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On Importance: Lessons Learned From a Strong Woman

At the beginning of November, I began writing my editorial column about fighting against gender inequalities at work and elsewhere. That was the working title, anyway. I was writing in response to a flurry of posts on the discussion list regarding the Division 35 “Aunt Academe” column that Judy Logue forwarded to the list as well as some troubling articles from the *New York Times*. I began to delineate some areas where it seems that men are on the losing end of inequalities that seem to be easily ignored. However, a major life event has derailed that enterprise, at least for the time being.

I have been avoiding writing this editorial for the last six weeks despite believing that there is at least one important message to be shared with the division. Shortly after starting to write the above referenced exploration, my aunt, Sylvia King, lost her brief yet courageous battle against multiple myeloma on November 25, 2006. According to the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation, “Multiple myeloma (also known as myeloma or plasma cell myeloma) is a progressive hematologic (blood) disease. It is a cancer of the plasma cell, an important part of the immune system that produces immunoglobulins (antibodies) to help fight infection and disease” (http://www.multiplemyeloma.org/about_myeloma/). Of course, Sylvia knew this and much more. She had just retired from her career as a cancer nurse. I hardly find this irony amusing. I confess that since her diagnosis and death just over two months later, it has been difficult to focus on much else. The quibbling about this oppression or that injustice have felt much less important in the face of losing a close loved one.

Sylvia was a very important influence in my life, and there are so many qualities about her that I admire. Please indulge me as I honor her memory by sharing with you some of the lessons that I have taken from this very strong and compassionate woman. Given that she was a musician as well as nurse, she would probably smile that I write this with Mozart’s *Requiem* playing in the background. I invite you to listen to it as well. It really is good music, and seems to me to express a balance of important emotions: grief, sadness, joy, and celebration.

She told the truth... usually. One of the things that I loved about Sylvia is that she often spoke the truth, even when it was difficult or not convenient. This is not to say that she lacked tact or just blurted out whatever was on her mind. On the contrary, she very much considered the feelings of others. I suppose that she learned much about balancing honesty and hope while working as a cancer nurse. Like everyone else, cancer patients want the truth about their conditions. Yet, hope is needed if survival is to be possible. The most difficult question I ever asked Sylvia was about her own medical condition this past October during what would turn out to be my last visit with her. She presented a fairly hopeful vision, but the truth was in her eyes and “between the lines.” After she finished speaking, there was a moment – maybe fifteen seconds – where we held each other’s gaze. I desperately only wanted to hear the hope, but her eyes seemed to plead with me, “don’t blow my cover.” She tried to give those around her some sense of hope, even if her own was fading.

She was compassionate. I always knew that Sylvia had a deep love of people and a desire to offer mercy and comfort in times of pain and distress. After all, it is for this that we often look to those in the helping professions. However, something very moving occurred for me during the funeral rituals. Many stories were shared about how she had reached out in kindness to persons who needed encouragement. I will share just one: during the pastor’s eulogy, he shared that Sylvia had been someone who walked beside them with mercy and encouragement as his family faced challenges and judgmental attitudes from congregants that nearly drove them to leave the church. In short, numerous people related how Sylvia reached beyond the things that we psychologists would call defenses, personas, and compulsions to speak to needs, pains, and vulnerabilities. Her compassion was also evidenced in how she was volunteering her time. For example, she had made several trips overseas to help medical personnel in other countries establish cancer treatment centers. In fact, she was on her second or third trip to Malaysia for that very purpose when she became one of the center’s patients.

She was determined. When Sylvia put her mind to something, there was little that could stop her. As I mentioned above, Sylvia was a musician. Over the course of time she had written several songs that she wanted to record. A few summers ago, she was able to do exactly that with other musicians living in Nashville. Her determination was also evidenced in how she lived the last days of her life. Being faced with the existential given of death, she sought to spend as much time as she could with those she loved. That determination and the generosity of others got her back to the States from Malaysia, and from Pennsylvania to South Carolina to be with her children and grandchildren. When faced with the things of ultimate importance, she chose to strengthen relationships.

She approached life with a sense of humor. One of my favorite memories of Sylvia’s sense of humor occurred during a family reunion. It had been raining all day, and the adults were trying to keep the children in the pavilion out of the rain. Sylvia then ran into the rain, high stepping and yelling, “hey mom! Look at me playing in the rain!” Just as she finished, she slipped and got herself completely soaked. Of course, she thought it was hysterical. This story has been told and retold for the last twenty years. I think that she knew that laughter was some of the best medicine that we can have. I asked her

several years ago how it was that she was able to work in oncology and hospice for so long. “It’s pretty hard, honestly. But, I have to do things to take care of myself: laugh, sing, pray, and focus on the important stuff.”

She was pretty humble. Sylvia did not seem to seek the approval of others in what she did, she just seemed to do what she felt needed to be done. While I knew about many of her activities – nursing, her musical talents, and some volunteer work – I was amazed to hear so many examples of her giving. During her funeral, my father shared that he and my uncle had no idea how deep her commitments and influences were because she just did not talk about them. I do not think she needed to. This is why you find nothing when you “Google” her (though, there are plenty of hits that are not her).

She was a person of faith. Though I will not belabor this point, I must acknowledge that the strength of Sylvia’s faith has been a very positive influence on me. I think her faith served as a foundation and a guide regarding these other qualities, and it was a clear source of strength for her during her last few months.

What relevance does this have to our division? This leads me back where I began this editorial: sometimes we quibble over things that are of secondary importance at best. I wish that we would begin to explore what are admirable and salubrious *human* qualities rather than dividing the world along gender lines and then calling one or the other superior, or more healthy, or whatever. As I have reflected on those character traits of my aunt that I most admire, how they are rooted in traditional gender norms is irrelevant to me. They are beautiful qualities that I appreciate in any human that demonstrates them. I am not sure that sacrificing relationships with each other for the sake of seeing this or that quality associated with this or that group is a worthwhile pursuit.

However, it is indeed valuable to explore how restrictive gender norms might make it easier or harder to express or develop a particular admirable quality. Indeed, valuing relationships over winning at any cost is a priceless trait with which men tend to struggle because of our socialization. It is great on the football field and maybe the board room, but is not so great in couple and family settings.

Thank you for indulging me as I wrote the article that felt to me as if it had to be written. I can hear Sylvia now, “Ok, Mitchie¹! Enough with this bragging on me.”

Goodbye, Sylvia. I love you and I miss you. Thank you for teaching me some very important lessons.

¹ Inclusion of this nickname here is by no means whatsoever permission to address me in this manner. Only one person now is permitted to call me this. All others do so at their own peril.