year she tired easily as she recovered at home from the treatment at the NIH. By early 2007 she was feeling better and was able to return to work. By Spring of this

year she was interviewing for jobs on the West Coast, and she got a job offer in Oregon that she was very excited about.

In May of this year, just as she had accepted the job in Oregon and we were preparing to go house-hunting, we discovered that her cancer had recurred and spread to her liver. The initial round of chemotherapy was harder than any previous chemo had been for her, and her blood counts did not allow her to receive any more chemo for about a month.

Around this time she became extremely frustrated that she did not have a creative outlet, because she tired so easily there were not a lot of things that she could do. She started knitting again as a creative outlet, knitting socks for herself and me, hats, and children's clothes for a charity that sends knit children's clothing to third world countries. She said that knitting gave her problems that she knew how to solve. She took French classes last Summer and again starting this past September, and in September she joined a group called Education for Ministry here at this church

that studies the Bible and church history and gathers together for theological reflection. In early September when we were discussing whether she should try to take those two classes when her future seemed so uncertain, we agreed that it was far better to try to take those classes and not be able to complete them, than it would be to not attempt them because of the possibility she would not be able to finish them.

Over the summer she was able to receive chemotherapy more or less regularly, and while she was extremely tired and in some pain, by mid- to late August she was feeling ok.

In late August and early September we were able to go on a wonderful vacation that included going to a beautiful wedding of friends of ours in Washington State, spending three nights at an Inn we had honeymooned at in the Canadian Gulf Islands, and visiting my brother and sister-in-law also in Washington State.

Later in September and October her condition got worse quite dramatically, and it became clear that the cancer in her liver was growing very quickly and causing her liver to fail.

While we always knew that this time could come, it was enormously difficult.

As you can tell from what people have been saying, Melinda was an over-achiever. She recently mentioned discovering a report card of hers from First Grade. Her father had written a note on the report card to her First Grade teacher asking why Melinda had gotten a “check minus” in Reading Comprehension when on her previous report card she had gotten a “check plus”. Melinda had internalized that attitude. She always wanted to do better at whatever she was doing. And one of the most frustrating things about her disease for her was how it was cutting short her life before she could accomplish all the things she wanted to accomplish. She expressed frustration that if, for example, she died thirty years from now, and the people she had interviewed

with out on the West Coast heard about it, they would know her as a wonderful oncologist who had accomplished an enormous amount who had then died. But if she died today and those people heard about it, they would just think of her as someone they had met once who died.

A few weeks ago, at a point where it was clear that she wasn't going to live much longer, she had what she considered to be a revelation from God. For those of you who knew her, Melinda was quite skeptical, and was not in the slightest prone to divine revelations. She heard a quiet voice telling her that "Your life is enough." "Your life is enough." She took this to be God telling her that her life was complete. That it was ok that she didn't have the chance to accomplish everything she wanted to accomplish. That the fact that she could not DO all the things she wanted to DO did not make her life inadequate or meaningless. And she took great comfort in this message from God.

The last week of her life her liver failure was becoming increasingly acute. As her liver failure progressed, it caused her to become increasingly confused and disoriented. She had great difficulty finding words and communicating. For someone who was usually incredibly articulate, this was tremendously frustrating.

Two things stayed with her throughout that confusion, up to her final hours. The first was her compassion for those around her. The last week of her life neither she nor I got more than at most maybe an hour of sleep at night, and there were of course a number of horrible things happening. So I found myself crying a lot. And when she saw this, it would momentarily jolt her out of her confusion, and she would hug me or put her hand on my cheek and say “Don’t worry. It will be OK.”

The second thing that stayed with her until her final hours was this. Throughout our relationship, especially as we were going to bed, it was extremely common for me to say to her “I love you” and for

her to reply (often as she was yawning and falling asleep) “I love you, baby.” Throughout the course of that horrible last week, even as she was more and more confused and less and less able to communicate, I would whisper to her that “I love you SO much.” And she would respond, “I love you, baby.”