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Eulogy

Writing a eulogy is hard, more so when it's your own. It helps if I see this less as a eulogy and more as a simple letter to family and friends. Typically, writing a eulogy means heaping praise on the dearly departed, but I was raised to believe self-praise stinks. So if I'm not praising myself enough, Father Peter has my permission to lay it on thick.

What has happened to me—and to my family—has been tough for me to take and for others to accept. I'm not sure I ever fully accepted it myself. You could say I came to terms with it—not so much made peace as declared a cease-fire. As one might say, using today's version of the Serenity Prayer, “It is what it is.”

I do recognize that I was fortunate in some ways. I was given a unique opportunity, a chance to spend time with family and friends while knowing just how short that time was, and a chance to say goodbye as I would want to say it. What's more, others were given a chance to tell me and my family how much they cared while I was still around to hear it. Bright moments in an often dark time.

How to eulogize myself? Rather than catalog my achievements or good qualities, I thought I'd try to answer three questions:

- What do I think it means to live a full life,
- How do I want to be remembered, and
- What do I want to say to all of you here today?

Regarding living a full life:

Despite spending hours thinking about this, I'm not sure I know the answer. I hoped this past year's challenges would give me some new and unique insight. Instead, these challenges have confirmed what I already suspected and what I'm sure most of you already know, namely, that the people in our lives matter most. As someone once said, “It's not *what* we have in our life, but *who* we have in our life that counts.”

Yes, I wish I could have lived long enough to see my children grow into adulthood and to enjoy an active, globe-traveling retirement with my wife. But, again, it is what it is. So while I wouldn't call what's happened a blessing, I do admit it has brought home how much the *Who* in our lives matters and how fortunate we are to be surrounded by those we care about and who care about us. That's the foundation of a full life.

Given my diagnosis, I was occasionally asked about my Bucket List—what wild or exotic things would I like to do with the time I had left. Now, I doubt those who knew me well would call me wild or exotic, and, fittingly, my bucket list was less about doing wild things and more about enjoying simple moments.

That's not to say I haven't done some great things. I've walked along Hadrian's Wall, strolled through the Roman Forum, jogged around the remains of the Circus Maximus, conversed in Latin among the ruins of Pompeii, threw stones from Tiberius's villa on Capri, climbed the steps of the Acropolis, sought answers at the Oracle of Delphi, and sprinted in the ancient stadium at Olympia. How's that for a classic bucket list?

In fact, even if I had spent my last months doing wild and exotic things, I could never have topped the life-fulfilling experiences I'd already had, like falling in love at first sight three times: the first when I met my wife Karen and the second and third when I watched my two children, Eleanor and Thomas, be born.

I was lucky this past year to fill my bucket list with simple but precious moments like talking with Karen about our kids' futures; listening to Eleanor describe (in detail) the trials and tribulations of high school; and watching Thomas pitch his way out of a jam in baseball. I was able to play guitar and sing songs with my siblings late into the night; share a bottle of wine at the beach with my dad; hold my mother's hand and swap chemo stories as fellow cancer survivors. In fact, it was during some of those chemotherapy sessions that my parents, Eileen and Pat, and I had some really wonderful, heartfelt conversations. Sure, I wish we could have had those conversations in an Irish pub, but hearing your parents tell you they love you and are proud of you sounds wonderful wherever you are.

This past year also helped me reconnect with former students as well as college friends so we could rehash the old stories that still make us laugh. It allowed me to see our neighbors rally around my family, providing meals, buying groceries, and driving the kids to their various activities. And I enjoyed abundant and deeply touching support from present and past work colleagues—via cards, letters, email, and my CaringBridge website.

Those were all simple but precious moments that help make for a full life.

Now for the second question: How do I want to be remembered?

I recently came across a poem that is often read at memorial services. The author is unknown, though sometimes Margaret Mead is cited. It's called "Remember Me."

Remember me:
To the living, I am gone.
To the sorrowful, I will never return.
To the angry, I was cheated,
But to the happy, I am at peace,
And to the faithful, I have never left.
I cannot be seen, but I can be remembered.

There's more, but these first few lines are my favorite, especially that last one about being remembered. Like everyone, I want to be remembered in a positive light. Sure, it would be great to be eulogized with the words of Shakespeare, something like, "His life was gentle; and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to the world, *this was a man!*" But even for a "selfie" eulogy, that's a bit much.

Instead, I would like to know that people think well of me, that they thought I was a good man.

You hear about people faced with their own death saying they have no regrets. Who *are* these people? Sure I have regrets, not so much things I wish I'd done as things I wish I'd done more of—more complimenting and less criticizing; more trusting and less worrying; more time doing good deeds and less stopping at good intentions.

So, while I could have done better, I hope that I've done well. I may not have achieved greatness, but I do hope I showed moments of greatness in the roles I most valued: son and brother; husband and father; teacher, colleague, and friend.

That's how I want to be remembered.

Last, what do I want to say to you all gathered here today?

I want to say *thank you*. Thank you for the love and support you've shown these past months—not just for me, but for my family. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I say it's through his family.

I was overwhelmed by the caring, generosity, and the love we received. It came from all places: from our parents and siblings to our extended family, and from our friends and neighbors to the folks at work. There's no way to express how much that meant, how much it kept me going, and how much it gave me hope that things will be fine after I'm gone—not just that life will go on but that it will go on well.

Now, I've gone on too long without quoting Latin, so here's a famous line from the Roman poet Horace: *Non omnis moriar*. It means "Not all of me will die." Like Horace, I hope that I will live on through whatever achievements and influence I've had in my professional life. I hope too that I will live on in whatever memories I've created or shared in my personal life. Most of all, I hope I'll live on through my family, which brings me to my last point.

I have a favor to ask: Please keep doing what you're doing.

Life goes on and I want it to go on for my family as warmly and happily as it possibly can. Keep showing them the love and support you've shown us this past year or so. Drop my parents Pat and Eileen a line or give them a call; take Karen to lunch or lend her a hand driving the kids around; ask Eleanor to tell you about her day or her plans for the future; and toss the ball or shoot hoops with Thomas—heck, you can even toss the ball with our dog.

Take care of my family and you'll be taking care of me. And if you ever miss me, visit them, because that's where you'll find me.

Love,
John