

## **“A Serious and High Calling”**

Remarks by Bernard Sussman, M.D.

*Internist and URMC palliative care consultant; also, son of Albert and Phyllis Sussman, namesakes, Albert and Phyllis Sussman Palliative Care Unit, Strong Memorial Hospital*

I'd like to tell you a bit about my parents. They grew up in New York City, living in the Bronx but linked in their dreams and imagination to the opportunity and sophistication of Manhattan. They were first generation Americans who faced economic and social barriers routinely, but were bound by common belief in a fairer and more tolerant nation – a belief that animated their commitments throughout their lives and is one of their most important legacies to their family.

In the photograph of my parents you may have seen as you entered the unit, they stand on the boardwalk of a New York City seascape, facing their future. I think the photograph was taken in 1939 or 1940, shortly before my parents married. The Great Depression had barely relented and the ugly scar of European fascism tugged urgently at my parent's sense of social responsibility. On that summer day, however, I imagine it was youth and love and thoughts of life together that inspired the choreography of their stance -- for it has always seemed to me that in this photograph they are dancing, their legs symmetrically positioned in rhythmic reflection of one another, their shoulders gently touching, their arms in equipoise.

I can only wonder what future they dreamed of at the beginning of their uncertain life together. Work, an apartment of their own, and children were certainly central to their dreams. My father was an aspiring journalist and my mother yearned to develop her talent as an artist. It would be years before any of those dreams were realized. The separation and anxiety of World War, as well as the struggle for an economic foothold, were to precede that first apartment and child. Whatever the blessings and rewards they dreamed of on that boardwalk, I know they were never bold enough to imagine being honored as they are tonight.

My parents were products of a once excellent New York City school system. My mother attended high school in the Bronx, my father went to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. He attended City College of New York in the mid 1930's, a meritocratic society of the highest caliber and accomplishment. Three future Nobel Prize laureates were classmates of my father. One of his proudest achievements was being editor of the City College newspaper twice – an unusual honor in such a competitive setting. My parents met after my father completed college and was working for a magazine of the Hebrew Butcher Workers' Union, translating Yiddish literature into English among other duties. They married on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1940 and lived on a pull out couch in my grandparents' living room until my father entered the Army in early 1942. Upon his safe return from the Pacific theater they resumed residence in my grandparents' living room. Eventually an apartment of their own, steady work and two sons followed. Success followed upon strength. My father left journalism for a career directing the fledgling International Council of Shopping Centers in the 1950's. He and the organization proved immensely successful, my father becoming an internationally recognized expert in shopping center development and real estate. In the late 1950's my mother resumed the study of art she had begun years earlier at the Arts Students League in New York, producing a body of work that was

exhibited in New York City and nationally. Her paintings reflect in color and soulful image her tenderness, melancholy, and sensitivity to beauty. They are her spirit incarnate and our most valued bequest.

When my mother became ill in 1971 the nature of medical practice, particularly for those with life threatening illness, was dramatically different than it is today. My mother suffered months of unexplained fever and pain before its cause was determined. CT scans, MRIs and interventional radiology did not exist. When earlier diagnostic hypotheses proved mistaken, exploratory surgery was necessary to establish the diagnosis of lymphoma.

It is easy to forget how differently medicine approached the care of cancer patients at that time. The research that has led to today's successes in the treatment of lymphoma, and other cancers, was in its infancy. My mother received a single chemotherapeutic agent and its benefits were questionable at best. The time from her diagnosis to her death was less than six months. Unlike the cautious optimism that characterizes treatment of lymphoma today, we knew at the start that my mother would not survive her illness.

My mother, however, did not know that -- at least, we never discussed it with her. Patients were rarely told of terminal diagnoses at that time. It was thought that knowledge of grave illness would undermine one's will to live and be a source of unnecessary suffering. The presumption that my mother was too fragile to know the truth of her diagnosis continues to strike me as the most significant failure of her medical care and, I fear, a source of unrecognized suffering. None of her doctors or we, her family, recognized the strength and courage I know she possessed to face her condition. The things we never said, because reality was cloaked in secrecy, fill me with a longing I accept but feel more keenly today because of what I have learned since about the power and importance of loving conversations at the end of life.

The field of palliative care did not exist in the early 1970's. When my mother came home for the last weeks of her life, we had limited medical guidance and no help at home. Like so many before and after, we did the best we could, and I think we managed pretty well. We made things up as necessity required, much as we sometimes do in palliative care today. Much less was done to treat symptoms at that time. Once home, for instance, my mother never received an opioid pain medication. Still, one of us was with her at almost all times and I choose to think that the love of family was a principal source of comfort for her.

There is no question that my father's presence was the most important source of that comfort. His devotion to her was total. We all pitched in but my father was never off duty. On one occasion only, he needed to go out of town for a few days. I can vividly picture my parents' reunion near the front door of our home when he returned. I thought my mother had been well cared for in his absence but it was my father she needed most of all. She had missed him so much. As they embraced tenderly, I saw them anew. As in a woodland landscape whose features are seen more keenly when the leaves have dropped and the snow has not yet fallen, their love and mutual reliance were evident in clear relief, unobstructed by the strife and distractions of work and family life. This was a view, like many children, that I had been unable to appreciate at other times -- a blessing really, to see one's own parents so deeply in love. "Don't leave again", she told him, and he never did.

My mother's death left a hole in our world but also proved to be inspiration for many good things. My brother and I have both had careers in medicine because of our desire to help patients and families facing serious medical problems. My brother is a Physician Assistant specializing in Emergency Medicine. I've been a primary care physician and my work in palliative care is connected by a straight line to those days and nights nearly 40 years ago. Our father also looked for ways to help others that would remember and draw commitment from my mother's struggle. He established a charitable trust dedicated to medical care and asked us, his sons, to put it to good use. We think he would be very pleased and deservedly proud to see what his generosity has helped create.

Our hope that this unit would be a space that will welcome and comfort the patients and families who will come here at moments of immense significance in their lives, has been answered fully. We could not be more thankful to all who worked so long and so hard to make this palliative care unit a reality. Although I didn't know what it would look like, I have long known the place of distinction this unit would have in this hospital. The essence of that distinction resides in the 4-1200 team that has responded with heart and soul to their calling. Whether nurse or social worker, nurse practitioner or clergy, patient care attendant or physician, music or massage therapist – this is an exceptional group, meeting great responsibility with kindness and competence, with more than dedication, indeed, with devotion, to the patients and families who may face crises without precedent in their lives, as our family did long ago.

As he approached his death the novelist Henry James observed, "This is the distinguished moment". In our 21<sup>st</sup> century moment in history, events seem to transpire in milliseconds, the public attention barely longer. We struggle to keep up with those events, moving too quickly to understand them. Regrettably this is often true in our hospitals as well the arena of public affairs. The problems of serious illness and the end of life ask something different of us. Here, on this unit, will be a place for reflection. Here we must continue to find time to listen and to sit quietly, to slow down when needed, so that in haste we do not fail to witness the distinguished moments, and the mysteries of life and death, that will inhabit these rooms. We are not here to provide answers to those mysteries, to explain the nature of the soul, what becomes of it at the moment of death or to envisage the shape of eternity that awaits us all. We are here to contemplate and respect those mysteries. We are here to keep company, as best we can, those who will come here in need, ever attentive to ways we can help, always mindful that we do not intrude. There is intimacy and there is grandeur in these distinguished moments. This, in good measure, is what can make this difficult work, so unusually rewarding. The Albert and Phyllis Sussman Palliative Care Unit is the fulfillment of a dream -- not only because it honors the memory of our parents, but also because it does so with a call to distinguished service of a kind so important to them. This is a serious and high calling assuredly, one that both humbles and elevates the spirit. Our family thanks each of you for being here today, for your help in reaching this moment of celebration, and for all that you will do in the future to answer the call to serve.