

When our beloved sister Sheila was in the seventh grade, I was in the second, and it also was at about the same time I was learning how to spell Sheila's name—i—e—e—i—l—i—a—l—a. Sounds like one of those primary school songs—you know, the fellow who had the farm. We young students committed some long forgotten transgression and we were assigned to write all the numbers from 1 to 100. I submitted all the numbers from 1 to 27-28-29-100. I suppose it was my way of saying, "I get the point. Why be dull?" The Sister of Mercy was true to her vocation and never confronted me but perhaps the effective instruction was an early indication of the kind of coded language Sheila and I would develop over the years sometimes urged by our father with his personal constitutional query, "What's your point?"

"Shorthand" doesn't adequately convey the meaning of our little language. It was elliptical, deliberately imprecise but succinct. A most recent example was when Sheila phoned to invite me for dinner. I gave a one word response: "Gosh." Sheila replied, "I'll take that as a Yes!"

Down through the years, words, phrases, popular culture allusions abounded. "Is it an earthquake or simply a shock?" "Think-pink." "When in Rome, (I do as the Romans do)" "Hey, these are good links!" "It's their life." "Philly." I did not have a comeback. "Sheila" is too lovely a name so I accepted it as a term of endearment. But from the kids: "cream cheese," "cheese steak" and I've never been to Philadelphia. But when I visited her classroom in the '60's, every student whether named Phil or Phyllis got a title of Mr. Ms. Miss. Don't press me on the phonetic distinction in 1968. Whether she was in her fire engine red convertible phase or her green Ford Mustang a la McQueen phase, every student was treated with that mark of respect and Sheila in a new dress got a complement from McQueen at the Coffee Cantata on Union Street just the same. "Hello, gorgeous!" One of the last things I said to Sheila was, "See you soon, gorgeous." I was once cautioned in college that as a issue of citation I should be wary of pop culture references but by then we realized that, even though the Kennedys had Casals to the White House to play Bach, when it came to JFK choosing between a cello and an upbeat—.

An English professor liked to offer the advice of "going along with the gag." One might not be open to or comfortable with the environment of the story or piece, its façade, but you might get something out of the architectural and design elements inside. With Sheila, it was our version of "through a glass darkly" or more accurately a sister and a brother holding up mirrors to each other, trying to make some sense of what we saw around us and having some fun at the same time. So we were pretty discursive down through the decades, but Sheila valued many gifted people and what they contributed before her kid brother did so she was right to describe herself as my "champion."

She had some moves as well. Two happy memories are placed about 25 years apart. Once, I played for our mother the scherzo movement from Dvorak's Seventh Symphony and for a few moments she danced to it on her own. A few years ago, Sheila put on some music I gave her and she did the same thing. Same moves. Like mother, like daughter. Different music. For Sheila, it was Sinatra singing Porter's "You're Sensational." Dancing. Not exactly like Vera-Ellen. Another talented woman whose work Sheila championed—to me. Along with Lady Ella always, Hepburn and Holliday, Kelly and Kendall. Lots of Ellagance during the early phase. Sheila's kind of style. I can see her now confabbing with her new best friends, trading notes and comments. "Sheila, you turned your brother into a fan of ours. Many thanks." "Listen kids—I'm just getting started with describing how I influenced people in my life. It goes beyond what you did for us."

There's a song from a movie to which Sheila led me that reflects so much that was true about her. Faithful, hopeful, loving. Practical. She possessed both transcendence and immanence which was refracted through her life with Ron, Molly, Katie, Michael and generations of family and friends on both coasts and in the middle of the country as well. This made her holy. To actually see and hear the performance of this song is essential to its spirit, but for now some of the lyrics will have to do. You can look up the rest on your own. As Sheila might say, "You're capable."

There's a rising moon for every falling star
Makes no difference just how sad or blue you are
One never knows about tomorrow
Just what another day may bring
One moment in your heart it's Winter
Comes a rose and suddenly it's Spring

One more allusion, and I'm taking a risk here. One can only imagine the golden necklace of phone conversations that Sheila and our much loved sister Mary created on a day to day basis for so many years. A few days ago Mary said something to me that reminded me of a quote (I can hear her groaning already, but wait for it) from a book and a play which was later made into a movie. In the story, a Naval supply ship's cargo officer gets his orders to a bigger and better ship. He's actually the officer in charge, issuing key decisions and even making hard bargains with the C.O. so the crew can get a much needed liberty at a port of call. Just before he transfers off, the-laundry and morale officer—is summoned up top, then returns, chagrined, "I've just seen the captain. I'm the new cargo officer. He likes me. We're having dinner tonight." Well, about that call from Mary. "I just got off the phone. I'm her new phone buddy. She likes me. We're having dinner." Well, here's to more of those in the future.

Now, our father would be the first to say, in Latin (we're on school grounds so I won't

chance the mispronunciation), every analogy limps. The structure of Sheila's life wasn't defined by a chain of command, Mary has plenty of phone buddies, and I warned her, "I don't have Sheila's talent." She sweetly replied, "I know."

So once more, with feeling for the always to be loved Sheila, forever calling to mind a form of Churchill's salute to FDR: meeting her was like opening your first bottle of champagne; knowing her was like drinking it. She embarks on what our faith teaches is a vessel to home port. What a ship's roster that must be!

"Thanks for all the liberties, Sheila. Thanks for everything."

-Phil Sullivan
May 28, 2008