

Ways To Honor Elka's Life and Memory

Elka will live on in many people's memories, gestures, words, and actions for generations to come. If you want to actively honor and celebrate her life, here is a list of suggestions of specific and general actions you can take. I wrote most of this list while my mom was still alive and read it out loud to her. We discussed some ideas and she laughed about some parts. And it was she who added some restaurant suggestions at the end!

We ultimately liked the idea that this list was a combination of memorial, advertisement for great Thai food, public health advisory, and political statement -- (we decided efficient obituaries are our specialty!):

Ways to honor Elka's life and memory

- Be a good friend.

- Take time with people, give them attention, be interested in whoever you are lucky enough to come into contact with (value relationships and honor Hello-Goodbyes).

(These are a few examples of Elka's thoughtfulness to detail in the second to last week of her life as she lay in her bed visiting with me in between naps: she wanted to be sure I contacted her dentist's office and her audiologist to thank them for their good care over many years; she wanted me to find a book list she had made and tucked away for a friend in Santa Fe; she wanted to be sure Kareem got information about how to make the chocolates he really loved, so I filmed her telling me the recipe; she tried to arrange the timing of three visitors to her bedside so they could meet each other.)

- Be kind.

(The last week of my mom's life, I think she talked about the importance of kindness more than any other subject.)

- Listen to classical music (live music when possible).

- Support the Bellingham Symphony Orchestra and the Bellingham Festival of Music.

- Cook phenomenal meals and bake gorgeous cakes.

(Please note that on this website we've included some of Elka's recipes in her own beautiful handwriting.)

- Grow flowers.

(Elka loved tulips, crocuses, daffodils, lobelia, and daisies, and her most recent very favorite flower was sanvitalia, if you want to start a little Elka garden...)

- Play Rummikub or Mahjong.

- Go to the Saturday Farmers market and support local farmers.
- Write thoughtful cards and letters with a pen and put a stamp on the envelope; remember birthdays and anniversaries.

(Elka often told me, "I think I'm single-handedly keeping the post office in business.")

- Know when to use "lay" and "lie" and "loan" and "lend" and "bad" and "badly" and "less" and "fewer" (as just a few examples!!!).

(Elka studied French as a child, so English was the third language she learned. Her father actually spoke seven languages. Elka and her brother and father were much more aware than are most native speakers of English "rules." One of our family's jokes is something Elka said once, only funny if you understand the larger context... "If is always were." We sometimes randomly say it to each other.)

- Read columns by Leonard Pitts.
- Listen to journalist Ari Melber (Elka also really liked Chris Hayes).
- Use tiny scraps of paper to make your lists (or use the backs of envelopes you just got in the mail, or use the blank side of the perforated oval from your new Kleenex box).
- Support access to healthcare which includes reproductive rights. Abortion is healthcare.
- Get vaccinated and boosted. Trade your individual freedom for collective safety.
- Work against politicians whose rhetoric stokes fires of intolerance in their followers and influences their followers to feel superior to others because of where they are from, what religion they practice, or the amount of melanin in their skin. Supporting any of those people is a direct assault on Elka's memory as a child whose life was torn apart by Hitler.*
- Work to end the death penalty.
- Work for social justice.
- Say hello to the little tree as you drive west on Lakeway Drive.

(It's dwarfed by the bigger trees, sort of across Lakeway from CTS Church; if you look at the row of oak trees lined up at the cemetery, you will identify the only little one. We call it "Elka's tree." She liked to say "Hello little tree!" as she drove by, always one to pay attention to the underdog.)

- Go to Holland or the Skagit Valley at tulip time.

(A story she always recounted when we stood in the tulip fields, agasp at the thousands of tulips is that, when Julia was very little, she yelled to my mother, "Omi, look at this one!")

- Eat really yummy food and thoroughly enjoy it; maybe even talk about the next meal you're looking forward to while you're eating the one in front of you.

- Contribute your time or funds to organizations Elka deeply believed in including:

Whatcom Hospice Foundation

Planned Parenthood

Equal Justice Initiative

Jewish Voice For Peace

Doctors Without Borders

Interfaith Coalition

Community Rights US (her son Paul's organization)

United Farm Workers

Re Sources

Human Rights Watch

Center for Constitutional Rights

Jobs With Justice Education Fund

Davis-Putter Scholarship Fund

Compassion & Choices

Rosenberg Fund for Children

The Opportunity Council

- Always have coffee candies (hopjes) in your pocket or purse or glove compartment, preferably many, to offer to others and for emergencies.

- Eat coffee ice cream (or any flavor of ice cream).

- Eat salty crunchy snacks and exclaim frequently about how much you're enjoying them.

- Eat green curry or pretty much anything from Rachawadee in Mt. Vernon while sitting by the Skagit River.

- Eat Triple Ginger Snaps from Trader Joe's.

- Eat a crispy rice salad from Busara.

- Eat a mango salad from Thai Maison.

- Eat the "pancake" (you have to ask, it's not always on the menu) from Soy House (and say hello to the owner, Ann).

* During one of my last discussions with my mom, she said she was reconsidering having me write anything about Trump in her obituary. She said she believed it was too dangerous to put his name here and that someone might kill me if I did. In the 1940's, Elka lost her home and much of her family to the Nazis, and it might behoove all of us to think about what a dying woman in Holland might have said in the 1930's if she felt that Hitler was dangerous and wasn't

sure about adding his name to her obituary out of fear of reprisal to her family. Elka had a lived experience that caused her to perceive Donald Trump to be as dangerous as Hitler was. Most of us do not have that lived experience. The fact that Elka actually felt afraid of my making this kind of statement publicly is exactly why I want to make it publicly.

If there is any chance that Trump-supporting people who love Elka and who want to honor her would take these words to heart and recognize that Trumpism is fascism, it's worth it to me to take this risk. In my mom's memory and empowered by her candor and wisdom, I include Elka's words: Please don't support Donald Trump or the divisiveness he has inflamed in this country.

<https://youtu.be/h7Y-9C6ox1Y>

How Elka's essence lives on

In the last weeks of my mom's life, I was so grateful to have time to sit with her without distractions (aside from the frequent ringing of her phone, which she always answered, from one of dozens of friends calling her daily -- and this was the case all my life, not just for those few weeks). We were able to talk about dying and death and where she believes she'll "be" after she's gone. Her responses ranged from "Dead is dead" to "It's all so strange because I'm alive right now and I don't understand it at all" to "I'm open to ideas..."

I read my mom an interview with a disciple of Thích Nhất Hạnh. This is an excerpt:

One of the most powerful teachings that he shared with us before he got sick was about not building a stupa [shrine for his remains] for him and putting his ashes in an urn for us to pray to. He strongly commanded us not to do this. I will paraphrase his message:

"Please do not build a stupa for me. Please do not put my ashes in a vase, lock me inside, and limit who I am. I know this will be difficult for some of you. If you must build a stupa though, please make sure that you put a sign on it that says, 'I am not in here.' In addition, you can also put another sign that says, 'I am not out there either,' and a third sign that says, 'If I am anywhere, it is in your mindful breathing and in your peaceful steps.'"

Hearing this and talking more about some of these ideas, my mom agreed with me that her "essence" will live on in others, so in that way she won't die. She also agreed that she would be very happy to discover that heaven exists! This topic was broached often: she has never believed in heaven and yet... how can we know? And we tried to come up with ideas about how she could let me know she is there... We spent a lot of time reflecting on this.

I said, "If there is a heaven, you can see Dad, and your parents, and Evelyn, and Anne, and Betty..." (I named more people who have died who were very special to her).

She said, *"It would be enough to see Dad."*

So here is a story to end this lengthy section I've written that over time has become sucher and sucher:

If there is a heaven where souls recognize each other, an idea my mom and I would both really like to believe, then I'm going to picture some of the extraordinary people who recently arrived there a bit ahead of my mom.

Among them are Thích Nhất Hạnh, Bishop Desmond Tutu, bell hooks, and Sidney Poitier (and although they have been there longer at this point, I'd like to add Congressman John Lewis and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg). When my mom arrives, these loving, beautiful people/souls embrace my mother's soul and show her around. They're very warm and welcoming, and my mother, who is very direct and practical and many would say blunt, says to them, "I was very impressed by each of you during my life, and I appreciate how well you are helping me feel welcome here, but what I would really like to do is to see my husband. Is that possible?" So they take her to my dad. Because I can only envision people still in their bodies, I am picturing Myron on a bench somewhere, enjoying the breeze, very peaceful, waiting. I don't know if it is in Central Park with a copy of Winnie the Pooh sitting next to him, or if it is in the beautiful backyard they created in Albuquerque, or maybe it's on their back deck in Bellingham or at Boulevard Park watching the sunset over the bay. Wherever that bench is, she joins my dad there. They are together again, sitting (or whatever souls do) side by side, forever and ever.

I want to believe this. What I believe without question is that, just as Thích Nhất Hạnh still lives in your mindful breathing and in your peaceful steps, Elka still lives in your thoughtful gestures, warm and caring relationships, social conscience and actions you take when you remember that we're all connected, and appreciation of art, music, and delicious food.

What kills a soul?

Exhaustion, secret keeping, image management.

What brings a soul back from the dead?

Honesty, connection, grace.

~ Shauna Niequist