

I've been on the receiving end of an untold number of sermons over the years. I mean ... we're talking a LOT! And it's safe to say that most have been forgettable. Even the ones that really lit me up in the moment, convicted and inspired me, the ones I thought I'd surely always remember, soon faded. And that's not necessarily a tragedy. For one, it's reason and motivation to keep coming back week after week to hear more reinforcing messages. Also, there's no telling what seeds have been planted as a result of these various sermons that may have—unbeknownst to me—continued to impact my spirituality (hopefully positively!) in one way or another.

But it means that when one, or at least a portion of one, **does** stick with me over time, it's a big deal.

Case in point: the wedding homily from May of 1992 when the betrothed couple, Dan and Marja, were told that they were beginning a life-long conversation with each other. The pastor went on to remind all in attendance of the characteristics of a *true* conversation: respect, equality, mutuality, give and take, humility, vulnerability, gentleness, kindness, intimacy, *really* listening to the other ... you can see how these qualities provided a perfect foundation for a wedding message. I wasn't even the one getting married—and have never married since!—but that homily has stayed with me all these years, to the point where I've even shared pieces of it in classes I've taught and in workshops I've led.

This week, that almost-31-year conversation came to an end as 59-year-old Dan finally succumbed to the colon cancer he'd been battling for the last several years. My heart went out to his widow, Marja—affectionately called “Marge”—a 36-year friend of mine from Divinity School. She's been a champ through it all: the surprise diagnosis, the many appointments and procedures and treatments, the never-ending supply of various drugs always needing to be picked up at the Pharmacy, the transitions of Dan working from home rather than the office, eventually not being able to work anymore at all, and eventually having to call in Hospice. In fact, she may be at her best in a crisis, an opportunity for her uber-organized and practical personality to shine. I'm confident that she'll navigate her grief in a healthy way. She's had a long time to prepare for his death and physical absence from her life, although that doesn't necessarily mean the days, weeks, and months ahead will be easy.

But it's the end of that decades-long conversation that really breaks my heart. The loss of a partner with whom respect, equality, mutuality, give and take, humility, vulnerability, gentleness, kindness, intimacy, and *real* listening skills was shared for more than half a lifetime ... that's not something that's easily, if ever, replaced or recovered. So, yes, my heart goes out to Marja, but it also goes out to *all* of us with a message—an invitation ... a mandate, even—to appreciate our conversation partners while we have them.

And *that'll* preach.

