

Journaling a Griever's Walk, by Howie Soucek

...as referenced by "*The Widow Walk ...a Light-guided, self-disciplined navigation*" — (in section 3, Share myself)

What follows is my personal journal (written from October 2012 to October 2014), shared with many friends and relatives as it developed, about my and my family's experience with Linda's brain cancer—including its diagnosis, multiple surgeries, therapies, caregiving, her death, and the aftermath of grief.

Here is a "table of contents" of the most significant milestones, as they appear by page number:

- 2.... Diagnosis
- 2.... Initial surgery
- 4.... Second surgery
- 5.... Regular journal entries begin
- 8.... Third surgery
- 21... Bad news — PET scan
- 22... Our awesome, humbling decision
- 23... Hospice explained and begun
- 26... Her final breath
- 27... The aftermath begins
- 29... Darkening valley
- 32... Homily for Linda
- 35... How are you doing?
- 39... Life-changing vision
- 45... Reflections on this journal — and moving forward

Original message, October 7, 2012 *****

Dear All—

In an effort (and the simplest way) to keep many of our family and friends updated as to Linda's health status, we will occasionally send you an email message such as this. If you would prefer not to be included in this distribution, please do not hesitate to let us know—no problem.

Since some of you may not know anything about the original events, we include them in this message this first time.

First, then, the background *****

The Diagnosis:

In the few months leading up to her brain surgery, we began noticing some subtle indications that something was amiss—a little imbalance, a little trouble making decisions, less interest in reading, and some problems with proper word selection (nouns). The frequency of these symptoms increased to the point that we paid a visit to Dr Mike in the latter part of May (2012).

Our thinking that her symptoms were likely the result of extreme stress associated with her experience as a classroom teacher and causing her retirement in 2011 (stress NOT due to her students), Dr Mike suggested a CAT scan of her brain, just to be sure there wasn't something else going on. We were so shocked as to never be able to recall what we thought or how we felt upon hearing the news that a 2 x 3-inch, oblong tumor appeared to be located in her left temporal lobe.

The scan results were immediately sent to arguably the world's top neurosurgeon, Dr Allan H Friedman at Duke University Hospital, who requested an immediate MRI. This all happened the next day, with Dr Friedman wanting us down there for immediate, emergency brain surgery. We left home at 10PM that night and arrived at the emergency department after midnight, where we spent the rest of night on a gurney and in a straight-back chair.

The Initial Surgery:

So, in less than four days from our initial visit with Dr Mike, then, Lin was in pre-op for her surgery, with me by her side all the while. There was so much trouble starting an IV, they had to use an artery in her wrist. My stress level began to build...

Then one of the several surgeons came with a notepad to ask Lin a series of specific questions—questions which did not seem relevant to anything at the time. When I asked what the purpose of the questions was, the surgeon told us that Lin will be only mildly sedated until after they remove the bone plate section (of the cranium) over the area where the tumor is located.

This is because it is difficult to distinguish the tumor tissue from healthy tissue, and when they use an electric probe to touch different locations on the brain while asking her the same questions asked in pre-op, she will give correct responses only if they are touching healthy brain tissue. This will give the surgeon the most dependable information as to where to make his incisions.

The sedative would be keeping her from "feeling" pain and from remembering any of this, while leaving her conscious and able to converse with the surgeons. When they would be ready to actually begin the incisions to remove the tumor, they would put her under the general anesthesia.

So in pre-op, then, I was at once fascinated by the technical process of all this, while at the same time, I was also *extremely(!)* distraught and tearing-up about

what was happening to my dear Linda, who, herself accepting and self-controlled, asked me, "Howie, what's wrong?"

I explained what she already knew was going on with me, whereupon she proceeded to *com-fort* me with words, body language, and touch in a way that only Love enables.

Later during her surgery, a loved one called me to offer encouragement, adding that I was going to need to "be strong for her," whereupon after expressing thanks, I admitted that it was I, ...who was deriving my strength from HER.

The tumor was found to be a Grade IV gliosarcoma tumor from her left temporal lobe. The procedure was a complete success, and we believe that we could not have been in better hands; every technician, nurse and doctor was absolutely first-rate.

In answer to my direct question as to a prognosis, however, the surgeon explained to me that this cancer, in the same way as does a glioblastoma, leaves trace elements ("fingers") of the cancer following the removal of the primary tumor, rendering it as a terminal disease, with therapeutic measures used in order to extend life as long as possible. This was my first realization that I was going to lose Linda—and this, only months after we had talked extensively about how we wanted to live our lives together in our golden years of retirement...

In the few days following surgery, the trauma to Linda's left temporal lobe (which processes language) resulted in some real problems with her speech—it seemed like she used the word "foot" half the time, so—finding humor in this—we thought she had a foot fetish... (Indeed, the removed tumor was dubbed "Le Foot" and donated to medical research.) That problem cleared up fairly promptly. What pain was there was easily managed with meds, and the powerful steroid she was on caused her spirits and humor to soar for weeks. The incision was a foot long and formed a large question mark on the left side of her head. An oval-shaped piece of cranial bone plate had been removed for the surgery and replaced before closing.

We then consulted with the Tisch Brain Tumor Center there at Duke University and subsequently began a six-week, triple therapy regimen that included radiation (5 days/wk), chemo (Temodar, daily, orally), and Avastin (by infusion each 2 weeks) treatments. The side effects were minimal, except for the fatigue (mostly from the radiation, as the chemo was low-dose during that time) that set in halfway through the treatments and continues to date; it may take a few more months yet for it to diminish for the most part. Fatigue results in the need for a lot more sleep— 11 to 14 hrs/night with another 3 to 4 hrs needed during the day, along with a lethargy that reduces the desire to do things during waking hours. Exercise is important, and we have been able to walk up to a half mile a day. As in the neurosurgery department, everyone at the Tumor Center has been highly supportive and expert in their service.

The second surgery:

Later *****

Following the initial 6-week therapy regimen, we had a break for assessments to be made but then had to delay a return to chemo and Avastin therapies for a while due to her low blood counts. There will be no further radiation treatments, as she received the maximum possible before the chances for permanent brain damage soar exponentially.

And then a piece of scab sloughed off revealing an opening in her head ~4mm across and deep enough to easily see the edge of the bone plate that had been removed and replaced. Our local medical oncologist saw this and immediately returned us to the neurosurgeon for evaluation, with the result that we returned again for a plastic surgeon to access the entire bone plate and grind down part of the edge that protruded above the rest of the cranium enough to hamper the ability of the skin above it to heal properly; the biggest detriment to healing, however, may have been the Avastin, which slows the development of new blood vessels, and the radiation therapy, which weakened the skin. The incision this time was half the length of the original, but ironically there has been more pain involved although it has been easily managed by the meds. This surgery and peripheral treatment, like the first, was first-class work there at Duke. What a place! We returned home late September to the fatigue, seemingly exacerbated by the stress and trauma of the surgery.

Only a couple days ago did we get back up to a half-mile distance for our walk. We must wait at least a month following the last surgery to return to the Avastin because it would hamper healing. The tumor center also wants us to return to the chemo sooner but their concern about her low blood counts is delaying that. Indeed, it is the low red cell count that results in her loss of stamina. If necessary, she will have to undergo special shots to stimulate blood cell development or even a transfusion in order to return to chemo and Avastin. Hopefully, however, her blood counts will come up soon on their own. Will keep you updated.

Additional thoughts to share with you *****

That evening back in May when Dr Mike came to us to explain that Linda had an area of concern in her brain, our lives changed profoundly and we have been evolving in the *ever-changing* "new normal" track ever since.

We cannot plan much from one day to the next—even from one hour to the next—whether meals, visits, sleep time, tasks to accomplish... Our earlier routines and habits are gone. New uncertainties about what to expect in the future attempt to push other thoughts aside. And the fatigue continues to be a damper on just about everything. We had hoped it would be mostly gone in about a month after radiation treatments stopped, but the forecast by the experts that it would likely take 5 or 6 months to noticeably subside was apparently true.

Still, an undeniable truth has emerged—that blessings abound at every turn and moment, and the love of relatives and friends is felt as a warming calm. Especially, the nurturing power of prayer is undeniable. Indeed, our list of things most important to us in years past was long, shorter in recent years, and now seems limited to love and prayer—and Linda and I take this opportunity to earnestly thank you for both. Life is good, and there is much to look forward to!

So, love back atcha,
Howie and Linda
(We're a unit!)

Regular journal entries begin:

10-14-12 Update *****

Upon receipt of a blood lab report Oct 9, the tumor center at Duke contacted us to say that Lin's counts are better, which was good news. We were expecting them simply to direct her to resume her chemotherapy, but instead they wanted us to go there Oct 16 for more blood work, an MRI, and a meeting with the oncologist. It could be that it has been an unusually long time following the initial therapies and the next round (which would have started some weeks ago had it not been for the low blood counts and unexpected surgery) and they want to get a clean start based on the new MRI. We'll see. I will add that Lin's red cells must be back in the normal range, as in the recent few days her energy level has risen substantially. ☺

10-17-12 Update *****

BTW, about these communications: While we would be uncomfortable with this sort of information being published in a social media, we are completely comfortable with your using your own discretion in otherwise sharing this information with friends and relatives. If you know someone who is not and would like to be included in this distribution, feel free to let me know. I think it best to protect email addresses when distributing to a group of size, so I am using a blind distribution.

We were at the Cancer Center at Duke yesterday for lab work, an MRI, and a talk with the oncologist. The MRI looks real good, and although Linda's blood counts are still low, they are rising and she will be able to resume chemotherapy; no Avastin treatments, however, for the next 6 to 8 weeks to ensure that she is completely healed from her recent, additional surgery to repair the problem she was having with an opening in her head that wasn't going to heal properly. Next week we return to Duke for a follow-up regarding that surgery. More later. Thus, tonight marks the next significant step in this journey, with the chemo dosage doubled and administered the first five days of each of two 28-day cycles. We'll have labs run each week to monitor her blood counts. Remembering the undeniable power of

prayer, we ask for a continuation on your part, and we want you to know that we return our own prayers of gratitude and well-wishing on your behalf.

Love and best wishes to All,
The Unit

10-26-12 Update *****

Lin resumed chemo Wednesday night, the 17th. The first three days presented no problems—no nausea and she had a good energy level. So naturally we got overconfident—went to a really good but stressful movie and ate fried onion rings—big mistakes! The next couple days were tough regarding nausea, but this subsided after that time. Meanwhile, the fatigue returned in spades—was sleeping ~13 hrs at night plus 3-4 more hours during the day; when awake she was weak and not up for much more than sitting. Yesterday & today, however, her energy level seems to be improving—cut some flowers yesterday and washed some dishes. Isn't it amazing (more likely not) that the ability to do such things feels like a wonderful gift! This is no fun, but we know a lot of folks who are also going through really tough times— We all have a lot in common, and it is incumbent on us to encourage each other.

11-16-12 Update *****

The remainder of the recent chemo cycle was uneventful, as Linda returned to her slow recovery from the radiation therapy's side effect of fatigue. She was scheduled to begin her next cycle of chemo on the 14th, but because of her continuing low blood counts (especially white, red and platelets) there will be a delay, as to start chemo again would further lower her blood counts and place her in a dangerous situation. We traveled to Duke Wednesday, however, to have stitches removed that had been added after the removal of the original stitches from her follow-up surgery in late Sept. Unfortunately, the skin tissue there is just not healing, and it now appears that it will not ever heal properly, as the skin in that area took the brunt of the radiation therapy and was consequently permanently weakened. Accordingly, Lin will undergo surgery again on the 26th to remove the most damaged skin (just found out the date this afternoon); an incision will then be made a few inches away from that area, with healthy skin then moved over to replace the damaged skin that was removed; the opening left behind the moved skin will be filled in with a graft taken most likely from her lower abdomen; this surgery will be less complicated than the late September surgery on the bone plate, and we expect that only one night in the hospital will be required. Yesterday afternoon, we met with the local medical oncologist and agreed to further delay a resumption of chemo until some point after the surgery, depending on blood counts. We also canceled a retake of a computerized driving test, which she was unable to pass the first time due mostly to slow reaction time; because of the nature of her brain surgery in May and the consequent radiation therapy, she has been unable to drive a car until she passes this test; we'll get back to that sometime after this next surgery. Tell you what—radiation therapy to the head is

serious stuff, and our prayer is that it did a world of damage to the cancer cells that remained behind after the original surgery in May. I'll be sharing an update with you again after the surgery later this month.

Years ago, Lin and I were sailing with friends from Deltaville to Tangier Island for the night, when a summer afternoon thunderstorm suddenly swooped up. We were out of eyeshot of land, the waves got big, lightening was all around, and a gusty wind added to our anxiety. We put over the grounding chain, reefed the mainsail, and Lord knows how Robert got the storm jib on as I tended the tiller. In the midst of the storm, you realize there isn't a damn thing you can do about the circumstances, so you hope and pray that there will be a good outcome, but equally important, you focus your skills and knowledge in every way possible to manage the situation with as much success and as little discomfort as possible. You just do what you have to do and keep going. And you realize that you are in the same boat as others, caring about each other, suffering together, supporting and encouraging each other—loving each other. What else is a storm for?

Linda and I wish you all a safe, peaceful, and warming Thanksgiving. We all have so much to be thankful for.

11-19-12 Update *****

Lin experienced a seizure day before yesterday and another yesterday. A seizure is something not unexpected following major brain surgery. It can be brought on by over exertion—physical or mental, excitement, or stress. While most of us are familiar with seizures that affect the whole body and include unconsciousness, they can also occur without any symptoms showing at all—and anywhere in between. In this case, her speech and the right side of her mouth were affected. We went to the ER, ran a CT scan, and conferred with the neurosurgery dept at Duke. We are upping her anti-seizure meds and plan to visit the neurosurgery folks at Duke while there for the surgery I described in my Nov 16 update. Lin is doing fine now, getting lots of rest today.

11-19-12 Update ***** Part #2 *****

It appears I updated you too soon today. A little after I sent you the update, Lin awoke with a fever and no other symptoms. This mid-afternoon she was admitted to ICU at our hospital, to discover and treat the cause of the fever. We understand that a person with compromised cell counts is more vulnerable to infection, such that lots of testing, antibiotics and watching are required. As of this evening, several tests have been run and they have eliminated the most obvious potential causes. More tests will be run tomorrow. Lin is doing fine—just tired. She is so awesome! She is getting great medical attention, and we will get through this.

11-20-12 Update *****

The first $\frac{3}{4}$ of today went ok—Lin was moved out of ICU to a room. Her temp seemed stabilized but tests so far have not indicated an infection. An ultrasound

performed on her legs to look for a blood clot proved negative. Blood cultures taken when she was admitted have not yet reached the point where a conclusion can be drawn—maybe tomorrow or the next day. At least she seemed more comfortable. But around early evening her temp rose to fever stage and she had a lot of trouble speaking. Before starting an antibio IV, the nurse asked her name and birthday but the response was unintelligible. These problems eased off within a couple hours. Her problems with speech that have come and subsided over the past several days have bothered me more than anything else. I am sure the docs here are going to be conferencing with the neuro folks at Duke once the infection question is answered. Meanwhile and with apologies, I am having to ask that there be no visiting or calls until we sort through all this and Lin is “settled down.” I have lots to do here at the house when I’m here—and that’s a GOOD thing for me. We heartily thank you for the cards and emails—and especially the prayers. While we are generally unable to respond to all the communications, we do feel the prayers and love, and we certainly return the same to you—like a free-flowing river that flows both ways at the same time.

The third surgery:

11-21-12 Update *****

Lin is doing much better today. Good appetite, better color in her face. With the blood culture results negative, all dangerous infection possibilities have been ruled out. The doctor phone-conferenced with the neuro-oncologist, the neuro-surgeon, and the plastic surgeon at Duke, with the result that Lin is released from the hospital today and we’ll be driving down to Durham Sunday for an assessment and also surgery (described in the Nov 16 update) at Duke on Monday. While we are anxious about yet another surgery, we look forward to eliminating the danger that continues to exist with an open wound on her head that will never heal. Onward Ho! Our two “boys” Allen & Matt, will be here tomorrow for Thanksgiving, and indeed we have much to be thankful for. Look! In front of us. Something beautiful, something glorious, something to appreciate and warm our spirit.

12-5-12 Update *****

We drove down to Duke on the 25th for the surgery scheduled the next day—reported for pre-op at 7:30a, surgery from 3:15p ‘till ~7p, and in recovery ‘till ~10p—a long day. The bone “flap” (the piece of the cranium that had been removed and then put back during the surgery in May) was suspect as the source of infection that caused the fevers last month and was removed permanently this time; and the whole area, including the membrane that covers the brain, was cleansed thoroughly. Then the rest of the surgery proceeded, removing radiation-damaged skin, replacing that by sliding skin from the back of her head forward, and then replacing that with a graft from her lower abdomen. Everything went well, and sure enough all the tissue samples and swabs came back positive for a certain type of bacteria for which a certain anti-biotic is available to be rid of it (in six weeks; fortunately it’s orally administered). Lin was discharged from the hospital Dec 2, her pillowy bandage that had been stitched into her scalp over the graft was

removed (along with the graft staples) Dec 3; and Dec 4 she was fitted with a custom shield to protect the vulnerable part of her head from impact. (After a year, she could elect to have surgery to add an implant—this will be her call.) We drove home that night. There has been more pain associated with this surgery than the earlier two this year, but the pain meds are helping a lot. And oh!—Were we ever glad to return HOME! The texting capability on my cell went kaput on me after a few days, and it became more difficult to easily keep folks updated—trying to make up for that now. Tomorrow we have follow-ups with the local medical and radiology oncologists. Lin still cannot hear with her left ear, and with blood counts relentlessly low, she may need to have a bone marrow biopsy to explore cause. Later in the month we have a follow-up MRI and visit with her neuro-oncologist at Duke, and in January a follow-up with the infectious disease physician also at Duke. In the meantime, we're going to get a few Christmas decorations up, go see a movie, and spend some time with friends and relatives. It is also gratifying to have begun Duke University Hospital's first patient tag-team wrestling league! (In an attempt to scout our secret warm-up technique, a competitor took the attached photo of us.)

1-1-13 Update *****

On Dec 17 at Duke University Hospital, we had a good follow-up regarding the Nov 26 surgery—Aside from one spot on the graft that I am attending to with Neosporin, the 20⁺ inches of incision on her head look great; and because the infection emanating from the now-removed bone flap is under control, there have been neither fevers nor seizures since the surgery. I will add that Lin has returned to an abundance of hair, far exceeding my meager showing.

The next day, Lin had an MRI, labs, and a visit with her neuro-oncologist. Unfortunately, the MRI revealed a new tumor developing in the same area as where the original (primary) tumor was removed. While this was not a shock, it is disappointing to see this happening so soon. There is more urgency now to return to Avastin & chemo treatments, which have been on hold due to the two additional surgeries and the low blood counts, respectively. Lin received an injection to stimulate the generation of white cells, and she will undergo a bone marrow biopsy (an outpatient procedure) soon to see what may be keeping cell counts low if not a lingering side effect of the chemo. We feel confident that we'll be able to return to the two therapies soon and start putting the kibosh on the new tumor.

We seem like a ship at sea in troubled waters; our plans and activities more subject than before to the whims of the weather and currents. Even so, as we endeavor to maintain our true, general course, we take delight at the blessings presented each day—so many. We see no sense in worrying about a future we know little of and have no control over, choosing instead to focus on each day. Thank you for being there for us!

And blessings to all of you in the New Year—Mark them!

1-8-13 Update *****

We spent the full day at Duke yesterday. The surgeon was pleased with Linda's continued healing progress and has signed her off for a return to the Avastin infusions. Her blood lab showed continued low cell counts, so we will proceed with the bone marrow biopsy as soon as it can be scheduled by the medical oncologist in Suffolk. In any case, there will be a prompt return to daily chemo (Temodar) and periodic injections of a drug that will boost her white cell count. Especially because of the new tumor, we are eager to be returning to the two mentioned therapies. Thus, yesterday was time well spent, and we both feel good about moving forward.

1-17-13 Update *****

During our visit with Lin's local medical oncologist today came the good news that the bone marrow biopsy she had last Friday was negative. So this afternoon she resumed her biweekly infusions of Avastin, and tonight she will resume her oral chemotherapy treatments of Temodar. If her white cell counts retreat, there will be an injection for that. With the appearance of the new tumor, we have both been anxious to resume these two therapies—We consider this to be a real blessing to be happy about. Maybe we'll get a couple inches of beautiful snow tonight—That'll be the icing on the cake!

2-7-13 Update *****

We're doing well at this point. Lin moved through her first round of chemo (Temodar) since October without nausea, partly because she's using a low dose (because of low blood cell counts), partly due to the new anti-nausea medications available these days, and partly due to her ability to take her chemo orally at bedtime, such that she can sleep through the likeliest period of nausea. The only real problem with the chemo is fatigue, which sets in about the third day of the five-day treatment and lasts about 7-10 days out of the full 28-day cycle. At its worst, the fatigue requires about 14 hrs of sleep at night plus a nap of 3-4 hrs during the day; when awake she just doesn't feel like doing anything. At least so far, the remainder of the cycle is good—just needing to be careful not to overextend, because when she gets tired, her capacity drops off suddenly and significantly. I think the plan is to up the dosage in the near future. The purpose of the chemo is to retard cell division—the development of new cells. This obviously hurts normal tissues, including the production of new blood cells (that's why blood cell counts are knocked down), but cancer cells—trying to divide at a very high rate—are hurt much more. This is the classic trade off.

As to the Avastin (1-hr infusions by IV): these treatments are every other week and present no real problems in terms of side effects. Avastin retards the body's ability to make new blood vessels, which hurts cancer cells much more than normal tissues (because of the rapid growth rate of cancer)—so you must be extra careful to avoid injury, since there are less new blood supplies for new & repairing tissues—surgery while on Avastin is generally out of the question.

Lin will begin her next cycle of chemo a week from today. We anticipate feeling settled into a pattern, knowing what to expect, and we hope by March to venture out for an occasional overnight visit to some destinations we've not seen for a long time. On this 18th & 19th we'll be back down to Duke for a fresh MRI and to visit the surgeon and neuro-oncologist to tweak our battle plan regarding the new tumor. Clearly, the 2nd and 3rd surgeries last year threw us off track in addressing this cancer, and we are more than glad to be getting back on course. Linda and I continue to be in good spirits, due in no small measure to your continued encouragement and prayers. We are very grateful. Life is good when we have each other.

2-20-13 Update *****

Well, if that don't beat all! As you know, two months ago Lin's MRI showed a new tumor, about an inch in diameter, clear as day. It was another kick in the gut to adjust to. Yesterday her MRI was completely clear of the tumor. We could see the scar tissue from the original surgery last May, but no sign of the tumor. Our neuro-oncologist was elated, but there was no definitive/substantive answer to the question as to how there could have been a new tumor of such size two months ago with its having now vanished according to yesterday's MRI scan.

Lin and I are left with nothing to conclude but that our and your prayers have been answered by way of a Divine Blessing. Personally, as I attempt to comprehend this, I realize the inadequacy of knowledge and language to do so, such that cognition and understanding are disabled—a frustration for my intellect; I am left to simply accept it at face value, accompanied by profound feelings of joy but especially of wonder and awe. We do not "know" what to expect going forward—Things could take a turn for the worse again, or for even better than now; but what we DO know now is what has happened in between the two recent MRI scans.

Due to the possibility/probability of microscopic cancer cells still present, the neuro-oncologist wants to continue the Avastin infusions and increase the dosage of chemo as blood cell counts will permit. Will do.

There is no denying the power of prayer.
Love to all,
Howie & Linda, the Unit

3-22-13 Update *****

Looks like we're settled into a routine, now, with Avastin infusions every other week that do not include problematic side effects. The dosage for the Temodar "chemo" is increasing each 28-day cycle because her blood counts are permitting it, and so far there are no real problems with nausea. Fatigue, however, continues to be a negative trade-off. Associated with the five-day oral regimen of each 28-day cycle, fatigue sets in on about the third day and lasts for 5 to 7 days; during this time, Lin needs at least 12 hours of sleep at night and a nap of 3 or 4 hours during the day, with little interest in doing anything otherwise during her waking day. I do not deny

that this side effect is a real problem to have to cope with—for me perhaps as much as for Linda—but when compared with what others experience as side effects of treatments for cancer as well as for other maladies, *we have it pretty good*, and there is much yet to enjoy about every day.

A customized plastic shield was made to protect the part of her head where her cranium was removed and she must wear it whenever she leaves the house. A wig or hat can be worn over it. Her original hair loss was due primarily to the radiation therapy, but now most of her hair is back and looks good! She has recently been given a go-ahead to drive a car again, and yes—we will be extra cautious. Many of you have been sending email messages and cards, and since we have been largely unresponsive in kind, you should know even so that your communications are much appreciated. We feel connected, however, just to send our messages out to you all, whether or not you reply in kind, and we thank you for just being there! Our next follow-up at the Cancer Center at Duke is April 10—will keep you advised.

Please continue with your prayers and your positive thoughts regarding Linda—and regarding the many others of whom you are aware who suffer to whatever degree from whatever malady or misfortune may be involved, for love and good will are boundless, multiplying upon themselves far beyond their origination. Boundless also are the benefits.

Love to all,
The Unit

4-11-13 Update *****

More good news out of our visit yesterday at the Brain Tumor Center at Duke—after I qualify an earlier understanding. Following many weeks of absence from therapy due to the two additional surgeries and low blood counts, the new tumor we saw in December was indeed large and brightly “lit up” in the MRI image, showing its aggressive rate of growth. Then the February MRI showed that no such tumor continued to be evident; in fact, Lin and I had the impression that the new tumor had completely disappeared. However, yesterday’s MRI shows that the new tumor is still there but only as a shadow of its former self—the combination of therapies has not only made the new tumor *inactive*—it is gradually killing it. So while February’s image was a snapshot, yesterday’s shows a very welcome trend. If this trend continues for maybe a year or so, consideration may be given to a cessation of the chemo, although the Avastin infusions and anti-seizure medication will likely need to be continued, even if at lower levels. I started to cry with joy, as this answers a daily prayer.

While we can live with the fatigue that accompanies the chemo, another side effect is lowered blood cell counts, because the chemo retards all cell division, good tissue and bad. And Linda’s blood lab yesterday indicated a low platelet and white cell count, which resulted in our local medical oncologist deciding today to reduce the dosage of the chemo she will use in the cycle that begins tonight. Needless to say,

Linda and I put great value on the chemo/Avastin therapy combination and we want to stay on that train!

Today we also learned more about the long-lasting effects of the surgery trauma to Linda's brain coupled with the side effects of the therapies involved. Aside from the fatigue associated with the early portion of a chemo cycle, one of the subsets of fatigue otherwise is the heightened susceptibility to stress—physical and psychological/emotional, whether negative or positive. Such fatigue hits suddenly and powerfully, and it can last for a few hours or a few days. Accordingly, she was largely incapacitated for two to three days following a few days of limited yard work last week, despite frequent breaks. We learned yesterday that this is normal, we are learning about limitations and consequences, and we were congratulated on continuing efforts to get such important exercise in such a satisfying way. Another long-lasting effect is some measure of cognitive deficiency—principally in mental concentration and also in recalling words that haven't been used in a long time—again, *all normal*. Linda will soon start a low dose of Ritalin to help with this.

Let me emphasize that Linda continues with a positive mindset, undaunted by the continuing effects of the surgeries and therapies. She is of inspirational character, and I feel that being her "caregiver" is both very natural (it's like taking care of myself) but also an enviable privilege.

Our love to all,
with warm thanks for your continuing well-wishes and prayers.

5-15-2013 Update *****

Dear Everyone,

There is quite a balancing act involved with blood cell counts versus chemo dosage. The oncologists want to get Lin up to a maximum chemo dosage ASAP, but as surely as the chemo poisons cancer cells, so it also poisons normal tissues, and Lin's white cell count was low this time. The result was that her dosage was not increased as much as they wanted, but it was increased.

And this last round of chemo was a little rougher than most. When the extra fatigue set in, at least 13 hours of sleep were required at night and another 4 or so during the day. Physical weakness was worse than usual, along with pain in the arms—enough at times to not allow the lifting of a coffee mug. To take even a short walk was quite difficult. (There's still no real problem with nausea, however, thank goodness!) Certainly, we are not alone, as we have family and friends who have it worse than we, with worse chemo side effects, more surgeries, more pain...

More clearly than ever, we see the self as a single whole composed of mind, body, and spirit (and by extension, the two of us—the Unit—inextricably joined at marriage). When the body is attacked, the whole self is affected. Thus, Lin's tolerance for stress (whether positive or negative, physical or emotional) has a *much* lower threshold before symptoms present themselves as weakness,

tiredness, anxiety, et cetera. It has helped us enormously to learn that this is all to be expected, and our loving friends and family have been wonderfully understanding and supportive.

Accordingly, expressions such as "it is what it is" and "what really matters most appears on a very short list" and "take one step at a time" convey an enhanced meaning now that we are in the process of a complete reshaping of our priorities and lifestyle. Thank you again for your love and support.

5-31-2013 *****

When asked to speak at our regional Relay for Life event this year about caregiving, I was able to draw upon my experience as primary caregiver for my Dad and also Lin, to date. *[I will be happy to provide a copy of this speech, if desired.]*

6-12-2013 Update *****

We had another follow-up at the Brain Tumor Center at Duke earlier this week, and I have concluded that the use of MRIs to diagnose what is going on in the brain is certainly an imperfect science. Every MRI since Lin's initial surgery has looked different—and not in a way that suggests a trend. This time there was an 8mm "spot" brightly lit and cohesive. It is clear from the aggregate of the MRIs that something is going on there in the location of the excised, original tumor. Now we understand that it could be the diminished, secondary tumor or it may be scar tissue; the uncertainty could be the result of the proximity of the MRI to the final day of her recent chemo cycle. Thus the neuro-oncologist wants her back in just three weeks for another MRI—before her next chemo cycle begins. If it turns out that the spot is a developing secondary tumor, stereotactic radiosurgery will be considered. This type of radiation is quite intense but very narrow and precise—at the mm level and very different from the six-week radiation therapy she had soon after her initial surgery a year ago.

Her occasional but increased cough and rough voice are attributed to the Avastin infusions, and there a couple things we can do to reduce those side effects—not a big deal at this point. As the chemo dosage has been increased, so has the level of fatigue and pain involved. Last night Lin slept *almost 16 hours*, and still two naps were needed during the day. Not much can be done about the fatigue, but they want her to start Celebrex for the pain.

We are doing well, considering. Her fatigue from this chemo cycle will likely diminish to a lower level within a few days. Today we had some great conversation and we danced for a few minutes in the den to some of our favorite music—happy, happy times.



I have attached a picture of an object I found on the ground in the yard about a week ago—an object representing a marvel of precision and engineering but also beauty. It is attached to a dried, dead branch that fell from the sycamore tree. I know you will guess what it is, especially if I tell you that the inside of the bowl is lined with a very soft, cottony material and has a diameter of 2.5 cm. The outside has uniform, individual weatherboards of lichen, held on with strands of spider web threads. Truly awesome!

Love to all,
The Unit
7-3-2013 Update *****

Mother and granddaughter (who just turned **8** last week), attached!

Yesterday Linda and I returned from our earlier-than-normal follow-up at the Tumor Center. The “spot” appears 1mm smaller than last time, and everyone seemed happy with Linda’s progress and the effectiveness of her therapies. While a biopsy is out of the question due to the previous traumas to that part of her brain, they plan to run a brain PET scan at the conclusion of her chemo course in about 4 months to determine whether the spot is friend or foe, and to see if any remnant cancer is trying to regain a foothold elsewhere in her brain. Accordingly, we ask that your prayers on Lin’s behalf continue for the duration; there is nothing more powerful.

The pain and weakness (mostly in her arms) associated with the first 7 or 8 days of each chemo cycle will hopefully be alleviated by the use of her Celebrex medication, which we will use for the first time this cycle, starting tomorrow.

I have had several requests to quote parts of or to email/forward “The Caregiver” speech I gave at Relay for Life recently, and of course anyone else who would like is welcome to do so without asking.

From Lin’s cousin, Janice: “Bon Courage!” Quickly found online English definitions range from “good luck” to “take heart.” Good luck just does not cut it, and desiring to step just a little further past take heart, I see bon courage as a heartfelt wish for others to have hope—but also determination—for things to get better.

Bon Courage!
The Unit

8-9-2013 Update *****

Dear Everyone,

The attached are a few photos we made during a recent visit from Allen and our granddaughter Zhanna (8 years old).



Zhanna created a cheetah...

...which grew large enough to attack a battleship!



We took long walks together down the RR tracks, climbed our favorite climbing tree, tended to our garden, and had a fine lunch at The Village Grille with Nick, former student and now chef. I'll have the large lump backfin cab cake, please!



We attended a Pow Wow, and after meeting a holy man, Zhanna befriended a dragonfly that returned repeatedly to her turkey feather.

The Celebrex I mentioned in the July 3 update has proven effective in reducing Lin's pain associated with her chemo cycle, and nausea continues to not be problematic (so long as we follow the rules). The Ritalin helps her cognition, but we use it only when the need is great because it makes her jittery and interferes with her sleep.

She just completed another chemo cycle earlier this week, followed by an Avastin infusion Thursday. Everything transpired quite well, and we feel that we are settling in to our new normal successfully—Lin walked a half-mile yesterday in warm, humid conditions, and she pulled a few weeds before coming in to relax awhile in preparation for a 3-hour nap. I am so proud of her I could pop; always good-natured and positive in spite of the difficulties faced. We enjoyed a great dinner with friends last night and go to Smithfield this afternoon to listen to choral music. You know how you don't really notice something—especially its nuances—until you yourself are immersed in it? The thing is, there are so many others who face similar (and worse), life-threatening medical/health difficulties who are so strong of character, positive in their focus, and inspirational in their behaviors— To feel honored to know them is inconsequential compared to the reprioritization of love that occurs in these and similar, loving relationships. Earlier frets, trivias and worries are becoming the pastels on our palette.

8-31-13 Update *****

Tonight will be Lin's third night of chemo this cycle. The dosage has been reduced because of a low platelet count, and this represents the balancing act that cancer patients typically contend with when using chemo, which causes damage to healthy tissues as well as to cancer cells. When you have to ease-up on the chemo to protect the good guys, you're making things easier on the cancer, too. We should pray for research efforts underway on therapies that target only cancer cells but are harmless to normal tissues.

Somehow, Lin walked a half mile yesterday, had a couple wonderful visitors, and for the first time in a year or so, wrote a couple cards to mail out. But she's in her chemo cycle, and in the early evening her speech degraded to the point that it was

unintelligible. After ruling out stroke & seizure, I determined that this was the result of fatigue, which as you may recall can present multifaceted symptoms. Exhausted, she went to bed earlier than usual but was up for a couple hours in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. Today we are being more conservative, intending for the evening and night to be much better.

Remembering that we have always acknowledged that there are others in far worse shape than we, we have the very recent news that Lin's sister has been in a great deal of day-to-day pain associated with her own battle with cancer. Indeed, her pain medication is now changing to oral morphine, and she has actually begun to weigh the tradeoffs involved with a continued use of chemo. The discovery this week of two lesions on her liver, a new development, is factoring in to her decision also.

Her temperament and mindset are as Linda's, however, and she and her husband communicate and share thoroughly all experiences for better or worse as promised—and we are all brought closer together, as it should be, through nurturing, encouraging, unconditional love.

We ask for your prayers on behalf of Lin's sister, as well as for my own sweetheart.

10-8-13 Update *****

This recently completed chemo cycle was somewhat more difficult than the others, with nausea and vomiting one night, due we think to our being out of normal routine in administering the meds that night. Lin also fell to her knees one morning due to imbalance while reaching down to pull a weed from the garden—but her fall continued from that position to the ground, her arms lacking the speed and strength necessary to prevent her face from striking a clump of flowers and soft soil—wouldn't you know it? Not a scratch or bruise to be seen! ☺ The lack of ability to use her hands and arms to protect herself during her fall was stunning; thus is "fatigue" further defined and another lesson learned.

The other troubling feature of fatigue that has crept in slowly over the past year has been a general decline in cognition (due, I believe, to the chemo), to include difficulty finding words to use in a sentence. This problem, making it difficult to communicate at times, varies depending on the level of fatigue at the time. I am so impressed with Lin's attitude about it, as she displays no anger or frustration—and this really enables my own patience and acceptance of the situation. How I have been blessed with such a life's mate as she!

Lin's next round of chemo in a few weeks will be her final round for the year-long therapy course, and soon after that we head down to the brain tumor center at Duke for some big-deal tests to determine where we stand in this battle. Our prayer and expectation is that there will be no sign of cancer!

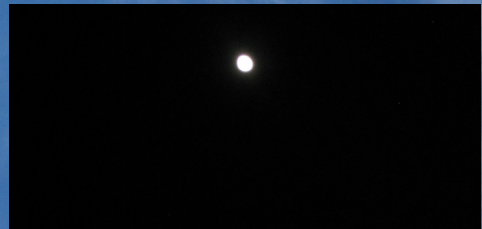
The situation for Lin's sister, Donna, has reached the point where there has been a change from one type of chemo taken every three weeks to the most effective two forms of chemo (of four tried in the last couple years) now being taken every week.

After some tough side effects lasting a day or two, she feels pretty good—she and her sister are obviously of the same mettle, and their positivity is contagious!

For your possible interest and enjoyment, I have attached a power point that is made up of photographs taken in our favorite room.

Love and Cheers from Lin & me,

October 20 & 21, Lin and I visited our beloved Atlantic Ocean, not far from the location of our first meeting 44 years ago, on the boardwalk at VA Beach. Lin's sister and her husband joined us there, and it was so good to be together there and away from home. While unable to walk much, we easily got to a couple great restaurants and enjoyed some sights that were very close by. I have attached a collage of photos for you.



11-1-13 Update *****

Dear All—

Lin's last dose of chemo was Sunday night, but with fatigue lingering progressively longer and more powerfully than with earlier cycles, it is obvious that the side effects have been cumulative over the year-long course. The loss of cognition is disconcerting for me, reminding me of my Mom's progressive difficulties from dementia. At times, communication is extremely difficult. Thus our hope, prayer, and expectation is that following the analysis at the Brain Tumor Center at Duke next week, Lin will discontinue the chemo, and the side effects will subside, if gradually, over time. I will certainly get another update out to you after our visit there.

I want you to know that what Lin & I have been facing has been difficult for us and it would be a deception to put some kind of smiley face on it all, but at the same time, we have grown increasingly aware also of others close to us, whose difficulties have been challenging—even dire—and who have been facing those difficulties with an integrity of spirit that inspires us to live similarly. To share these experiences with one another and realize that all else is set aside leaving love as all that matters is spirit-nourishing. What a blessing we make available for each other!

I attended a symphony this morning and thought I would share my record of it with you, below.

With all good wishes,
The Unit

Howie's Briefs, #154

Another 4 AM sojourn at the symphony,
with breezy fingers deftly plying, first sections of sycamore, then pine,
producing soft, harmonic music soothing to the soul;
an intricate complexity of symphonic sound,
accompanied by cricket melodies from every direction;

each leaf before me, a waving flag of praise and messenger of joy;
the whole, reaching occasional crescendos
akin to large, graceful swells in an ocean,
raising with them the small eddies, caps, and glistening moonlight reflections
of a living sea.

And rather than closing the show,
a gossamer curtain of cumulus slides swiftly and silently north
to alternatively hide and reveal a twinkling audience.
It is a time not to think;
only to be resonant.
What a gift, this symphony!

Bad news — PET scan Nov 5

11-8-13 Update *****

Our hopeful assumption relayed to you in my last message was quite off the mark. Lin's increasing fatigue but especially her deteriorating cognition the last couple months is due to a return of the cancer, not a cumulative side effect from the chemo. The tests run Tuesday showed a new cluster of cancerous tissues in the area of her left temporal lobe where the original tumor had been removed; and there is another area further back close to a reservoir of her cerebrospinal fluid system.

So her chemo is being changed to an experimental type in an effort to slow or possibly defeat this re-emerging cancer. Just before her Avastin infusion yesterday afternoon, we had a meeting with her local medical oncologist to calculate the dosage for the new chemo, which will arrive tomorrow. Lin's sister Donna is continuing along her own difficult path as well, and the both of them are assuredly fighting the good fight as well as it has ever been waged.

Your prayers and love continue to bolster Linda's and my spirits. You should know that Lin's spirit is strong, especially—and positive. Oh, what a blessed man I am!

With love to all,
The Unit

11-16-13 Update *****

Since our Duke visit earlier this month, Lin and I have entered a new phase in our journey. Her cognition continues to decline, now to the point that, at least half the time, I am able to understand only about half of what she is trying to say. Incidental remarks are generally ok, but when she wants to express something that requires mental organization and assembly, she struggles, usually laughing it off with persistent good spirits. I explain this so that you will take it into account if you talk with her—I want you to know that this problem is not as troubling for her as you might think, *so refrain not from your attempts*. Her ability to write is approaching negligible, so please continue to write her if you like, but don't expect a reply necessarily. Her ability to read remains ok in smaller doses. When we walk, she shuffles her right foot, and her physical strength, endurance, and balance have generally declined, although she is getting around the house just fine. Lin is sleeping about 12 hours each night, now, and she usually requires an additional 3 to 4 hours during the day, whether morning, mid-day, or early to mid-afternoon—we never know what time of day until it's time. She is on her 6th night of her new chemo tonight without complications. I have asked and found that neither gamma knife surgery nor proton therapy would be appropriate, as her re-emerging cancer is too diffuse; her doctors are hopeful that the new chemo will produce desired results, but as you might expect there are no predictions being made. I also want you to know that Lin is not suffering from much pain or nausea or sadness. As she will tell you, she is doing fine, and her sense of humor continues to bolster her. I

have been taking over more and more tasks that she used to do and that we used to do together, but I want you to know that these are naturally and gladly done. One does what one needs to do, should do—and *wants* to do; thank God I am able!

Please do not worry about disturbing her, as when she is resting I have signs on the doors, her cell is muted, and the land line is off the hook. You can always call my cell, however, to talk with me or leave a message. Please do *not* be hesitant about visiting her—and do not worry that you may not be able to, either. Tentative planning can be done on the phone, but definitive planning close to the appointed time will be needed, as things often change for us at the last minute. And please do not worry about initiating—or responding to—communications, for we know you are there, and simply the sending of these updates helps *me* to feel better. If there are others who you know are not receiving these updates but would like to, just let me know first & last names with email addresses. I am finding it more difficult to keep up with my tasks in general these days, so as things move along I will ask for your patience; I am blessed that there are many here who I can and will call upon for help when needed. So there is no reason for any one of you to fret!

My primal brain screams sorrow for her—and for myself, too, producing a strange ache at my body's core, while my neocortex applies reasoned consideration of practical, foresightful matters of function and happiness. The two are ever-present, struggling with each other for possession of my body and its actions. And as often as I pursue it, my mind, conduit between Neo and spirit, brings forth a shower of peace from the Lord, cleansing me for a time, and reminding me as to what in life is most important—and how to act accordingly. I continue to pray for complete healing for Lin and to express gratitude for the many blessings in our lives every single day.

With love and appreciation for you all,
The Unit

Our awesome, humbling decision

12-4-13 Update *****

Lin's condition continues to deteriorate. I am able to understand only 10-15% of anything she is trying to tell or ask me that requires assembly/composition. She has quit the one-star sudokus. She is walking much less, now, and I steady her for much of that. However, she continues to eat well, is generally free from pain and nausea, and she abides in good spirits, thank God.

Blood was drawn today so that we can look at blood counts tomorrow when we meet with our local medical oncologist. I do have the sense that the issue is becoming moot, as I expect there will be discussion about whether or not to continue with the chemo and perhaps even the Avastin infusions. Indeed, Lin and I have made our decision—*together*—and are prepared to begin talking about Hospice, whether it becomes initiated sooner or later.

As for me, I have found that, if asked again in the future, I will need to augment the comments I made months ago at a Relay for Life event about caregiving—naturally, I am unable to collect my thoughts about it at this time. The condition of Lin's sister also continues to decline, and her husband and I have found ourselves drawn closer in a bond of sharing, understanding, and support, as we are having such similar experiences at the same time. Oh, these two sisters! Such an abundance of love, courage, and encouragement involved with them and those who love them! Bon courage, indeed!

Thanking you again for your friendship and love,
The Unit

from a few weeks ago...

Howie's Briefs #157

What a beautiful fall day, today!

Earl raked leaves, which I spread over my gardens for tilling in, to lighten the soil and encourage new life in the spring.

I gazed over at Fred's and Roy's and Burt's perfect gardens—perfect for the consistent toil; but for far more than toil, I think.

Roy and Judy walked over to tell me that Burt passed away this morning.

I looked at Burt's garden, and I almost wondered—wondered if it were now a waste for him to have worked it—worked it so tenderly and devotedly all these years, for what is to show for it now?

But even before wondering it, I knew the answer.

And the answer reminds me that I must live for today
and love forever all.

I promptly returned to my toilsome tilling task.

Hospice explained and begun

12-5-13 Update *****

Big decision applied today, Lin and I having previously discussed it, before our meeting with our oncologist this afternoon. We are ceasing the chemo, the Avastin infusions, and the steroid medications which, though they all have served their purpose well, are now of insufficient value in the face of Lin's advancing cancer. The deterioration of her condition makes the January visit to the Brain Tumor Center at Duke unnecessary—even an MRI at this point is not needed.

For those unacquainted, the threshold we have crossed is recognition that the "battle" against the cancer and the "buying of time" are ended, and we now transition rapidly to care at home that maximizes ease and comfort for the whole family through Hospice, which now will be in full charge, beginning at an

introductory level; it would be useless to try to anticipate what will happen and when, but I will say that we can still go out to eat when we want to, and we'll wait to cross bridges until we have to—bridge by bridge, by George! ☺ Based on my personal experience with Hospice during Dad's final days, I know that Lin and I will be served by angels.

Many of you have asked what you can do for us, and I do not know what to say, except that your abiding prayers, love and friendship are what embrace and nurture the heart as well as the psyche, and Lin and I take this opportunity to thank all of you profoundly for that.

With love to you all,
The Unit

*She is like a horse grazing
a hill pasture that someone makes
smaller by coming every night
to pull the fences in and in.*

*She has stopped running wide loops,
stopped even the tight circles.
She drops her head to feed;
grass is dust, and the creek bed's dry.*

*Master, come with your light halter.
Come and bring her in.*

*-- Jane Kenyon, "In the Nursing Home"
(Thank you, dear Celia)*

12-11-13 Update *****

Dear Everyone,

As some of you have heard, Lin's dear sister passed away December 5, the very day we applied our decision to go on Hospice care. This has been a blow to the whole family, and on the same day as her funeral, we had Hospice in our own home to initiate conversion to their services for Lin and me.

While we're not walking up and down the street anymore, Lin can still walk ok, slowly, if on a flat surface, with some assistance, and for a short distance. Her vitals are still good, and she is eating and sleeping well. She remains relatively free of pain and nausea. Off and on, she is sleeping roughly half of her waking day, now. She is having lots of trouble expressing thoughts that require assembly, but she understands much of what is said and can make incidental remarks fairly well. And yes, by Heav'n, she remains in good spirits!

We have a great work team just finishing up a remodeling of our bathroom shower to make it handicapped-accessible and including a seat for Lin; I pray that she will be able to use it, even if with assistance, for many days.

Visitors are finding it necessary to call my cell in advance to check status and not to remain long for the visit, as Lin tires readily. Lin cannot read much anymore, but she can understand what is said when I read an email or card to her—and I watch her face light up ☺. Being ever the “little red hen,” she still tries to help me do something—clean some little mess—even though she is not sufficiently able. That hurts...

Christmas will not be about decorations, gifts and merriment this year; it will be only about the birth of our Savior (therewith hope and joy) and the love and encouragement that we all have for each other—and should have every day of the year.

Blessings to you all,
The Unit

12-20-13 Update *****

We have met most of the Hospice team, now, and the comprehensive and positive nature of their support is becoming apparent. We also continue to receive incalculable support from many, many partners in love, near and far. This so much so that I must apologize for my inability to sufficiently acknowledge contacts and acts of kindness. There are more and more things that have fallen by the wayside as I try to unscramble and reprioritize the host of things in my head and before me that press for attention at any given moment. Fortunately, I have learned not to fret... too much.

At this point in my writing today, I have deleted a couple paragraphs that I wrote yesterday, and I must tell you that Lin had a rough night last night, awakening near midnight with significant head pain. A call to Hospice and the use of some left over pain meds helped her resolve most of the pain and get back to sleep. And as I write this, she has been asleep the past 23⁺ hours now, save for the eating of one banana and a very difficult trip to the bathroom. Our journey along this path is progressing faster than I anticipated, but I understand that this is not unusual when brain cancer is involved. I think we are crossing a threshold in caring for Lin.

Already, I have been having to do, or help her to do, the dozens of little, day-to-day operations that we all take for granted when we are healthy—pulling up our pants, putting on socks, choosing the correct utensil with which to eat, handling food without spillage, walking, bathing, and so on. **Surprisingly, perhaps, each act of caregiving seems to me to be the antithesis of inconvenience, as I feel like I am simply taking care of myself. I thank God often for giving me the ability to do this.**

Even so, I have my own personal limitations and needs, and I know that I very soon will have to get help in here to augment what Hospice and I do. I am ok, and I am never alone. My impression is that things could happen pretty fast from this point going forward. Yes, I have great angst. But for the love of God and your love, I would indeed be lost.

Just a few months before Lin had her emergency brain surgery at Duke, my Dad was rushed to the hospital with labored breathing and passed away little more than a week later in our home under Hospice care, with myself as the primary caregiver. In those, his last days, as he lay in bed unable to speak, I drew close and spoke to him. I wrote the following poem during that time, and now I cannot help but feel it to have been a rehearsal.

Howie's Briefs, #128:

I looked into his eyes just inches away
as he lay on his death-bed; and I told him I loved him,
and I thanked him for all he had given me and done for me.
He heard me, and his warm eyes sent love back.
I thought of photographs of him as a boy with his dog on the farm so long ago,
and I wondered at all the experiences he had had, vanishing now with him.
So where is the meaning of his life?
Tangibly, in me, and through me; and many others.
He carried love, warmth and goodness in his time and in his own way,
and he taught me by example how to do the same, in my own way.
It was the same with Mom.
We participate in the constants, influencing each other in the process.
Tangible life with all its experiences passes away, but the constants are eternal.
We each brought them with us to make an impressionistic painting
for a few others to enjoy for a while.
Our art briefly beautiful, we return to the source and ultimate model in good time.
Who will look into my eyes, when I have finished my canvass?

Love to everyone,
Howie & Lin, the Unit

Her final breath...

12-23-13 Update *****

For the past day and a half, Lin had laid in bed unmoving and unconscious, requiring meds each two hours to keep comfortable—and comfortable she was. These changes came on very quickly, as is not unusual with some brain cancers. I totaled 5 hours' sleep the past two nights and have been taking "one hour at a time" in addressing the challenges associated with attending to my sweetheart's approach to her final breath taken. Allen and Matt have been so supportive and engaged, and I was grateful that Zhanna, at 8 years of age, was there with us also.

Last evening I went into the kitchen and prayed aloud to God, pleading that it was time for our Lord to take Lin up into his gentle arms, but sooner than later. I promptly walked back to the bedroom and as Matt witnessed, I got onto my knees next to her and was applying some lip balm to her lips, and I told her that I was going to be ok and that she did not need to worry about me; I said that her sister and mother were waiting for her, tapping their feet by now; then I told her, slowly and deliberately, my face inches from hers, that I loved her always, ...always, ...*always*. And as I spoke the final "always," she began to expel her long, long last breath gently and peacefully, as though she had been waiting for me to say those things that one more time and let go, beautifully and gracefully, in answer to my prayer moments earlier. Never have I felt the Presence of God more closely—embracing me—than at this moment.

Matt instantly retrieved Allen, and the three of us laid hands upon each other, with Zhanna joining us, as we experienced this moment, saying what Lin deserved and thanking God for the blessing of Lin in our lives and for his tender and timely act. This was an awe-some and wondrous moment, *with love glowing like the sun* and with warm appreciation for a life exceptionally lived. Praise God!

Blessings to All,
Howie, Matt, Allen & Zhanna

PS—I will send other info at a later time.

The aftermath begins

12-26-13 Update *****

Dear All—

I have finished Lin's obituary, which should appear in our local paper, *The Tidewater News*, and in the *Southside Sentinel* very soon. I have attached it also to this message for your information.

Linda P. Soucek



Linda P. Soucek, 66, died Sunday, December 22, in her home in Franklin, Virginia, with her family by her side. She was born April 5, 1947 in Newport News, Virginia to Ina Kaye Sawyer and William Edward Pitts.

Linda was graduated from Ferguson High School in Newport News in 1965. She earned a BS in English, Speech, and Journalism at Radford University (with Honors) in 1969. She also obtained an MS Ed in Secondary Education (4.0 GPA) at ODU in 1998, and an MS endorsement in English (4.0 GPA) at ODU in 2000.

She married Howie Soucek July 26, 1969 at Christchurch, Virginia, and while Howie completed his last year at Hampden-Sydney College, she taught remedial reading in grades 3-7 at Rice Elementary School in Prince Edward County, Virginia 1969-70.

From 1970 to 1979, Linda taught English Grammar and Literature at Middlesex High School in Middlesex County Virginia, while Howie taught in the middle school. During this time Linda and Howie lived in a small cottage nestled in a pine forest on a fresh water lake near Deltaville, Virginia. This was their haven of peace together amid a world of drama and turmoil. It was also in the early years of their marriage that Linda joined Howie in obtaining an aircraft pilot's license, and the couple owned and flew a Cessna 150 for many years. Howie was a master navigator, but no one landed a plane more gently and sweetly than Linda.

The couple moved to Franklin, Virginia, where Howie had taken a position with Union Camp Corporation in 1979. Linda taught English Grammar, Composition, and Literature at Southampton Academy 1980-1981, and she tutored students at local public and private schools preparing for SAT testing 1983-1984.

From 1985 to 2011, Linda was an English teacher at Franklin High School, including Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, Dual Enrollment English, composition and creative writing, public speaking, and journalism. She also enjoyed being an on-campus English Instructor for PDCCC 2011-2012.

An article titled "What Makes an Extraordinary Teacher" appeared in *The Tidewater News* in October 2012, with Linda as a prime example, and indeed many former students of hers—and their parents—will testify as to her love of and passion for the best interests of her students—and they love her for it. By her husband, Linda is described as the most giving, selfless person he has ever known; theirs is an abiding and profound love.

Linda is predeceased by her parents and by her dear sister, Donna Kaye Sterling, who passed away only this past December 5. She is survived by her husband, her children Allen Howard and Mathias Carpenter; and her granddaughter Zhanna Victoria, by Allen.

A gathering of family and friends to celebrate Linda's life will take place Sunday January 5, 2014 at 2:00 PM at High Street United Methodist Church, located at 31164 Camp Parkway, Courtland, VA. In lieu of flowers, anyone wishing to make a remembrance may make a contribution to an appropriate Area United Way; the High Street United Methodist Church or the Emmanuel Episcopal Church, both in Franklin, Virginia.

Linda's body has been cremated, and the ashes will remain with me until mine can be joined with hers in the future. The service described in the obituary will be a celebration-of-life memorial service. I do plan to have time set aside for individuals to have an opportunity to stand and offer a testimonial to Linda if moved to do so.

Please feel free to share this information with others you know would appreciate having it but who may not otherwise have heard about it. Linda touched many, many lives in a most positive way, and my sending out a couple hundred of these messages will not suffice.

My journey with Lin is not over—and our transparency with you will continue for some time. So if you will allow, I plan to continue sending occasional updates.

With great thankfulness for your encouragement,
and with love,
The Unit

My darkening valley

1-1-14 Update *****

In continuing our tradition of transparency with which Lin and I began our journey early in 2012, I now must give you a glimpse of my valley—a humbling, dark place I now occasionally visit of necessity but oddly feel better for having done so.

It feels a natural place to be—even important that I am there; I feel neither sadness nor grieving, as such. During the while, I sense my behavior to be primal, with my neocortex observing as if a third party in quiet astonishment. I have had crying spells too, but this is much different. I was moved to write about it:

Howie's Briefs, #159

From profoundly deep within me,
deeper that I can see or think,
as naturally as my heart beats,
wells up a soulful, primal moan,
stretching long—so long, each,
again, and again, and yet again.
Not a cry.
More akin to a wolf's howl,
a guttural plea projected, piercing into the ether,
to Heav'n;
to where she is,
my one love;
we, a divine union set before we met.
I have lost the best part of my mortal, earthly self,
and I am left to howl before the stars.

Such as it is.

Fortunately, I have more than my valley to visit during these troubled times. I have a shining hill to look to, lifting me up and forward to wonderful things to do, people to cherish, and blessings to be noticed and appreciated, every single day.

I established—or more rightly took sight of—my hill months before Lin’s body passed, and I told my boys that for me to think of it when needed, lifted me up from a pit of dread and misery. Now that same hill pulls me forward still, feeling the Lord’s hand on my shoulder all the while.

I want you all to know how much your messages, thoughts and prayers have meant to Lin and me all throughout this journey. No one will ever convince me that prayer and thoughts of good will are without tremendous power for good. The spoken word carries even more power—Look what the Lord did with his. Perhaps we should tell each other of our love more often.

Many times in the months beforehand—and as you know, a few seconds before Lin’s body passed—I promised her that I was going to be ok; I intend to keep that promise. The Unit deserves no less. Thus as I will at times be visiting my valley again, my shining hill will keep drawing me forward toward the good—to what we are here for.

I would like to add to this update the daily devotional entry I read this morning in *God Calling*. How applicable can you get?

January 1
“Between the Years”

*Our Lord and our God. We joy in Thee. Without Thy help
we could not face unafraid the year before us.*

I stand between the years. The Light of My Presence is flung across the year to come—the radiance of the Sun of Righteousness. Backward, over the past year, is My Shadow thrown, hiding trouble and sorrow and disappointment.

Dwell not on the past—only on the present. Only use the past as the trees use My Sunlight to absorb it, to make from it in after days the warming fire-rays. So store only the blessings from Me, the Light of the World. Encourage yourselves by the thought of these.

Bury every fear of the future, of poverty for those dear to you, of suffering, of loss. Bury all thought of unkindness and bitterness, all your dislikes, your resentments, your sense of failure, your disappointment in others and in yourselves, your gloom, your despondency, and let us leave them all, buried, and go forward to a new and risen life.

Remember that you must not see as the world sees. I hold the year in My Hands—in trust for you. But I shall guide you one day at a time.

Leave the rest with Me. You must not anticipate the gift by fears or thoughts of the days ahead.

And for each day I shall supply the wisdom and the strength.

And from Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind":

...Be through my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophesy! O, Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

From atop my shining hill, I bid you each and all:
Happy New Year!

With love,
The Unit

1-21-14 Update *****

Dear All,

Realizing that there might be many of you unable to attend Lin's celebration-of-life memorial service January 5, I had asked that a recording be made so that it could be viewed by individuals at a later time, and the church delivered. So I have loaded the copy of the service (which is *in two parts*) onto a website called Dropbox, sacrificing some of the quality of it in order to reduce the size of the file that the viewer will have to download to their computer for viewing.

[Note: these links no longer work, but if you would like to see Linda's awesome service, please feel free to ask, and I will ensure that you can view it.]

There are two different links below, each named "View video" which can be used to access and download the service. You need to know that these links will lead you only to a *preview* of each part of the service, unless you download the file first. I have included some instructions to help you, but in the event you have difficulty, you will need to obtain some "local help" of your own to resolve any problem you might have. The instructions are the same for each part, separately.

Step 1: Use the link below to access the website. Do not click on the "play" symbol to watch the video, as this is only the preview. Instead:

Step 2: Click on the "Download" button in the upper right area; in the pull-down menu that results, click on "Direct download."

Step 3: You will be presented with a dialog box from which you can choose to save the file for viewing later (just remember where you have saved it), or to open the file (with Windows Media Player); if you open the file, you will view it at that time. Be patient, as the *download* process may take a minute or so before it will be saved or viewed. Don't worry—If you mess up, you can start the whole process over again from the beginning.

- Part 1: [View video](#) Runs an hour in length.
- Part 2: [View video](#) Runs for 20 minutes.

I consider every moment of this service to be a beautiful tribute to Lin and indeed a celebration of her life. By several different accounts, some 550 people attended this wonderful service in our beautiful church, and I include the terms “joyous” and “uplifting” among others to describe the nature of the event. I am grateful that those who attended were able to, and I appreciate the warm thoughts and love of others who were unable to attend in person. Also, I take this opportunity to thank all of you who have so freely expressed your thoughts and feelings of love and support for the Unit over these many, difficult months.

My love to you all,
Howie

My homily for Linda

Howie’s Remarks at Linda’s Celebration-of-Life Memorial Service
High Street United Methodist Church, January 5, 2014:

While many of you do indeed know me, technically, as Howie Soucek, I am most often recognized around town with a statement such as: “Oh! You’re Mrs. SOUCEK’S husband?!”

This is with good reason, as it seems as though Lin has taught half the town, but especially because she is regarded by all who know her as a truly extraordinary teacher—and person.

In November 2012, I wanted to help the general public gain a better understanding of what makes an extraordinary teacher, and I submitted an article by that title to *The Tidewater News*.

While my intent was to recognize and honor all such teachers, I could not help but to use Lin as my example of one of the best. Perhaps the most salient few sentences from this article are as follows:

Youths in school cannot be fooled—they know which teachers truly care about them and which do not, and there is no college degree and no performance evaluation system that can instill or guide the personal attributes that garner love, respect, and the desire to learn. Great teachers know how to motivate youths, and in the words of one extraordinary teacher, Linda Soucek, “You get kids to believe in themselves and then watch them take off!”

“You ***get kids to believe in themselves*** and then watch them take off!” —

As we try to figure out what’s wrong with public education today, perhaps we should pay more attention to teachers like Mrs. Soucek. Oh, how she loved her students—how she loved teaching—how selflessly she treated them—and how persistent she was in never giving up on any one of them!

Now... everyone knows Lin to have been an extraordinary teacher, but not everyone knew that she had a pilot’s license and that we flew our Cessna 150 together for many years.

We always flew separately during our lessons, however, as was the case for our “long cross-country” requirement, in which we each piloted separate planes from Patrick Henry International in Newport News (then the busiest airport in the state) to Charlottesville and from there to Danville, and back to Newport News—a stressful, 5-hour trip for us as student pilots.

I will make a very long story short by saying that we entered instrument conditions between Charlottesville and Danville—meaning, you can’t see anything outside of the plane and you must rely on your panel instruments for everything. Having lost visual contact with each other, Linda became what we pilots might call “temporarily disoriented” and, using radio navigation and our radio communications, I was able to bring her in to a close formation with me the rest of the way back home.

When we finally returned to the Pat Henry International area, I set up to land... on the wrong runway. And after correcting that, I then “porpoised” my landing [explain] and had to abort it to try again. I landed ok the next time, ...but Boy!—two big mistakes—Was I embarrassed!

But now it was Lin’s turn. She called to the tower, but they couldn’t find her, so they told her to turn on her landing light. Then they said “Is that you, circling around Fort Eustis? She said affirmative, and they said “Ma’am, are you related to the pilot that just landed a few minutes ago?” She said “He’s my husband,” and then you could hear “We thought so” along with some laughter in the background.

Well, Lin made her approach to the airport, entered the traffic pattern just right, had a perfect final approach—to the *correct* runway, and she sweetly kissed her tires onto the pavement just past the threshold, for a *perfect* landing. Linda was always known for making perfect landings...

I’d also like to share a story about Lin and me—one that some of you have heard—about our first argument. It took place in our first year of marriage, and actually, it was the only real argument we ever had in our 45 years together. This goes back to when chicken was 22 cents a pound, you could get a six-pack of beer for 99 cents, and you discovered a certain fondness for bean soup once a week.

But one special night I cooked a steak and made up some onion rings from scratch. We so enjoyed those onion rings! I said golly! Let’s make some more, and Lin

heartily agreed. So I went to the fridge to get an egg to make more batter, and found that there were only two left. I told Lin “No problem! I’ll use my breakfast egg for the batter now, scramble your egg for you for tomorrow’s breakfast, and I’ll have cereal.”

But Lin didn’t want to even consider me using my breakfast egg to make more batter. Naturally I argued—“But it’s MY egg, and I can use it tonight instead of tomorrow if I want.” Lin remained adamantly opposed, and she left the kitchen to go use the restroom.

...You KNOW what I did, don’t you? I went over to that fridge and I took MY egg and began to make more batter. When Lin returned, she became incensed that I had acted against her wishes behind her back.

Well, we didn’t talk with each other the rest of the night. And in bed we didn’t even move, not wanting the other person to think we were restless out of guilt. When we awoke, still no conversation (and I surely cannot remember what we had for breakfast...). She went off to her day of teaching at Rice Elementary, and before I headed off to my first class for the day at H-SC, I sat down to write Lin a poem—a poem of reconciliation. It was about two little turtles who loved each other very much, but while playing one day, one accidentally hit the other’s shell too hard and it hurt. They became angry at each other, but later backed around backwards around a big tree so that they didn’t see each other approaching and thus saved face. When their little turtle tails touched, they knew everything was ok and they were very glad. And they never got angry at each other again.

I suspended the poem from the ceiling for her to find when she returned from teaching that day. That was about 44 years ago, and it’s the only time we were ever really angry with each other. —But did you notice the nature of Linda’s argument with me? She was not arguing for something to benefit herself—it was for something that would benefit ME. -- ☺

Now... when it comes to her experiences in the classroom, Lin could have written a book... Starting with her first year of teaching—at Rice Elementary—there were countless stories that came home to me about some great need a student had or about something humorous. On one occasion, she had given an assignment to her students to come to class prepared to use certain vocabulary words they had studied, in a sentence. Using the word “legend,” one student stood and said “I pledge a legend to the flag every day!”

Similar humor surfaced throughout her high school teaching experience as well. One of her former students, now with children of her own, recalls Linda’s indicating the importance of a comma by pointing out the difference between “Let’s eat grandma!” and “Let’s eat, [comma] grandma!” Linda made learning fun—while at the same time holding her students to the highest standard.

[Add the story of Lin calling the student’s momma in front of class]

[Also added the text entry she made regarding double negatives: "It's a no-no!]

Lastly, I must share my bluebird story with you: By way of background, you should know that the bluebird was Lin's Mom's favorite bird—and this, on a spiritual level. Lin inherited this love of bluebirds, as if every appearance was something magical.

We had not seen a bluebird for months in our yard, but the day after Lin's body died, A bluebird streamed into the yard as I sat on the patio, and landed on the trunk of the sycamore before me. Then he flew to a closer branch and seemed to look at me, turning his head to see me better. Then he flew to the branch closest to me, only some 20 feet away, to study me further. I knew this was Linda's spiritual representative, come to reassure me that we were still connected in a meaningful way.

But all at once, he hopped, turning 180 degrees to show his backside to me, ...and he pooped! —instantly turning back around as if to watch my reaction. Well, in the first instant, I was insulted, of course—but, I quickly realized—that humor had been injected into this encounter, and also that this was not just Lin; this was a CONSPIRACY, involving Lin's Mom and that prankster sister of hers, Donna.

But then... the bluebird flew toward me and hovered, fluttering not 5 feet away, right in front of me, for 2 or 3 seconds, before flying away. Considering my circumstances and the timing of such a visit by such a creature, I was overwhelmed by it as a pure message of love, joy, and—...connectedness. -- ☺

I warmly thank ALL of you for attending this celebration-of-life memorial service for my beloved Lin.

"How are you doing?"

2-18-14 Update *****

The ever-question is, "How are you doing?" And my ever-response is, "I'm doing ok," although my ok is not what it used to be, and to define it would take awhile, if even possible. Loved ones, I will share my current status as best I can with you in this update.

Howie's Briefs, #161

It is a hurtful, dark void that now dwells within me,
where a sustaining light and warmth once lived.
I am able to think not of it for a time,
and become occupied by good tasks and contemplations,
only on occasion to remember the light, now fled,
and so open up the void's pull upon my primal resources,
drawing me into its stark depths of despair

until finished with its meal.

Recovery is a mindless, peaceful exhaustion on the shore of the void,
followed by a return to the warming consciousness of abiding love—

Abiding love, our only purpose in this life on earth.

But how easily we are distracted or self-dissuaded by this or that.

Life goes on, such as it is.

I do not watch much TV, but I have been enjoying the Olympic Games recently. The athletes' behaviors remind me of the derivation of the word "amateur," describing their activity as being "for the love of it" — a thought-provoking notion, considering how much more extensively it should be applied to at least most elements of our day-to-day lives.

And ready to retire one recent night, I happened upon the Tom Hanks movie "Sleepless in Seattle," a favorite chick-flick of Linda's and mine. That was it—I locked in, noticing and dwelling on certain parts much more so than years ago—almost as if for the first time.

Lin has come to me in several dreams since her body died. In the first instance, no words were spoken nor were any necessary, as she brought with her a deep peacefulness and sense of wellbeing that communicated itself to my core. She had long hair as when I first met her, and she held me softly, providing me a pure, warm comfort. Then I heard a baby's cry, around a near, unseen corner, and she gently left me to care for the child, which I somehow knew to be either Matt or Allen. I awoke in peacefulness.

I have finished going through Lin's clothing, setting aside a couple dozen items that hold memories of her presence from near and long ago. The rest go as Lin would want to those in need in the community. What a strange, haunting feeling I had at different places along the way in this process, entailing a most difficult realization—a forced acceptance and a "letting go," deepening the sense of loss.

Howie's Briefs, #165

Today I did not feel at all lonely.

I just felt utterly alone;

and there is quite a difference.

Going through her dresser was even more difficult, with hidden treasures here and there to find. Empty drawers are a mean sight, and I am certain that filling them up with other things will not help much at all. But as with so many other activities, you do what needs doing and you keep going. Tom Hanks' character's line was "You get up in the morning, and you breathe in, and you breathe out..."

This writing cannot begin to describe how my life has been and is changing. I don't even know quite how to feel about it, except that I can most assuredly reaffirm to you all what I have said before—that Yes, I have great angst; but for the love of God and your love, I would indeed be lost. I will tell you that nothing, nothing is the

same as it was before Lin's body died, and even as before her diagnosis—not the eating of food, lying in bed, sitting in a chair, buying groceries, doing desk work, cooking food, being with friends, working outside, reading a book, driving the car, thinking about topics of interest or what needs to be done or what I want to do, looking at any object, the brushing of teeth, rubbing the cat, getting dressed, et cetera ad infinitum. I feel forced into a new state of being that attempts to cope with an awful and profound loss that is not difficult to describe—but also into a deepened state of well-being that is impossible to describe; this is the ultimate of many, many ironies all along the way of this horrific journey. An important part of the love of God, above, is the ever-presence of Jesus, recognizing that I have control over my awareness and benefit of it...

Howie's Briefs, #163

I brushed dry snow from my patio seat
to sit awhile before the sun and to converse with my feathery friends.
Two doves came close, standing together and facing me from only 15 feet away.
I wondered at their speech, with no vocabulary to help,
and I heard a timeless message before they left—
Be conscious of Love!

Closing my eyes to see certain things better,
I settled on the matrix of wind
sounding through boughs of sleeping life,
and forming an occasional gusty mass, moving along from left to right
like a whale swimming casually through arms of kelp
which are just gracefully disturbed by its large but smooth and silky movements.

I felt dozens of pinpointed, icy kisses from angels upon my cheeks,
each melting individually into my psyche to provide me comfort.
Then opening my eyes, I saw tiny snowflakes dancing before me,
glistening in the sunlight to the wind's tune
just as sparks cast upward from the ember-fairies of a fire.

I am loved.
Praise for the morning!
and for its promise.

Thanking you all for your love,
and sending you mine,
Howie

3-7-14 Update *****

Dear All—

The photo below has become one of my favorites of Lin, because it represents her wonderful, admirable spirit throughout her entire ordeal with brain cancer, from diagnosis to the death of her body.

The joke was that we had just started the first tag-team wrestling league at Duke University Hospital. And so obviously intimidating were we that there was no one who came forth to challenge us! No-sir-ee, not one!

Indeed, this photo was made outside her hospital room following her third surgery in 2012 (see 12-5-2012 Update), this one involving more than 20 inches of incision and the permanent removal of a large part of her cranium due to infection. The helmet was required until an external prosthetic shield could be made—one she was reluctant to wear, especially after her hair grew back to cover the indentation in her skull.



It is the expression on her face—after all the surgeries, the radiation and chemotherapies, and the diminished capacities to enjoy life as before—that is a compelling testament to her character, good nature, and spirit for life. To the end, she was compassionate and giving to all—even happy, in spite of her own circumstances.

So for me it's not just the missing of her; it's reflecting on what she went through—and especially *the manner in which she endured it...* She is an awesome role model for someone like me, as I struggle to feel cheerfulness in going forward despite this trauma in my life. I do endeavor to emulate her example, however, and I have the sense that this will gradually become easier for me as the natural grieving of my flesh subsides over time and allows my spirit to soar in joy.

I take great stock in knowing that there are many others who have endured similar hardships on the part of their loved ones and themselves and who have supported me with words of empathy and encouragement. Also, it is difficult to describe how nourishing and sustaining the thoughts and prayers of all of you have been to Lin and me throughout this whole experience. There is much more to life than we typically think of, and we have so much more in common than we have in differences; this is more evident to me now than ever before.



A week ago I ventured into the yard in search of spring's first blossoms, and what I found was "more than meets the eye" (photo at left), as another example of an underlying meaning I am finding in my day-to-day observations in life. Is there more in this photo than what meets your eye? More than shapes and colors, and even more than beauty?

Let Spring burst upon us with its many seen and unseen beautiful truths!

Blessings to all,
The Unit

My life-changing vision

4-13-14 Update *****

Our timeshare week in Duck on the Outer Banks of North Carolina came available recently, and I made the decision to go—and go alone. Linda's and my honeymoon was spent on the Outer Banks, and it was the natural setting for the forming, special closeness of first ourselves and then our young family in the years after. I knew that this trip would include difficult moments but that there would also be much to enjoy—I simply had to go. Please be patient with me, as I make an account of this trek.

Day One: As soon as I awakened, I sensed an aversion to going on the trip, as if I would be leaving Lin behind. It was helpful to pack some pictures of her and to include her toothbrush with mine. I got away much later than planned... But away I went.

We had always taken the back roads to go to the Outer Banks—a country path with many turns, many memorable milestones and oft-repeated traditions. This was a lonely drive, with the passenger seat shouting its emptiness with a deafening silence.

It was strange indeed to have dinner by myself in the restaurant without Lin's sharing in the sunset over the sound, with its white-capped, surging accompaniment. And what an irony that so many others, seated together, had so little to say to each other while I sat alone with memories of non-stop conversations with my love every time we shared a meal together. What an irony indeed.

About to abed, I thought I'd make a perfunctory check of the television offerings, and upon turning the set on, Sandra Bullock appeared in *The Heat*. I was instinctively uninterested but quickly and surprisingly found myself laughing—repeatedly—throughout the rest of the movie. I needed such laughter.

Day Two: I launched out for breakfast around 8AM. There were many cars parked around but not a single human being walking around but me. While it was cold and windy, I still expected to see some activity to/from surf casting and shelling.

Breakfast was delicious but difficult in this traditional haunt and included an unexpected, unprovoked welling up of grief. Choking back private sentiments, I wondered again if I would continue in the future as my former but damaged self or as a revised edition that has left the past—with respect and warm appreciation—in the past; a revised edition that is more determined by current and future needs and interests; or where in between? Nothing makes sense but to head for the latter.

Kipper snacks... with my Dad many times, and with Lin, too. ...And now in this condo at lunch time, I am the star in the final segment of *2001—A Space Odyssey*. (Do you remember?)

Right now everything seems as an illusion; the only thing real in our lives is love. That's the science of it, and that's the mystery of it. Ask any quantum physicist and any believer in the Unseen; the answer is the same. We should all leave our foibles, fretting, fearing, and fussing afar and come together on this, for our time-gift is fleet and fleeing—more so that we choose to recognize. Everything is a choice. What an awesome power we've been given!

This evening—a most beautiful sun-setting for the newest crescent moon; a wondrous sight. Even Cassiopeia joined in the viewing—no minding of the Andromeda Galaxy, its usual target. Beauty and wonder are persistent, if we allow them to be.

Day Three:

Our spring timeshare week in Duck on the Outer Banks of North Carolina having come available a few months after Lin's temporal life ended, and I made the decision to go—and to go alone. Linda and I had first met and fell in love on the beach (it's quite a story), our honeymoon had been spent on the Outer Banks, and so it had become the natural setting for the forming and special closeness of, first, ourselves, and then our young family in the years after. And because I was experiencing terrible grief and suffering after her passing, I knew that this trip

would include difficult moments but that there would also be much to enjoy, if I were to be deliberate in this—I simply had to go.

It was early in the morning of the third day that I experienced a life-changing vision of Lin—this was the vision which brought pure Joy into my grief-journey and back into my life in the world; Joy, and the *knowing* of where Lin is and what her condition is, and where I will be also when my time comes. Elsewhere, I have written of the clear distinction I make between a “dream” and a “vision,” and I will be happy to share this with you if you ask.

Before rising for the day, and having prayed the day before to visit with Lin again as I slept, I slipped into an early-morning slumber-state and happily found myself with Lin. We were inside some large convention/hotel with other people bustling about, when Lin left me to go up to the ninth floor. I quickly embarked on an effort to find an elevator so that I could be with her again, but I was disoriented and frustrated by my inability to find one.

Since parting from Lin, the environment had taken on a dull, dark, and unwelcoming atmosphere, and when I did find an elevator, it proved unfit for my purpose, rising only to the fourth floor, and that only after frantic, frustrated attempts to locate and operate the correct buttons. Others in the elevator seemed perfectly satisfied with its performance to the fourth floor and continued on in their insouciance. I could do nothing save to return to the ground floor.

Extremely disappointed by my inability to get to Lin, I began to give up hope of finding her and felt myself moving in profound darkness away from the building, when I noticed a small, red, spherical glow in the distance. As I came closer, moving through the utter darkness, I saw that it was a cluster of a few dozen red points of light, each with its own soft-glowing halo, all swirling slowly and gracefully as a turning sphere of lights—each one the perfect red of Lin’s favorite color. I did not hear, but felt, Lin telling me to keep going, that I would find her.

As I considered returning to the search, the brightness of the glowing points of light gradually dimmed, and I found myself driving a car on a circuitous highway around the large building I had left. Whereupon I approached a choice to be made: either stay on the main highway, gently circling from the south toward the eastern portion of the building where I wanted to go, or take an off-ramp to the right, in a direction away from the building. Instinctively, I wanted to stay on the main highway, but a compelling voice told me to take the off-ramp, and so in complete trust I chose to do so.

Upon that decision, I instantly found myself in a splendid, bright elevator compartment, with broad doors opening widely onto the *ninth floor* and into a huge, gloriously bright, white room—so much so that I could not distinguish walls, floor or ceiling—and yet, a vast space with an unseen floor. Feeling goodness everywhere, I began to sense the presence of “living beings” off in the distance, interacting with each other, although they appeared as vaguely spherical or amorphous shapes;

they were white in the same way as the room but somehow distinguishable from the room and from each other.

Then one of the “beings” left the others and moved in my direction. Its spherical shape began to elongate vertically, with a head that took on the appearance of Lin during our early years of marriage—so beautiful to see, and welcome in a way impossible to describe. There was so much Joy in her face that it is as though she was radiating Joy as she swiftly approached me and then embraced me with Love. We talked briefly, her face immediately before mine, but only two things she said to me remained vividly clear to me after this experience—the first thing she said: **“I’m so happy!”** (I will never forget but cannot describe the way she said the word “happy”), and the last thing she said: “There’s still much for you to do there.” — whereupon I awoke.

Strangely, I felt no remorse about having left, as if some perfect objective had been reached completely. Indeed, I felt nothing but Love and Joy throughout my experience on the ninth floor, as then I awoke, carrying with me that Love and Joy in the flesh for my third day on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

As I walked the beach this day, collecting shells and filling my senses with the salt sea, my earlier slumbering experience seemed clearly to have acted as a catalyst in my journey, turning me into a fresh, easterly wind, inflating my sail from before it, and allowing me once again to reach forward.

Truly, this was and is one of the most profoundly life-changing experiences of my life, for I KNOW where she is, I KNOW that she resides with pure Joy in God’s Love, I KNOW that our Relationship continues even as I still walk the earth, and I KNOW (again with more surety than my human brain is capable of) that I am destined, in God’s time, to enter into a most sublime, Sacred Presence with my Lord, my Lin, and all others whom I love. Oh! How blessed I am!

As I reflect on this, I notice that at several points along the way I was presented with a decision to make. Confronted at first by relentless, dreary disappointment, I chose to quit— And look where THAT got me! Then, inspired, I *chose* to try again, and boom!— I was on my way. Then I could have chosen to go the way my *egoic self* wanted to go, but instead I trusted the Voice that told me to go in a different direction; and again, boom!— There I was! We make a myriad of choices every day, and we should contemplate many of these decisions *with more than our egoic self* before taking action.

Day Four: I had planned on returning home today, but not until after a significant breakfast and a long walk up the beach again. The sand was rich with color and sea-offerings, and the day was warm enough for me to sport my daisy-dukes! Still uplifted by my dream-vision the night before, I began my selections of such as a devil’s purse, two Venus clams, and the tail of a horseshoe crab, all to be retrieved home as a treasure-trove to add to so many others there—each with its own story of adventure long ago.

And this treasure's story is a matter of the heart, as I happened upon the large shape of a heart, made from a long tube that someone had found on the beach and visioned a perfect purpose for. But this was no ordinary art, for it was obvious that its creator was driven by a passionate love—one with which I found resonance. Adding "Howie & Linda" within its borders, I wondered of the confluence before me.

Love is a boundless, endless supply of healing and joy
for those who receive it
and for those who offer it.
And I have found that I do not have to look for love;
I have only to open my eyes.

My despondency now having completely abandoned me for a time, I returned from the beach with a hopeful spirit and a joyous heart. Thus my dream-vision and my found-heart served as significant milestones for me in turning a corner in my new journey moving forward.

To add—I believe in my heart that Lin's message is for us all—not just me. Remember what she said!

My warmest well-wishes and love to you all,
The Unit

7-17-14 Update *****

Dear All—

It has been a long time since I last wrote, my having planned many weeks ago to write about my grieving/sadness experience—and indeed I have written quite a bit of material about that—but I have had trouble "pulling it together," and I feel also that there are some of you with whom in one way or another it may not be appropriate to share. My current plan is to send some brief thoughts about it next time and offer a long version only to whoever may request it. For now, a "newsy" communication:

The week of Independence Day, I returned to the Buccaneer (the motel of ancient mariners on the Outer Banks of North Carolina) for the first time since before Linda became ill. Son Allen and granddaughter Zhanna joined me in my small efficiency, and although I had a few difficult moments, the week was glorious—this, despite the passing through of Hurricane Arthur (Cat II). I have attached a Word doc collage of pictures for you.

And speaking of storms, only several days ago I was standing inside my garage watching a powerful thunderstorm out the backdoor window, when a bright flash of lightening, its cannon-like boom (not the sound of "thunder"), and a sharp snap sound inside the garage all occurred simultaneously—I knew that there had been a strike in my back yard. I scurried immediately inside the house. Subsequently, I

found that my TV was fried—but not its surge protector (I do not think this was a lower voltage “power surge”), and not anything else on that circuit; I lost a light bulb (but nothing else) on a different circuit; and the electric garage door opener, a foot higher than my head where I was standing barefoot inside the garage, was knocked out (but nothing else on that circuit). After the storm passed, I went outside to find where the lightning had struck, and there was the evidence: a long, longitudinal, superficial layer of bark blown off the sycamore. Hoping that the tree will be ok, I then noticed a small trench leading away from the tree, about 15 feet long, 5 inches deep, and ending abruptly, that had been exploded out of the ground (along with a couple bricks) by the lightning. But I still couldn’t figure how the lightning got inside the house. I went to the outbuilding to check things there and found no electrical power available. On my way back to the house, it hit me: the exploded trench ended exactly where the power line was buried a couple feet deep on its way from the house to the outbuilding—so the lightning had used that wiring to get to the breaker box in the garage and from there launch its sightseeing venture. Really fluky stuff—lightning goes where it wants and does what it wants. Surely an angel had been watching over me as I stood in the garage at the time of the strike.

A “housekeeping” note, FYI: I plan within a month or two to give up my land line phone and rely entirely on my cell phone. In the event you do not but would like to have my cell phone number, please email me with the request, as I want to limit its exposure as much as possible.



This is a photograph of my Linda in our first year of marriage. Her hair was braided just like that when we first met in the late summer of 1968. Early on in our 45 years together, Lin and I defined each other until we evolved a new, singular identity, as perfect a union as I can imagine. Knowing her as I do, there must be a half-dozen distinct messages being conveyed to me by the contours of her expression. The underlying, message, however, was ever “I love you.”

I do hope that this summer is going well for you all, and I send you my love,

Howie (AKA the Unit)

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.
It is the source of all true art and science.
He to whom this emotion is a stranger,
who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe,
is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

–Albert Einstein, *Mein Weltbild* (My World View, 1931)

Reflections on this journal – and moving forward

10-23-14 Update *****

Dear All—

This past July 26th marked our 45th wedding anniversary, and I have long known myself to have been married to an angel on this earth all these years—a truly awesome, humbling blessing! This photograph was made at Fred's Restaurant just a month before Lin's body passed away in December last year. *To her last moment of consciousness, Lin was the essence of integrity, selflessness, and love.*



Even before my last (July 17) Update, I have wanted to share more of my thoughts about my grief-journey; while it has not been difficult to write down these many thoughts, it has been difficult for me to pull them together cohesively to share with everyone.

However, in the last couple months the qualities and oscillations of my journey have begun to settle into something of a steady-state, and I have a better picture of where I am headed in my journey than I did before. Thus, I feel the following to be my final "Update" as such, with future messages simply sharing accounts of my goings-on at the time. I certainly hope that you, too, will stay in touch with me, as you have been, with similar news of your life-events.

In its briefest terms, then, I will say that the long process of losing Lin was at times excruciatingly difficult—and now, my life without her is profoundly bad. At the same time, I continue to experience so many blessings and prayers answered that life is wonderful indeed. I am unable to reconcile these two realities and am simply adjusting to their coexistence. The still-evolving result has been a humbled, mellow life, more focused on fundamentals than ever before.

No doubt like others', my own grief-journey is strange and complex, blending sadness with joy, regret and optimism. There seem to be three components to my own journey, and I attempt to summarize them for you as follows:

The first component is of the flesh/self:

Of the five recognized stages of loss and grief, I believe that I surely skipped Denial, Anger, and Bargaining. With the severity and symptoms of the fourth stage (Depression) being a continuum, I would say that I have been experiencing

“sadness” in spades, as a vitally important part of my grieving process—and that this stage has in fact been coincident with the fifth stage of Acceptance, which Lin and I had in place from the time of our initial discovery of her malady.

My sadness evidences itself in two entirely different ways. One is a constant, subliminal presence which my routines of day-to-day living keep suppressed until some little trigger releases it. I realize this suppression amounts to a thin veneer of protection against something that could easily overwhelm me for a while unless I repair the opening quickly, which I normally do without problem by refocusing.

Secondly, however, you have seen in my earlier Updates that my sadness occasionally appears forcefully, at which times I *am* my howling wolf, while at other times I am detached as a third party observing with astonishment the wonder and profundity of my wolf’s grief. Such episodes continue, with no sign yet that they will ever taper off.

Strangely, I have come to *feel* (I have known for some time) that my sadness is so normal for me and so natural—even necessary—that a spell, though forceful and profound, can arrive and be experienced *without regret*; I return to my previous activity, and within a day or two I have difficulty remembering just when it occurred or what triggered it.

Lastly, my grief-journey has led my *self* into a land of relative isolation, for as no one else experienced the relationship I had with Lin, no one else can understand the nature and depth of my personal loss, and I am incapable of communicating it. Thus my sadness is largely a solitary, unique experience for me. But worse, human nature prefers uplifting, happy conversation, and it is uncommon if not rare that someone sets awkwardness and discomfort aside to discuss another’s grief—same for most grievers! So I think most who grieve feel that, as a matter of degree, “I’m on my own” in their grief. *And this is most regrettable, indeed.*

Thus my grief journey seems strange to me, with my neocortex and limbic brain joined in a conspiracy to sponsor a “sadness of the flesh” whose epicenter is clearly my earthly “self.”

Amazing to me, I sense that I am capable of overriding this sadness, using the same tools of the flesh that promote it. The unacceptable prerequisite, however, would be to deny the presence of Lin in my life and to deny our deep and holistic relationship, which would be as unnatural as it would be abhorrent for me to achieve.

How my flesh suffers!

The second component reflects the new me going forward:

At this point ten months after, I cannot envision my “Acceptance” stage ever being rid of a significant sense of loss and sadness. However, I do feel that the “new me” is at the same time enjoying much of life as I did earlier—and a little of it perhaps

more so. Too, there are activities of satisfying substance that are occupying much of my time.

I have written a dual scholarship program being implemented this school year: the Linda P. Soucek Memorial English Scholarships. One will apply to students in the regular Senior English class and the other to those in either Advanced Placement English or Dual Enrollment English. Among several criteria included in the selection process, I am including a personal interview (rather than an essay).

I am also supporting the development of a Business Education Partnership (including job shadowing, internships, demonstrations,...) through our Chamber of Commerce, and I am participating in VIPS (Volunteers in Public Schools) as a tutor at our middle school—my favorite whippersnappers!

Only recently did I finish up my last remaining project in the wake of my Dad's passing away in early 2012, and now, after sorting through Lin's clothing (in the spring) and then her jewelry and dresser (this summer), I will work through the contents of her desk, with all its correspondence and special knickknacks. Later will come all the cabinets and drawers throughout the house that are full of the resources she used to get things done and keep our home well. Such projects are quite difficult for me but necessary to accomplish, and I work at them with a timing consistent with the tolerance of my grief journey.

"Getting things done" does continue to delight me, as it always has. Nowhere is this evidenced better than out in my yard, where the evil forces of weed encroachment and other results of my neglect challenge me to keep up. There are things I used to do that I no longer can, but there is so much good work remaining that I do enjoy and appreciate as an important part of the new me going forward.

Also, I increasingly find myself sitting down with others to talk about some trauma or quandary they face. Ironically, my own suffering has helped me to focus better on others' difficulties and help to reduce the accordant "isolations" I mentioned earlier, as we all have so much in common when it comes to the things that matter most in life.

The unconditional love involved with friends and relatives began to loom large in my life especially following Lin's diagnosis as a vital, sustaining, nourishing force. Whether part of the joy of a large group in a wedding—or a meal shared or a quiet venture in the woods or on a lake with one or two held dear—the way in which we should relate to each other is obvious.

Indeed, ever since Dad died, I have increasingly (it's a work in good progress) disallowed anger, fear, resentment, and dramas to detract from the joys in my life, as I have come to appreciate goodness, I believe, more than ever before. Life has become too short and too precious for the unnecessary negatives, wreaking havoc with my—and others'—endocrine systems. This is really simple stuff, isn't it?

The new me is moving forward!

The third component reflects a burgeoning spiritual development:

There is something underlying—no, propelling—the new me moving forward, but it is very difficult to describe in terms other than “spiritual.” It is more grounded and stable than “attitude,” more profound than “courage,” and vastly more intelligent than “stoicism.” It is *unselfish* in that it relies on enough humility, faith, and trust to submit one’s fleshly self to something not understood cognitively, although it is sensed by many people all over the world with increasing evidence and acknowledgement.

Not to be confused with the brain’s awake-state, the term “consciousness” keeps popping up in my daily devotionals as an equivalent to “the Kingdom within” and without. The same can be found in most other religions, and even quantum physicists are now pointing to a reality that connects everything that exists and accounts for all kinds of phenomena that cannot be accounted for by any other means. So all of a sudden the power of prayer is being proven by scientists; science and religion are soon to end their divorce and remarry—Love conquers all...

In my April 13, 2014 Update, you read of my 9th floor dream/vision of Lin. This experience was a milestone for me in my grief journey, as I transitioned from being starkly isolated from Lin to *knowing* where she is (and where I will be), that I am close to her always, and that joyful love is ever-present, our being beneficiaries on this earth only when we deliberately choose to be conscious of it. Indeed, it was at this point that consistent Joy entered my grief-journey.

My spirit soars!

This closes a description of my current grief-journey in as concise a manner as I am able to convey it. It has been therapeutic for me to write it down and to share it with you, and I thank you just for reading and thinking of it.

With my love to you all,
Howie (AKA The Unit)

PS—I am finishing up an assortment of additional poems and other writings about my grief-journey, to share only with those of you who request it via an email message to me. I anticipate that only a very few of you will want or need this additional layer of writing, so please have no compunction about refraining from this.
