

For Lisa: A eulogy from her brother

By Doug Berger

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Life is a struggle. It is as much a human universal as raising children. You wake up each day faced with more hours of struggle. You don't know how the day will end. You don't know if you will make it to the end of the day. Sleep is interrupted by yet another day of struggle.

Lisa struggled just like all of us but she had to work harder. She was different. She was mentally challenged, financially challenged, and in the last couple of years, her health was challenged. She fought all these challenges as we do each day but in the end, there was one where she didn't stand a chance.

Biology interests me. From school, I learned that all plants, and animals have a life cycle. You are born, you live, and then you die. It has always been thus and thus it will always be.

Our worries about death include when will we die and how will we die. Will we have a long life full of all those days of struggle or will we walk off a curb and get hit by a bus. We really don't know. There is the often-told story of the runner Jim Fix. He ran marathons and other long distances. He popularized jogging as a way for people to get fit. He died one day while jogging. He died of a heart attack.

We don't look for death, we run from it. We ignore it. We try not to think about it. It seems it makes us feel better, not thinking about it and not knowing about it. Lisa knew she would die. She had to think it about each day, with each treatment, with each day she was in pain, as the cancer did its work and destroyed her body and there was nothing she could do about it.

This funeral, the reason we are all here today, is not for Lisa. It is for us, her friends and family. Lisa is gone and more than likely knows not what is going on in this room today. We gather to honor her and remember her and to say good bye one last time. It will make us feel better. I would think that if Lisa had the choice she would refuse to be here as she didn't like being the center of attention.

I don't like funerals. Most times people say only good things about the deceased. When former President Nixon died, politicians fell over themselves praising his diplomacy and work history. His crimes against the country were virtually ignored. His decision to continue the Vietnam War was ignored. I think it is important, to get a view of the whole person, you have to mention their good points and bad points. That is how I would like to talk about my sister Lisa.

Lisa was my half-sister but I never used that term when telling people about her because I never looked at it that way. We were brother and sister just as much as if we had the same father. It is also true we didn't get along too well.

My only explanation was since we were cut from the same cloth, there was not room for both our egos and our own independent streaks. We fought like cats and dogs sometimes. We would spar with words. She would call me every name in the book and sometimes throw things at me.

Never the less, I would risk my own life to help her if needed and I will miss her.

Lisa was mentally challenged but she refused to accept it and she tried so hard to be normal and do normal things. Once when Mom tried to get her into a program at Blanchard Valley School, she refused saying she didn't want to be around those "retards". She was lucky in a sense that if you didn't know her well, you wouldn't know she was mentally challenged. She tried many times to get a driver's license. She knew it was important just as all of us normal people do, but because of her handicap, she could never pass the written test.

Lisa was an extremely private person. People would call her on the phone and if asked who it was she would say 'a friend' or she would be going out somewhere and if asked where she was going she would say 'a friends house'. To this day, I still don't know who all her friends were.

Lisa craved love and friendship. Because of her mental handicap, she sometimes made bad choices in both. Some friends she hung out with would take advantage of her. They might take her money or try and fix her up with convicts or let her drink too much. Lisa never comprehended how selfish they were being. She never knew what real friendships were all about.

Lisa was extremely stubborn. She hated Doctors. You had to drag her literally kicking and screaming to fill out forms or sign her name on some document. If she didn't want to do something, it would be like moving a boulder with a pixie stick. You could try and reason with her but it almost never worked.

Lisa was full of emotions. She laughed and cried sometimes for no reason. She could be really gentle one moment and blow-up in a rage and turn it off on a dime. She was not shy about it all. The day we came home from our Las Vegas trip in 1998 and found out we accidentally left her suitcase on the shuttle from the airport to the parking lot, you would have thought the world had ended. Even after deciding to drive back to Detroit to get it that evening, she still was upset.

I have to be honest. It was a struggle to live with her for all the reasons I mentioned. We did argue and fight for many years. The change came when I grew up and she didn't. Whenever I would complain to Mom about what Lisa did to me that day, she would always point out that she was not like me. I knew that but in my younger days, it was hard to keep it in mind. It wasn't until I was in college that it finally stuck with me. Our arguments and fights lessened. Part of it was I matured but living 100 miles away helped as well.

In the last couple of years, our relationship had soured again for reasons that are trivial now and were trivial then and I do feel bad that my own stubborn streak prevented me from seeing her once more before she died. She really didn't know I wanted nothing to do with her at the time. Telling her wouldn't have done any good.

I talked to her on the phone one day. She called me out of the blue and we talked for an hour or so. I also had Mom update me when there was news. It is hard to dislike someone who is sick. Although I cared about how she was doing, I also tended to not think about the coming end. It made me feel better not to dwell on it.

It is better to remember the times we had together when she was almost normal. Playing card games with Mom, going on vacations, attending our family shindigs.

There was the time when I was in Junior High when I decided to play hooky from school. The Vice-Principal called to find out why I was not in school. Lisa told her that I wasn't sick and handed me the phone. That was a long walk to school that day.

There were the notes and later e-mails she would send me. Her writing was terrible but I liked to get them none the less. Once when I was living on my own and I had no money for food she sent me some of her food stamps - of course she demanded I pay her back when I could.

I would call home, she would answer, and we would tell each other to stay out trouble.

There were the fun arguments too, like when we debated which one of us was adopted.

There was the time Mom forced her to take me along on her date to the drive in to see The Empire Strikes Back. I think it was more that Mom wanted someone to look out for Lisa than my desire to see the movie.

Then there was the time when I made the mistake of tagging along when Mom let Lisa drive the car so she could get her driver's license. She had a lead foot and heavier brake foot. We turned on to busy County Rd. 97 with several cars behind us and she didn't want to drive any more, the traffic made her nervous, so she stopped right then, in the middle of the road. Horns were blaring as Mom did the Chinese fire drill to take over the driver's seat. I sank down out of sight just thankful we didn't end up in the ditch.

There was the time she talked me into finding out what Mom had gotten us for Christmas. The presents were in the closet in the bathroom. It was a plan doomed to failure when you live in a small trailer. Mom wondered what we both were doing in the bathroom, at the same time, with the door locked. Luckily, Mom didn't hold it against us. It is one of Lisa's quirks that so many years later she still would sneak peaks at her presents. The tell tale signs of packages opened and reclosed gave her away each year.

I live in Columbus now but I still try to come back home for our family shindigs. It is part out of sense of obligation and because I need to reconnect with my roots. There are times when not everyone can be at one of the gatherings. People either have to work, might be sick, or have a conflict. The thing is that we know they will probably be at the next one or we will see them some other time after that.

After this past Friday morning, that assumption is not true. Lisa won't be there and we won't see her again. Family events, for me, won't be the same because there won't be a possibility of her being there.

Even though I didn't have the chance to see her before she died and even though she struggled for all these years, and even though she was not normal, she did leave something with me that I will have with me for the rest of my own life. I know what it is like to have a loved one who is mentally challenged and I now understand and respect the challenges someone with that disability goes through. In fact, I don't like it too much when a normal person makes fun of someone with a disability. Everyone, disabled or not, should have their basic humanity respected.

Lisa's challenges put the challenges I go through everyday in perspective. It tends to make mine somewhat trivial.

Our family isn't normal, at least not Brady Bunch normal, and those years of living with Lisa and our alternating love/hate relationship taught me that no one you really love should be hated. We need to accept our family members for who they are warts and all. We wish that they would conform to our own ideas but in the end, we are all different. Our only common connection is blood. For many years, there have been intrigues and soap operas in our family and because of my experience of living with Lisa, I learned not to get involved with them. Life really is too short to sweat the small stuff and there are things we have no control over.

We gather at funerals for closure for ourselves. We honor the loved one who died and I hope we put their lives in context with all that has come before and that we might take something from them for our future.

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