

# A Sacred Orbit

*January 30, 2022, Fifth Sunday in Epiphany; Forest Home Chapel, Susan Steiner Spear*

## 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

### Introduction

Ever since Christmas, I've been thinking about this week's service and sermon, after opening this beautiful gift from Gwen Wollney. It's a gourd-and-pine-needle basket, a work of art, skill, and love. Upon seeing it, my first reaction was awe, that Gwen should give such a valuable treasure to me. Look closely at the mastery. Inside is a handful of dried lavender, giving off a lovely fragrance. Isn't it wonderful?

My second reaction was that it was a sacred object, and wouldn't "sacred objects" make a great sermon topic? Pastor Rebecca agreed, gave it the go-ahead.

But then reflection took a turn. Why did Gwen want to give this to me? Why are she and I close enough for this extravagant gift? Who — not what — is the sacred center of the entwined orbits of our lives? The answer of course is our beloved Leroy Wollney.

Writer Joan Didion, who died in December said, "You get the sense that it's possible simply to go through life noticing things...and that this is...worth doing. The seemingly insignificant things that most of us spend our days noticing **really** are significant, have meaning, and tell us something." <sup>1</sup>

Rebecca, Carol, Sara, and Joe as Chapel preachers all bring unique gifts to the pulpit, to which we respond in faith. I will never have those same God-given gifts. But I do have the gift of noticing what's going on between people, the dynamics of human interactions. I pay close attention to see what habits often work well between us. When your habits build us up in a godly, affirming way, I aspire to these habits too.

I have noticed Roy Wollney knows many good people who **want** to spend time with him, take care of him, laugh with him, learn from him, and be in his orbit. So do I.

Roy has agreed to be the center of this sermon, not for himself, but because he wants all of you to know how grateful he is for the loving-kindness each person brings to his orbit of friendship and care in his old age, far above his expectations, let alone his hopes and prayers.

You may reflect on Roy's sacred orbit specifically, or, I invite you take your own sacred person as an example to think about.

## The Planets

To begin, Rebecca, may we please run through the slide show, to give folks an idea of who Roy is, and the planets that orbit his heart, and who lives there?

On the first planet dwells Roy's late beloved Kaye, his wife of 68 years. His parents, family and friends above live there.

Second planet is Roy's family: his son Clayton and wife Jan, daughter Gwen her partner Margaret, son Dana and wife Carol, children and grandchildren. Roy's family is the center and bulwark of his life and care. And don't forget the cats! Maus, seen here on the bed, is very much with us, but Fleder, who loved to go on walker rides, has gone on to give comfort to Kaye above.

[next slide]

Third planet is Roy's professional caregivers. There's his home aides Terry (pictured here) Mitzi, and Toni, who live close by and love him to pieces. (More about them later!!!) Krista, his visiting nurse comes once a week. There's Office for the Aging support. Then there's a squadron of doctors, nurses and staff who care for his welfare. We should also include EMTs who have come to Roy's aid, emergency room doctors, nurses, and technicians.

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The fourth and final planet is Roy's friends and neighbors.

There should be a special spot on this Jupiter-sized planet — a special whirling heart — for his neighbor Linda, who **has come** in three times a week to care for Kaye and Roy for many, many years. Linda does laundry, shifts the trappings of the seasons, gardens, and helps Roy keep his life orderly. They are kindred spirits when it comes to orderliness. Linda sews for Roy, especially gorgeous, easy-to-put on shirts with Velcro fasteners and lots of pockets. Please, please give thanks to God for Linda!

There's old dear friends from the Enfield Food Pantry, especially pastor Jean Owens and the other Roy, who drops in with deliveries.

There's Joe and Gail, great friends, who went to concerts and plays with Roy and Kaye, who now drop in with dinner and to watch a movie, and since Covid, come help Roy worship on Zoom most Sundays.

There's us, the people of Forest Home Chapel, who have loved worked, volunteered, worshiped and lived with Roy and Kaye over the years. You bring conversation and gossip, food and flowers, and especially the joy of your presence. The first summer of Covid, Sara and Crystal and Joe and Gail, came to play musical requests for Roy out on his deck. Bliss! I take him for the scenic drives he loves, help with his shopping, and when Gwen can't be there, go in with him at doctor visits to be his health advocate. We have become dear friends.

This planet must also include all nature, favorite places Roy explored when he was a young man, places he, Kaye and the family camped together, and favorite places here. This planet is green, for the forest.

[last slide]

Finally, you can see the whole illustration of Roy's heart and its satellites together.

[thank you, Rebecca, you can turn off the slide show.]

### **How Can I Help?**

Now I want to tell four stories about life in Roy's orbit.

You may have noticed that Roy likes order, a place for everything and everything in its place. I have never known Roy NOT to inspect a gift horse in its mouth ever so carefully. Now Roy likes a certain special three teaspoons. They're heavyweight, carefully balanced and especially, have a tapered bowl. Woe betide the person (me included) who plunks down any old spoon next to his soup. You'll get a lecture on what makes a good spoon — every single time. One time I got so fed up, I searched all the thrift stores for one like them, then presented **this** spoon to him. Roy said, "No, it's close, but not the same, not as good."

But when Toni, Terry and Mitzi came to care for him, and make Roy his lunch, I noticed that instead of plunking down just any old spoon, they brought out all three good ones, to let him choose. No growling, no lectures!

And because this is a godly and humane habit of interaction with another person, I too began asking before plunking down, to give Roy some control over his environment. To allow him to assert some autonomy. To preserve his dignity. And to satisfy his need for personal preferences to be respected. Please give thanks for Terry, Mitzi and Toni.

(But just so you — my future caretakers — know, this is now my favorite spoon.)

#### **Romans 15:2**

The Apostle Paul wrote, "Strength is for service, not status. Each of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, 'How can I help?'" <sup>2</sup>

## A Place of Holy Mystery

As time went on with Terry or Mitzi there most days, and Toni coming in once a week, it became obvious to all of us that Roy was beginning to let strangers into his life. At first, he wouldn't remember or say their names, almost wouldn't talk to them at first.)

But how Roy has softened! The three aides and I work so well together, strategizing how best to **offer assistance to, not impose help on**, Roy. We cook favorite foods he craves, make special gifts to lighten his heart, love his cat, and affirm his sorrows. Toni often stops by for coffee on her days off; I stay for lunch because it's fun. Toni and Gwen make cookies together. There is teasing and good-natured banter, which we all thrive on.

One day I heard Roy ask, "Terry, would you please get the hand cream from the bathroom?" Her name! A please! Something good is at work here. We four women are church people, and know what that something good is. We have noticed!

### Luke 7:16 – holy mystery

Luke records, "They all realized they were in a place of holy mystery, that God was at work among them." <sup>2</sup>

## Fruit in an Orchard

In November, the good doctors of Trumansburg Family Health summoned all their elderly patients, Roy among them, for a special Covid booster roundup. We parked by the back entrance. **One** nurse came out to bring each patient in to get boosted. If patients couldn't navigate safely, **two** nurses came out to the car to administer the shot.

When it was finally Roy's turn, **three** nurses emerged from the back door – one with a needle, one with the accessories, and one empty-handed. Tripping down the sidewalk, Anya, Tisha and Chris reminded me of the Three Little Maids from School in the Mikado, in happy anticipation of seeing Roy again.

Roy on the other hand, began to sit up and pay attention, rather like a golden retriever who has just realized we're entering the bank's drive-up window, with a biscuit in the offing.

The maids arrived; I opened Roy's passenger door, and clumsily began to help him take off his shirt sleeve. Roy barked, "Just yank it!" The maids broke out in giggles, one even snorting. I whirled around, asked, "Who snorted?" Chris pointed, saying, "Tisha."

From there on, the maids took over amid much banter, expertly exposing the right muscle, giving the shot, applying the band aid. Anya, the empty-handed one and his former visiting nurse, had come out just to say hi! Through it all, Roy was in a state of great delight. Who knew a Covid booster shot could be a high point in five people's day? Please give thanks for Tisha, Anya and Chris.

### **Galatians 5:22-24**

Paul wrote, "But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people." <sup>2</sup>

### **Glad Heart**

Last story: Roy's hands are stiff; he can no longer open his own mail. But every time one of his helpers opens an envelope for him, something wonderful tumbles out: beautiful cards, news of people he loves, cartoons, drawings, articles. The best ones get pinned up so we all get to enjoy them. They're great conversation starters.

Now Roy has steadfastly continued a small, meaningful ministry over the years, that of creating "pass cards" for the Enfield Food Pantry. Small rectangles of card stock, Roy puts a sticker on each one – funny, pretty, or inspirational stickers. He says clients often save these little cards. Last fall, when the world supply chain ran out of stickers, several of you Chapel folk sent Roy packets of them from stashes you had at home. Terry reports that she, Roy and Mitzi really enjoyed opening these packets, to see what tumbled out.

Wendy Millroy's packet was best, chock full of fun stickers left over from her girls, but also news of daughter Christina's progress in the world. Christina often came out to help Roy with gardening; they became great friends. Roy, an expert gardener, says he never has to tell Christina what to do, she just reads his mind.

Almost every time Roy finishes reading these paper gifts, he says wistfully, "I wish I could send this person a thank-you card, saying how grateful I am to them for thinking of me." Roy gives thanks for every one of you!

### **Philippians 1:3**

Every time you cross my mind,  
I break out in exclamations of thanks to God.  
Each exclamation is a trigger to prayer.  
I find myself praying for you with a glad heart. <sup>2</sup>

## You Are My Disciples

In summary, what have I, and maybe you learned in Roy's orbit? Some of the basics of compassionate care-giving, new jokes, new friends, and so much more.

Anthropologist and physician Arthur Kleinman in his book, *The Soul of Care*, describes caregiving as “grounded in presence that embodies the liveliness and fullness of being, and in the willingness to stay turned toward another, even in the midst of pain and confusion.”

For Kleinman, the soul of care is theological and improvisational; it's awake to the dimensions of existence that can't be fully known or described. Our fragile bodies and our vulnerable lives are signs that we have been placed in each other's care. Giving and receiving care, Kleinman insists, is what we're made for. <sup>3</sup>

### John 13:34-35

Jesus said, “Let me give you a new command: Love one another.

In the same way I loved you, you love one another.

That is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other.” <sup>2</sup>

This is the Good News of the Gospel: ***keep on turning towards one another***. Thanks be to God. ***Amen!***

## References

<sup>1</sup> Joan Didion, in a 2006 interview with Paris Review.

<sup>2</sup> *THE MESSAGE*, “a contemporary rendering of the Bible from the original languages, crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events, and ideas in everyday language,” by Eugene Peterson, 1993. Used by permission from the NavPress Publishing Group.

<sup>3</sup> *The Soul of Care: The Moral Education of a Husband and a Doctor*, by Arthur Kleinman, Springer Publishing, 2019. Reviewed in *The Christian Century*, December 31, 2021, by Stephanie Paulsell; some words in this sermon are hers.