

Reflections on the death of Queen Elizabeth II

September 25th, 2022

I want to tell you the story of a boy called Neil. He was a long-awaited and much-loved only child. He was a beautiful infant, with a mop of white-blond hair, bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and a stunning smile.

One day, when Neil was about 2 years old, he complained of a headache and began sleeping a lot. His family doctor could find no obvious reason for this, and thought perhaps he had a cold or 'flu coming on. After about three days, Neil's father was holding him while he slept, and he noticed a change that made him rush the child to the hospital. Sure enough, Neil had fallen into a coma. He was diagnosed the next day with a massive brain tumour.

After several weeks of intensive treatment, the medical team gave up all hope and suggested to the parents that they should take Neil home to die. They did. But Neil did not die. He woke up and gradually regained his mental and physical abilities, including the smile.

There was damage, however. He walked with difficulty, had poor control of his left side, and needed medication to control seizures. But the smile never faded.

When it came time to go to school, he went to a special school for physically handicapped children, where he became an avid, if unconventional, swimmer. He also became the school's emblem of cheerfulness. He took it as his task in life to welcome new pupils, to cheer up those who felt low and to generally keep everyone smiling, which was quite an accomplishment in a school that had an average of three funerals a year. To this day, the school has an award in Neil's name, called the Sunshine Award.

Sadly, when Neil was 16 his cancer returned, and this time, when he went home to die, he did. Just a few short years later, his mother died. His father still lives alone in a house full of memories and mementos, carefully-preserved belongings and photographs, and it is one of those photographs that is the point of my story.

The photograph shows Neil, his face radiating joy and excitement, holding out a small bouquet of roses. The roses are being received by a diminutive woman, dressed all in bright, peacock blue, with a smile that is bright and warm, as she chats with him. It is Queen Elizabeth II.

That was one of the greatest moments of Neil's short life. He treasured the photograph and the memory of his chat with the Queen, and his eyes sparkled when he talked about it. Neil has been gone for almost 30 years now, but his father still treasures that photograph and remembers the thrill of that day.

The really important point about this story is that it is not at all unusual. The Queen probably made personal contact with dozens of people that day, and dozens the day before, but she took a genuine interest in every one of them, and for each one of them it was a moment to remember.

In the last two weeks we have heard much said about the Queen and how well she did her job. We have also heard much about how deeply her Christian faith anchored everything she did. Nowhere was that more evident than in those small interactions with individuals she did not know and would never see again: she cared about them all, because she saw the divine in everyone.

In the various ceremonies this past week, the most moving moment for me was at the end of the service in St. George's Chapel. The piper, up in the gallery, began to play the lament, and as the Queen's coffin was slowly lowered into the vault below, the piper left the chapel and the sound of the bagpipes gradually faded away into silence.

When Queen Elizabeth I died, in 1603, the great poet John Donne wrote of her "*grace, dignity and courtesy; ... her humour, generosity and sheer love of life.*" He thanked God for "*the courage that she showed in times of hardship; the depth and reality of her Christian faith; and the good example that she set for us to follow.*" He could have been writing now, in 2022, about our Elizabeth.

About a hundred years ago, the Ontario-born Anglican Bishop Charles Henry Brent, wrote a beautiful poem in which he asks "What is dying." He begins the poem by comparing the departing soul with a ship heading for the horizon:

She is an object of beauty
and I stand and watch her till at last
she fades on the horizon,
and someone at my side says, "She is gone."

And he ends it with,
And just at that moment when someone at my side says,
"She is gone",
there are others who are watching her coming,
and other voices take up the glad shout,
"There she comes."

She is gone. We were privileged to live during her reign. And now she is being welcomed on another shore.