

Eulogy for Jeane Wells Perry
May 27, 2008
by John Martin

Good afternoon.

This is from my journal entry, dated August 26, 2007:

One of my dear, dear friends in life left me a voice mail message yesterday, saying that she had something very important to ask me—that it wasn't urgent, but that it *was* important. She went on to say that she wasn't sure if it was inappropriate to ask me, and she wanted me to know that I had every right to decline, but she wanted to ask me anyway.

I returned her call this morning, and she asked me if I would devise and deliver her eulogy. I replied, "I know without a doubt that I can, and would love to, write it. It's the delivery I'd be worried about, as I'd probably be crying throughout the whole thing."

She laughed and replied, "As I said, I want you to feel perfectly fine about declining the request, but I can't think of anyone else in the world I'd rather have do it. That article you wrote about me and Milton and Rhoda once, everyone who reads it comments on how beautifully written it is and how warm the sentiment in it is."

After we hung up, I wrote her a card that said, "Dear Jeanie-Baby, Your request ranks as one of the highest honors in my life on this earth to date. Please be at ease knowing that no matter what I write, or how I deliver it, it will come from a heart and spirit that have been blessed by knowing you in our time here together. Thank you for the highest compliment and affirmation that one could receive as a writer, and the ultimate honor one could receive as a friend. I love you!"

I'll share just the opening two paragraphs from the story she referenced, mostly to put my relationship to Jeane in context for those of you thinking, "Who *is* this guy up here?"

In August of 1991, through Wake County's Resources for Seniors, I met Jeane and Milton Perry—a sight-impaired, elderly, married couple who live in the tiny town of Garner, just outside Raleigh, NC. Ever since, I have been "reading to the blind" two hours a week, every week, for eight years.

The Friendly Visitor program couldn't have done a better job matching a volunteer with a client. Both of us had very specific needs, which complimented each other's perfectly. At that time, I had come to miss having "grandparent figures" in my life, and began to look for a way to remedy that. That need, combined with my love of reading, meshed nicely with an older, sight-impaired couple's need for a reader. Over the years, we've established a ritual so sweet and fulfilling that I feel guilty calling it volunteer *work*. It's just plain fun, and there can't be any better *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

SO, having never written a eulogy before, after receiving Jeanie's request, I did what any person of my generation would do, I googled, "How to write a eulogy." Everything I read told me that I should interview several people in the deceased's life, and share who she was as a wife, a mother, a sister, an aunt, a grandmother or a friend. My initial thought was, "Okay, easy enough. She has no shortage of loved ones in her life."

But those of you who know me well, know that I've spent a lot of my life wondering, and worrying, about what other people think of me. And as I've grown older I've come to accept the ancient wisdom that you have no control over what other people think about you—and in the end, it's what you think of, and how you value, *yourself* that's important.

And in that moment, I thought, "I'm going to visit Jeannie-baby, and I'm going to find out how *she* feels about the time that she's spent here so far. So, in January of this year, in North Augusta, SC, I spent an afternoon with her, asking her these heavy questions:

1. What would you consider your biggest accomplishment in life?
2. What is your most treasured memory?
3. What person in your life made a significant contribution to you being where you are in your life? What did they contribute?
4. What is the hardest lesson that you ever learned?
5. What was the last thing you did that was totally out of your comfort zone? What did you get out of it, or learn from it?
6. What do you consider to be the greatest gift you've ever given to anybody?
7. What is your favorite book in the world, and why is it your favorite?
8. What is the most frightened you've ever been in your life?
9. Who is the person you most admire in life, and what trait in that person do you admire the most?
And the old standby:
10. If you could talk to one person (living or dead) who would it be, and what would you ask that person?

Before I share some of her answers, I want you to know that this was such an incredible exercise, and I recommend you do it with *your* loved ones, and do it soon. While not at all easy to answer, these questions make you think about what's important to you, can elicit some *great* family stories, and provide keen insight into each who participate. I know they did all three of those things for Jeanie and me.

And now, I give you the essence of Jeane Wells Perry, in her own words.

To the question, "What would you consider your biggest accomplishment in life?" she replied, "Rearing my children to be productive, and honest Americans. I think that is something that has brought me more pride than pleasure."

I think the fact that she chose the word "Americans," as opposed to just "people": "Rearing my children to be productive and honest *Americans*," offers some insight into her feelings about patriotism, too.

Next, “What are your most treasured memories?” She said, “What comes to mind is something that’s very irrelevant, but one time when she was young, Marti was combing my hair, and I had bobby pins in it, and she said, ‘Mommy, you have bones in your hair.’”

She continued, “And when Phyl was first born, they said, ‘We have delivered for you, a beautiful baby.’ She was *screaming* at the top of her voice, her face was real red, and she had a widow’s peak of fine black hair going down almost to her *nose*, and my first thought was, ‘Boy she’s ugly.’” But I wish you could have seen Jeanie’s face absolutely *beam* when she added, “But then she became a *beautiful* baby!”

Her third cherished memory was, “And with regards to Jim Wells, our kids always said, ‘Mom and dad have a love affair; they don’t have a marriage.’ and added thoughtfully, “And in my life, those small things are really the most important.”

To the question, “Who is the person you most admire in life, and what trait in that person do you admire the most?” she mentioned three people:

“I admired my grandmother because she was a great musician. And, John, I often wished that I’d had a movie camera and sound effects at that time. Because she used to not *play* the guitar, she *picked* it. And, just, fingers would fly like *that*; she picked out every sound; I mean every bit of a tune, and it was *most* unusual. And, she had learned that without going to school for music. She also played the piano, organ, just anything. Just seeing her doing that made me wonder, “Why in the heck didn’t some of *us* become more musically inclined?”

She continued, “I’d also have to say, my deceased aunt, my mother’s sister, as she lived the type of life in which I’d’ve like to have followed in her footsteps. She had a bit of knowledge; I never did know where she acquired it, about furnishing a home, collecting things, and making excellent buys.

I interrupted her, “So you’d like to have been another Martha Stewart, would you?”

A slow, guttural laughter started, while I pointed out, “You didn’t list *her* as one of your most admired people.”

To which she replied, “I have heard a lot about her, but I have not been that impressed.”

The third person she mentioned admiring was, again in her words, “I would have to remember Ann Sullivan, who was Helen Keller’s teacher, and what she did. I can’t even understand it—comprehend how she ever accomplished what she did.”

The question, “What was the hardest lesson you ever learned?” elicited this response: “I have never confessed to this, but my daughters, neither of them, were very capable of poetry, and they would have me do it. And I did one for Phyllis; I don’t remember

anything about it, except that it was like, he was a something, lean and tall, and something prince charming at the ball, or *something* like that.

“Well, I wrote that for her, and her teacher was a half-sister of Ernest Hemmingway. And the teacher gave it an “A” and wrote: ‘You have good rhythm.’

“And I have always felt guilty about that.”

She did not go on to elaborate what lesson she learned from that experience, but she did say a couple of times about being asked to help, “How are you gonna refuse your children?”

Perhaps the quickest, and shortest, answer was to the question, “What do you consider to be the greatest gift you’ve ever given to anybody?” she simply replied, “Life, I suppose.”

About whom she’d liked to talk to—living or dead—and what she’d ask them, she said, “Well, it could be my brother Bob. I don’t remember at just what age he died, but he was a very brilliant person. But, John, he had married *five times*. And what I would ask him, I guess, would be, “*What* were you searching for?”

I’ll share just two more answers with you, to the questions: “What is your favorite book in the world?” and “What is the most frightened you’ve ever been in your life?”

Her favorite book? She said, “Well, let’s see. I have never considered classics, because they were always too much for me. I’m aware of them, but I’ve never considered them. The greatest book, and this is true, I’m not trying to be something I’m not, the greatest book that I’ve ever *attempted* to read was The Bible, the New Testament, because it’s all about the story of Jesus, all that we can receive from him and expect from him.”

And the last question, the one about a time in which you were most frightened in your life. Jeanie struggled *incredibly* with this question. She was totally bewildered about not being able to come up with an answer. But by the time we finished discussing it, she had articulated two insights about herself on this topic:

First, she said, “I led a very sheltered life. Everybody protected me from everything. In fact, my mother didn’t want me to learn to ride a bike, for fear I’d fall and hurt myself. And when I graduated from high school with a scholarship, she said, “No, I don’t want you to go. I’m afraid of what might happen to you on campus.” I thought that was a very unrealistic way to look at it, but it was *her* fear, and maybe that’s what made me *not* fearful.

The thing is, I think I learned early to put things out of my mind that might be disturbing, and I think I’ve accomplished that to a great degree. And *that* might be something to be frightened about, I don’t know.”

And her second insight was, “I never was afraid about what was going to happen to me, and you know, John, I just never have experienced real fear, because I have always felt surrounded by people who cared and loved me.”

With that, I’m reminded of one of my favorite short poems, by Raymond Carver. It’s called “Late Fragment,” and it goes like this:

And did you get what you wanted from this life even so?
I *did*.

And what did you *want*?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.

From her words in that last response, “I always felt surrounded by people who cared, loved me,” I’d say that Jeanie *did* feel herself beloved on this earth.

In conclusion, in atonement for pre-empting *your* treasured memories of Jeanie with her *own reflections* of her life, I invite you to share yours—if you haven’t already—at our little gathering that will follow—share them with me, with Jeanie’s family, and with each other as we celebrate this life well-lived and well-loved.

Thank you for enriching my life, Jeanie-baby. *You* will be one of the treasured memories of *my* lifetime.