

In Serving the Memory of Our Beloved Stephanie

Perhaps some of my students here today will recall this passage. I pray each and every time that I use this in a classroom full of seniors that each of you will take it deep into your heart. Today, I have a bittersweet feeling that the message in these very old words will once and for all feel real enough to demonstrate just how truly priceless each of us are in THIS life. And it goes...

All mankind is of one author and one volume. When one among us dies, that one chapter is not torn out of the book but translated into a better language. God's hand is in every translation and his hand will bind up all of our scattered leaves for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.

No man is an island, entire of himself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. Any person's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind.

These are the words of the British literary great - John Donne. Think of his intention in this religious sermon entitled "Meditation 17". Simply put, Donne needs for us to understand that we are all connected. We ... even in the most casual relationships affect one another each and every single day. We, like the chapters of a book, are unique in and of ourselves and at the same time we are bound together in each of the fragments of our lives.

All of us assembled here today shared the gift of Stephanie's life for much too brief a time. Eighteen years for her family and certainly less for the friends seated here. Because we are human and fallible; we all tend to live our lives in the moment. We worry over bills and to do lists, upcoming commitments, petty arguments, our social calendars, eating right, how we look and thousands of other things that on a day such as today have absolutely no value.

Today we all are dealing with loss. Today we are overwhelmed with the knowledge that a beautiful, healthy, enthusiastic, funny, smart alecky, sometimes sweet and just as often infuriating girl is gone from our lives. A petite girl with an incredible sense of fashion, a gorgeous smile, and bright expressive eyes; Stephanie Oliva has given everyone here some wonderful memories to keep and cherish.

Stephanie loved to perform. She loved dance. Her brothers might recall the many times when Stephanie danced to entertain them - perhaps right in front of the TV when they were watching a football game and believe me, this sure got a smile out of mom when she told me the boys would say, "yeah, yeah - nice...now get outta the way." Steph served as an altar girl in her church and her charm drew the littler kids to crowd the pew so they could win a seat close to her. I'm sure you can all picture the theatrical Stephanie singing show tunes from the bottom of her little lungs complete with sweeping arm gestures while painting the powder room in her house.

Stephanie spent most of her years at Arcadia as a cheerleader. Her family told me that Stephanie gained a whole lot of pleasure from her standing argument with Mr. Ruggieri over whether or not cheerleading was indeed a legitimate sport. Mr. Hale - our former AD was another of Stephanie's favorites. He was one of the few people who consistently made Steph feel important. How? As I say it almost sounds too easy...all Mr. Hale did from time to time was call her into his office to ask her opinions about sports related stuff and things in general. This, to Stephanie, was significant enough to become some of the memories she cherished. She grew to feel this same kind of respect and love from Miss Biondalillo as well for the very same reason. To just listen ... so simple, really.

Shakespeare said, "Nothing is so common as the wish to be remarkable." I think most of us gathered here today are thinking we might have said more and done more to prove to Stephanie that she was indeed remarkable. Instead, we are forced to accept that the loss of this precious young woman is a much bigger burden than we want to bear. We are all angry and grief stricken over the unfairness of it all. Today there is almost nothing that could be said to console our hearts.

As a mother of three daughters my first thought upon hearing of this tragedy was: How in the world would I or my husband ever summon the courage or faith in God to deal with the loss of

a child? How does anyone bear it? My thoughts moved to Stephanie's family ... her oldest brother Nick, my former student and someone I am proud to know ... John, the brother I do not know, but a good friend to my older daughters...and then to Nick and Cindy. We four parents met when our daughters were best buddies in grammar school together. We became better friends over the years through our Arcadia HS connection. We shared many topics of conversation but most often our talk revolved around our kids.

Cindy and Nick, Nicholas and John ... Carl and I know you are suffering. We know for the past few days you have tormented yourselves with thoughts of what you could have done differently. There is no answer. There is no handbook with a 100% success rate that teaches parents how to do everything right. We are who we are ... we live our lives ... we try to do our best ... sometimes we have satisfying results ... and other times we lay awake at night haunted by what we perceive to be the failures.

Listen ... When that little bundle of life wrapped in pink or blue is handed to us we are overjoyed with the bright possibilities ahead. We brag about each little gurgle and smile. For many of us the greatest difficulties amount to little more than earaches, runny noses, and new teeth. Down the road, potty training and the first day of school are two of the most traumatic events we deal with. For most of those early years, mommy and daddy are cape wearing, high flying superheroes. Mommy and daddy make everything perfect all of the time. We know it because we can see it, hear it, feel it and touch it with every bedtime story and kiss goodnight, every birthday cake with candles, every gold star sticker posted on the fridge, every handmade drawing, mismatched string of beads necklace or indefinable clay sculpture. The list of treasures goes on and on doesn't it?

Then in the blink of an eye our sons and daughters become teenagers and our hero image just vanishes. The early warning signs might be a raised eyebrow, one syllable answers to everyday questions and deep sighs. This soon escalates to eye rolling, huffy breaths and heavy feet up the stairs to the privacy of their own room. And then while mommy and daddy are still confused about when, how and why it has all gotten like this; we move to the next level. We now have reached the territory that includes rivers of tears and accusations about the multitude of ways we are trying to prevent them from making their own mistakes and dealing with the consequences which of course they know they can handle all by themselves. Our precious children resist our best advice. They suddenly shout phrases like, "how would you know" "things are different now from when you were young" "you don't know anything about my friends" and "you are so unfair".

And we mommies and daddies, enter the combat zone and begin to holler back any and everything we can think of to scare away the beast and return our precious child safely to their senses. The sad fact of life is that in spite of our very best efforts, some kids are just easier to convince that our only motive behind all of our meanness is that we want the very best for them. I sometimes use the words of Margaret Atwood in my classroom, hoping at least a few of my students will understand through her words just how deep a parent's need to protect his or her child goes.

"I would like to give you the silver branch,
the small white flower,

the one word that will protect you from the grief at the center of your dreams...

I would like to be the boat that would row you back carefully..."

Some of the young adults gathered here today know me well enough to understand that I need to serve two purposes in order to be satisfied that I have properly honored Stephanie and her heartbroken family. I need to give you comfort. But equal to that, I need to force you to think. I know a whole lot about many of you. I have my ways. Quite a bit of what I know I keep to myself until I can look directly into your eyes and make you look into mine. So listen carefully because the first thing I am going to say is ...Yes, I'm a cancer survivor who had a cigarette on the way here today ...Yes, I did my fair share of not so smart things when I was your age ... Yes, I have made more than a few lousy decisions in the past 30 years ... Having said that, hear me now and hear me well ... if you truly want to honor the memory of the lovely, feisty, energetic Stephanie Oliva, as well as her family: Mr. and Mrs. Oliva, Nick Jr. and John, then do

so by wrapping your arms tightly around your parents, guardians, and any significant older folks who ever stood in your way in an effort to protect you and tell them with firmness of voice that you love them no matter what and you always will. Do it soon and do it often. Do it for the Olivas who would gladly give up everything they have ever had for the opportunity to do this one more time with their beloved Stephanie. Do it because I say so. Do it because you can. Do it because there is more than a chance that it will feel wonderful.

To close, Cindy Oliva told me this weekend that Stephanie often started conversations by saying, "When I am rich and famous...". Honestly, I don't know much about fame but I can say this with certainty: Stephanie Oliva you were indeed one of the richest young women I will ever know. The evidence was obvious last evening as it is now assembled here in this house of God. The Christian band, Mercy Me in the song "I Can Only Imagine" has the lyrical character wondering how he will react when he stands before Jesus. In my heart I know Stephanie will not be still, or fall to her knees. Our Stephanie will most assuredly dance and sing "Hallelujah". My family and I offer each of you prayers, love and deepest sympathy now and always,

Terry Luther