

## The Passing of A Friend So Rare ~ Celebrating the Life of Elizabeth Scott Sykes Alling Sewall

*Remarks by Lucy Mathews Heegaard*

I am Lucy Mathews Heegaard, a friend of Elizabeth's. Over a year ago, she asked me to speak on this occasion. But the forewarning makes the task no less daunting, no less painful — like her passing. Yet, I am mindful of her instructions to me: “Make ‘em laugh, Luce,” she said. “Make ‘em laugh.” Because Elizabeth was always able to find laughter underneath even the most difficult moments. I can't recall ever having had a conversation with her — even the sad ones — in which we didn't laugh at least a little. I count that as one of the great gifts of our 31 years of friendship.

But before I get too far along, I'd like to ask your help to create a space in our hearts and minds for these remarks I offer about Elizabeth's life. You see, Elizabeth told me often in the last few months how much the presence of LIGHT made her feel surrounded by LOVE and gave her unwavering confidence that a higher power holds us all, connects us all. So, I would greatly appreciate if you would join me in imagining the most beautiful, brilliant, golden-white light you can possibly summon. Perhaps like a perfect beach day on Elizabeth's beloved Martha's Vineyard. I can think of no better space in which for us to mark her passing and to celebrate her life.

There's a line from a song that has come to me often as I've thought about speaking today. It's by Cheryl Wheeler and she wrote these words about the death of her father: “We're just bereft, not deserted,” she said. I would never want to minimize the grief through which we all must pass in mourning Elizabeth. Sadness is unavoidable. But I cannot emphasize strongly enough that we're just bereft, **not** deserted. Elizabeth has left us with so many memories — and in them, so much of herself and of her love — that we cannot possibly ever be deserted, even in her passing. We each hold a part of her that no one else has. And in our coming together today, we bring all of our memories into this space, and thus, every part of Elizabeth is present with us — Here — Now — and Always.

Elizabeth and I met just before our senior year in high school. We were at the Miami Valley School in Dayton, Ohio where her father, Duncan, was headmaster. I was the new kid in school. Before we even met, one of the school administrators had told each of us that we were going to be good friends. But I was skeptical. How could he know? Yet, less than two months later, there we were — good friends already. I remember Elizabeth saying to me “Oh we’re going to be friends for the rest of our lives, we’ll be in each other’s weddings, we’ll be godparents to each other’s children...” She rattled it all off as if it was a foregone conclusion. I, however, am not one to leap into things quickly. My first reaction was to want to say, “Hold on a minute! Let’s not rush into anything!” But something made pause and hold my tongue. Because I knew she might be right. And she was.

At the end of our senior year, she made me a cross-stitched gift, which I still have. It reads: “A friend so rare. To LMM. I love you. ESSA.”

The first time she had breast cancer, I wanted so much to be there for her but we lived so far apart — Minneapolis to Boston isn’t quite “next door.” I decided to take all her letters to me that I’d saved over the years and make copies and send them to her. I figured that re-reading our history together would, at a minimum would distract her, but hopefully would make her laugh, as well. I bundled the letters, year by year, from 1981 through 2001, and sent her a year’s worth of letters each week. They lasted through the full course of her recovery from surgery, chemo and radiation.

When I turned 40 and wanted to ignore the birthday altogether, she wouldn’t allow it. She arrived on my doorstep, to my total surprise having plotted a celebration with my husband’s help. It turns out she was right. I just needed a good party. She anchored me that night. She has always anchored me.

As I watched Elizabeth face the prospect — and then the process — of dying, I knew that I was bearing witness to something very sacred. And then, it occurred to me that I had been bearing witness to her life and she to mine, all along. Isn’t that really the essence of what we do for our dear friends? We take note — not just of the tangible things, the facts, the chronological details — but more importantly of the intangibles. . . the unexpressed thoughts, the fears, doubts, and hopes underneath the surface — invisible, oftentimes, to the rest of the world, but

**noticed** by those whom we hold most dear. Elizabeth did this for me and for many of us here today.

And it went both ways. I watched as she read and re-read stacks of cards, letters and emails in the days after she came home from the hospital for the last time. She smiled as she read. She sighed. She shed a few tears. She laughed. And she reveled in the memories and the friendship that each of you had given to her. She told me often that she felt grateful **every day** for the love of her family and friends. If there is just one thought you to take away today, remember that: she was profoundly grateful for your friendship and for your love.

So, now, instead me continuing to try to speak **for** Elizabeth, I thought I'd let her words speak for themselves. I chose a handful of quotes from her letters and texts to me over the years that I thought reflect the "Essential Elizabeth."

**"The warmth of family and close friends relieves aloneness."** she wrote in 1983, a pretty poised observation especially for a college sophomore.

**"Me. In love with life. I want to share so much, give so much."** from a 1985 letter, this passion for life remained just as true of Elizabeth in 2012 as it was when she wrote it, nearly 30 years before.

**"So glad for the gifts of infinite friendship."** this, from a letter in 1986, as she reflected on her high school and college friends. I was struck then as now, by the way she phrased it. What a lovely thought ~ An Infinite Friendship

**"Taking the world in with an open heart"** from a postcard she sent from Greece from 1987. I would say that she was always taking in the world with an open heart.

**"Contentment personified."** an expression she often used in her letters. Typically about times surrounded by friends and family, and especially when those gatherings were in a places with beautiful views, like of water or sunsets.

And here's a question she posed to me in a 1990 letter: **"Am I this social/active because I am single or because I am me?"** You all already know the answer,

don't you? Her extroverted, high energy, get involved, run-the-school-fundraiser, organize-the class-reunion Self was simply and truly who she was.

**“Have a superior glass of Chardonnay for me and send me taste vibes.”** A text from this summer. She adored good food and good wine shared in good company. An excellent cook, she loved a good party. Even when she no longer had a desire for wine, she savored the memory of it. And of the good times had sharing a glass together.

**“humbled and proud”** that's what she texted me in May of this year, on the day she underwent surgery to allow her tumor to be used in research by the doctors at Dana Farber that she held in such high regard. She was “humbled and proud,” she said, at the thought of helping other women in the future.

**“To hug my boys is beyond words.”** another text from this summer. She loved us all dearly, yes, but none so much as Duncan, Scott, and Gordon.

And, one last quote-- a text from this summer-- that is perhaps the most fully expressive of the essence of Elizabeth of any on my list. She said:

**“Gordon and I feel how blessed our love is because it is the foundation from which we and the boys function. I cannot imagine facing this without it. I know that my boys have it to draw on and the well is deep. There is no limit to love.”**

What more can I say? We're just bereft, not deserted. Because there is no limit to love. Thank you, Elizabeth Scott Sykes Alling Sewall, for helping us know that.