

My Eulogy for Jonathan Eric (“Rick”) Beitch, September 14, 2012

That I am here today eulogizing my beloved son Rick is surreal to me. That he and I became particularly close over the past few years makes it even more difficult for me to bear. That he and his best friend Chani remarried just two days before his death is bittersweet. And that his grandson Jacob, also here today, was born just eleven days before Rick’s death—with so little time for Rick to drink in the wonder of this sweet baby—feels to me too cruel.

Memories sustain me these days. It is late fall in 1969. I see Rick stumbling down the aisle disembarking from a jet plane that brought him halfway around the world from Korea, arriving at JFK in the wee hours of the morning, jet-lagged and seemingly in a cloud of confusion. Irwin and I recognized him immediately from pictures we had been given by the adoption agency, Welcome House. But what is that? He is limping! No one told us about that. Well, we’ll deal with it, we thought. But in the next few moments we had the answer. His shoe laces had gotten lost at some point during the long journey from Korea, and he was shuffling to keep both shoes on, left shoe on the right foot and vice versa. Later, we learned that during the long flight the children had shed various articles of clothing, and some ended up with each others’ shoes. I still have those tiny shoes, along with the beautifully hand-tailored brown striped suit and white dress shirt and tie in which he arrived. His birth mother had carefully embroidered “Re Ki Beitch” on the inside of the suit jacket.

I see him chasing the cat around our little apartment in Cheshire, with a smile of complete delight on his face, while calling out “goyangi!” That was the only Korean word we ever heard him speak. In anticipation of his arrival, we had studied a little Korean so that we would be able to communicate with him. But in an incredibly short period of time, perhaps a matter of weeks, he was speaking fluent English. As his biological clock switched over from Korean to Connecticut time, he began to sleep better at night, and his exuberance emerged. Soon he was off playing in the fields outside the apartment, chasing grasshoppers, and smiling ear to ear when he managed to catch one to study up close.

We were racially blind in those years. The fact that Rick's birth mother was full Korean and that his father was an American GI (from Texas) did not seem to be of concern to us. I remember once, we were at Everybody's supermarket, pushing Rick down the aisles in a shopping cart. A woman was frankly staring at Ricky, then at Irwin, then at me. Eventually, she realized that she was being very impolite, and she tried to cover up by stammering, "What a cute little boy! He looks just like both of you."

We lived in Cheshire, which in those years was particularly homogeneous racially and ethnically. Years later, Rick told us that he always felt different from others, in that environment; hearing this was painful for me, especially the idea that we had chosen to live in a neighborhood that turned out not to be very diverse. Even Hamden Hall was not very heterogeneous, racially or ethnically, back then. In fact, a few months ago, before Rick died, he told me that when he was growing up, there was only one other person—Cyndy Gordon Burns, who will be sharing her own memories today—whom he knew well, who had a similar Asian background. What a bond they must have shared!

Ricky's first school experience was a pre-kindergarten program two mornings a week at Scooter School; the photograph taken of him in an ersatz cap and gown at the end of that year is buried somewhere in our attic, waiting to be found some day when I get moved to do even more searching than I did for today's memorial.

Some months after Ricky had joined our family, a teaching job materialized here at Hamden Hall. Soon, the three of us—Rick, his new (although a bit older) sister Debbie, and I—were off together to a new world. Rick was in "connecting class" (a link between kindergarten and first grade) and Debbie entered first grade. I taught math and physics, in a holding pattern until a biology position opened up here a couple of years later.

A schoolmate of Rick's, Michele DeMusis, recalls that when Rick was in first grade (and Michele in second), Rick decided to organize a few of his classmates into a band of superheroes. It is my recollection that Rick chose to be Batman, because I remember creating and decorating a special cape for

him. Michele's story is that the second graders, not to be outdone by their younger schoolmates, had to do the same. A war of superheroes erupted, with shouts hurled back and forth, through the doors of the first and second-grade classrooms. Does anyone here today remember that crazy time?

Rick's world each day, from 8:00 AM until sometime late in the afternoon, became Hamden Hall, for the next 13 years, until his graduation in 1983. During that time, he discovered many loves—art, social studies, playground interactions, and later organized sports, science, and—mostly from afar—girls.

During those years, our family shared many wonderful adventures together—camping, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, and more —sometimes just the four of us, and other times with a group of Hamden Hall students in the Outing Club. By the time Rick had been graduated from Hamden Hall, he had spent time in much of North America (all but two of the States in the contiguous USA), as well as parts of Mexico and Canada, and a “grand tour” of Europe with our new VW Rabbit. Initially we slept in pup tents, and later graduated to youth hostels, interspersed with an occasional modest hotel. It was all very exciting, although in Europe, Rick seemed not to be interested in what we were doing or seeing. Instead he chose to keep his nose in a book. He had discovered the joys of reading during that summer trip and in every free minute was devouring *Watership Down*. Not until many years later did Irwin and I discovered that Rick was only pretending not to pay attention when, in fact, he was drinking in every detail of each experience. In recent years, as we reminisced together, he described to me in minute detail the various restaurant meals we ate, the churches we visited, the boat trip we took on the Rhine River, and much more.

Occasionally on camping trips that we took when he was a little boy, he wandered off and got lost. We realized later, after getting frantic about his whereabouts, that he was simply curious about his surroundings and took off to explore each new place. He was a superb hiker and backpacker; when we used to take Hamden Hall students backpacking in the White Mountains, Rick was almost always at the front of the group—all except one time, when Irwin, Rick, and I found ourselves at the tail end, separated from the rest of the

group. It was late afternoon, and the three of us were above the timberline, watching the horizon, where a thunderstorm was brewing. Rather than continue toward the oncoming storm, in the direction of the group's destination for the day (Madison Spring Hut), we decided it would be safer to take a side path that would lead us down from the top of the mountain, ultimately bushwhacking on what turned out to be a closed and abandoned avalanche trail. That night, while the rest of the group, including Debbie, worried about us, Irwin, Rick, and I slept under the stars in the woods. Fortunately, we had brought with us "gorp" and water and our sleeping bags, so it was not as bad as it could have been. During the night we heard helicopters circling overhead, looking for us (the three lost hikers), but we were unable to get their attention with our little flashlights. It was then that Rick—about twelve years old at the time, as I recall—had his first of what would be many panic attacks; we worried that it might be a heart attack but were cut off from civilization and could do nothing about it.

When the sun rose the next morning, we discovered that we were within spitting distance of a major trail, close to the Pinkham Notch trailhead. Once on that trail it was not long before we encountered our friend, Solly, carrying a couple of beers in case he found us, and soon afterward our fellow hikers who—especially Debbie—were noticeably relieved as we calmly appeared before them.

After we got back home, our family doctor checked Rick and gave him a clean bill of health.

Rick's high school years, as I recall them, were rather tumultuous. Always the adventurer and now a party animal, he tried various substances that were available to him—some licit and others not. His grades did not exactly crash, but academics seemed to take a back seat for awhile. There were some courses in which he "gave it his all", including the Zoology course I taught, his studio art courses, and always sports. He was a superior wrestler; I was intrigued, watching him in matches after school, where I saw skill and confidence in Ricky that I did not know existed. He also tried his hand at football. But I think his favorite sport was Lacrosse. I remained in awe of what he was able to accomplish on the athletic field, in light of a physical

disability that very few people knew he had. Sometime in the first few years of his life, when he was still in Korea, he probably contracted a case of polio, the most long-lasting effect of which was to impede muscle and bone growth on one side of his body. By the time we realized the extent of this bilateral asymmetry and sought surgical intervention, we were able to correct only part of the leg length discrepancy (all but about a half an inch). Although he sometimes felt aches and pain in his legs because of this imbalance, it did not stop him from loving and participating in sports throughout the rest of his life.

Another memory: On one occasion, when I think Rick was in his early 20's, he and some friends were having a few beers and enjoying a balmy afternoon together on what they later discovered was water company property. He and his buddies were all given citations and each told to pay a fine for trespassing. The parents of some of the others covered for their sons and took care of the fine; Irwin and I chose to "tough parent," telling Ricky that he would have to earn the money to pay his fine. He never took care of this matter and was ultimately picked up in New Haven on a New Year's Eve a year or two later and taken to jail. I remember that night with great pain. He used his one allowed phone call to contact us and ask us to bail him out. We refused. It was a pretty miserable New Year's Eve for all of us. My memory of the time sequence is a bit fuzzy here. He was bailed out, I think by a friend, the next day.

As I recall, it was around that time that he met Chani, changing his life forever. Here is my version of how they met, based on what I remember Rick telling us; Chani might well have another version. One cold winter evening he passed by an apartment in New Haven where a party was going on. Hearing the happy people inside, he crawled in through a window, to investigate. Later that night, after the guests had gone home, Chani discovered him asleep in her bed. Anyway, over the next year or two, Rick cleaned up his act, married Chani, and became a father. His life changed forever; for him, the sun rose and set on his daughter.

Miranda was special from Day One—an exotic mix of her parents' and grandparents' exotic ethnic backgrounds, a gorgeous mix of genes from Peru, Korea, the US, and Eastern Europe. Challenged by forces beyond her

control—neurological and hearing problems that could trigger seizures and related episodes—she worked her way through multiple, traditional classroom settings and became a voracious reader. Thanks to the determined, ongoing support of her parents and her own resolute engagement with life, she has turned out to be one of the most sensitive, empathetic, and compassionate young women I know. Her infant son Jacob is truly lucky to have such a caring mother.

Like most young couples, Rick and Chani had some rocky times in the early years of their marriage. They separated for awhile but remained friends and were always passionate about co-parenting Miranda. They raised her in the Northeast, living first in several locations in New Haven, then Spanish Harlem, and on to South Norwalk here in Connecticut. We all got together from time to time for family occasions. December holidays found us in the Boston area, where Debbie's two children, our grandchildren Andy and Sarah, lived. We stayed at a favorite hotel in Peabody, north of Boston, which had a huge indoor pool, where the three grandchildren loved to swim together and improve their underwater skills. Sometimes we went in to Boston together, to the aquarium, the Children's Museum, and other favorites. Each February we gathered in New York, for our annual "Birthday Bash." Rick's birthday was February first, followed in short sequence by Andy and Sarah's respective birthdays, then mine in early March. We celebrated them all by going out to dinner together in the City, then to a Broadway show. Rick was always a very visual person and loved the details of the spectacular sets of shows such as "Lion King" and "Cats." We always tried to sit as close to the stage as possible, so the kids would feel part of the action. The last Birthday Bash was in February of 2010, following on the heels of Irwin's death. Rick and Miranda, Andy and Sarah, and I convened at a hotel near Central Park, went ice skating together in the park, and saw "South Pacific" at Lincoln Center. I remember that after the first act, Ricky questioned my choice of a show, commenting that it had an outrageously racial overtone. He felt a bit appeased by the end of the last act, but I will never forget the guilt and anxiety I felt at his initial reaction.

That weekend in New York just wasn't the same without Irwin, and I realized I could not carry on with the tradition in his absence.

A half a dozen years ago, Chani's company made her a very tempting offer that involved a move to Dallas. She asked Rick how he would feel about being relocated to Texas and sharing a home together as they continued to raise Miranda. After much discussion and angst, they decided that making the move would be a wise decision for them. Their foremost question in any such major decision was always whether it would be good for Miranda. The father-daughter bond between Rick and Miranda was unique—palpable and loving. The Texas move was good for them all in many ways, although their years there together were not without challenges.

Upon their move to Texas, Rick threw himself into learning the geology, the natural history, the topography, and the culture of this new part of the world. Working in lawn care, he learned a great deal about the exotic southern vegetation of Texas. His pride in what he had learned was obvious as he showed Irwin and me around when we flew to Dallas to visit, the following spring. At the same time, he told us that he missed the beautiful mixed hardwood forests of Connecticut—especially when autumn arrived in Texas without the magnificent fall colors he had always taken for granted.

Almost three years ago, when Irwin was in the hospital in Albany, dying from complications of septicemia, I called Rick to tell him that his father was in the hospital. I didn't know at the time how serious things really were, choosing to hold on to the hope that the medical team there would "fix up" Irwin and we'd be able to return to Connecticut in a few days. But Rick got on a plane and within hours was there with me in the hospital. He held my hand, hugged me, and kept me from falling apart over what turned out to be the last few hours of Irwin's life. The next day, he drove me back home from Albany to Cheshire and stayed with me for the next week or so, until my brother Joel, and later my sister-in-law Pamela, flew in to "take over." Rick and I became very close during those days he was there. During that brief period together, I was struck, again and again, by how lucky I was to have such a sensitive, caring, and perceptive son. After seeing me climb up on a wobbly stool to get some dishes down from a high shelf, he went to a hardware store and came back with a sturdy kitchen stool for me—smiling gently but never saying a word. At another point, when he went to fetch something from the

basement, he noticed that the sliding doors on the basement closets were not opening and closing easily. An hour later, he came back upstairs with a grin on his face. He invited me to come down to the basement, where he showed me how beautifully he had fixed a problem that had been plaguing Irwin and me for years.

The ensuing days brought more such gifts from Rick. He was taking care of me—taking care of his mother—taking charge in a quiet and loving way that to this day moves me to tears. That did not stop after he went back home to Texas; he called me frequently, to make sure I was okay and to chat with me. We talked about family, politics, sports, articles he had read that he thought would interest me, and more—and we reminisced about the happy times we had spent as a family when he was growing up. He knew how much I was hurting, and he was doing everything he could to ease that pain. At the same time, he was processing his own grief for the loss of his father, while trying to be the best father he could to Miranda and a caring co-parent with Chani.

Although Chani, Rick, and Miranda had some ups and downs during their years together in Texas, and although their move from Connecticut to Dallas entailed a great deal of adjustment for each of them, they remained one of the most cohesive families I have ever known, always fiercely committed to each other.

Rick's death has shattered my equilibrium, burst the bubble I was feeling in the wake of Richard's and my wedding just two months earlier, when Rick gave me away and danced with me to "It's a Wonderful World." Here are the facts that shake my core. Through Rick's death, I have lost a devoted and loving son. Of the family that Irwin and I built together, over almost a half a century, I have become the last living member. That realization has hit me hard and I expect will continue to jar me for quite some time.

--Barbara Rose Beitch