

Comments by Artie Isaac
Memorial Service for Jennifer Michel Keefer
One o'clock, April 5, 2003
First Congregational Church, 444 East Broad Street

Before her time.

My name is Artie Isaac. I was Jennifer's rabbi.

But Jennifer wasn't Jewish. But, then, I'm not a rabbi. So, more accurately, we were friends. I was her teacher and she was my teacher. We were mentors to each other.

Tony called me last weekend to say that Jen had wanted me to speak today. I was surprised, because Jen had so many closer friends. I loved Jen, but I don't know the grief of her closest friends.

I certainly can't speak of the grief of her family.

Tony told me her reason: Jen thought that, if I spoke, I might be able to keep from making everything too sad. I think that Jen had another reason. You see, she was many things to all of us. To me, she was always my public relations consultant. I think she asked me to speak today, because she thought I needed the exposure.

Her words "not too sad" rang in my ears all week. I've struggled to write some words that are not too sad – for this unspeakably sad moment.

For those of you who are dissatisfied by my words, I apologize. You would have approved the first draft. It was the proper expression of grief, of reverence, of shock — shock and awe, real shock and awe, shock over losing Jen, awe for what she accomplished, the love she created in 33 short years.

I am not reading the first draft today, because I was unable to read it aloud. Those words were too sad. And that is not what Jen requested.

But,...

...because this is Jen, you don't really need to hear much in this eulogy. When some people die, they leave too much unresolved, unspoken. Not Jen. You knew what she thought of you. She told you. And she knew what you thought of her. You told her. And, even if you didn't tell her, she knew anyway. So I don't have much to add.

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Similarly, her family doesn't need to hear much from me. Jen certainly told them she loved them. And much more. She wrote journals to her family, telling them just how much she loved them. And how they should live their lives. Those journals are not for me to read, but I bet they're pretty specific. Right down to which glasses to serve with which wine. With roasted salmon. When served with asparagus.

No, none of us can add to Jen's instructions for any of us. We can't resolve the relationships left unresolved, because Jen, in her typical style, left no such loose ends.

So, rather than my delivering a eulogy to you, let us together deliver a message to someone who is not here, to someone that Jennifer never met:

to the child who
will someday
be named after her.

Because someday, God willing, there will be a girl born and named after Jen — named, maybe, in this very beautiful church, a church that Jen loved so much. Perhaps this girl will be a grandchild or great-grandchild to Jen and Tony.

That girl — Young Jennifer of the future — will bounce around and love being “Jennifer,” but she will come to wonder about the woman for whom she was named. She will ask her parents, “Was I named for that legendary actress, Jennifer Aniston? Was I named for that crossover diva, Jennifer Lopez?”

Here is an attempt to answer her question: “Why did you name me ‘Jennifer’?” Here is a letter we can send to that Jennifer, not yet born. We can place this letter in a bottle and cast it off to sea, to be found on the smooth morning beach of this future life to come.

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Dear Young Jennifer,

We are writing you from a church in the long-ago year of 2003. This church is full of people. We are hundreds of heavy hearts. We are at the funeral of your namesake.

You are named for Jennifer Keefer. Perhaps you have received a piece of her jewelry. She left her jewelry — with specific instructions to her husband that, before it could be distributed, it had to be professionally cleaned. She was organized that way. She didn't want to pass on any dusty jewelry.

But, the most precious jewel you have inherited is her name.

At first hearing, her name — Jennifer Keefer — sounds like a bird call: Jennifer Keefer. Jennifer Keefer.

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She loved nicknames. She called her own children “Ellie” and “Ellie Belly” and “Hankers” and “Hankimus Maximus.” She grew up as “Jenny” and we called her “Jen.”

More than how your name sounds, is what it means. Because of the way she lived her life, her name is a gift of great meaning. Here is what your name means to us because of the way your namesake lived her life:

- When we hear her name, we think of her beauty. Jennifer was beautiful. Her beauty was true. A beauty that was radiant, with or without makeup, with long hair, or short. She would smile that perfect smile and you would find yourself eye-to-eye with an uncomplicated beauty. She was as beautiful as your name.
- When we hear her name, we hear her voice. Jennifer’s voice entered the room before she did — and stayed after she left. It was a wonderful voice, and very different. It sounded like a bird. And a bell. Her voice chirped and rang and trembled at the same time. It was a little confusing. It was like a bird that had swallowed a bell. Her voice was clear and strong and seemed to resound from the back of her head. It would take a head start, and run fast at you. And all of us fell in love with her the first time we heard that voice. Because it was a voice that always told the truth kindly.
- When we hear her name, we think of her work. She had a big job at a very young age: the executive director of an orchestra. When she took the job, we wondered if she was too young. At the first big meeting of the board of trustees, she surprised us with a Big Idea. She said that we should devote ourselves to teaching children music. (This was before she was a mother.) “Teach our children music,” she said, “And we will always have an audience for our orchestra.” The trustees looked up. Saw her young face. Heard that musical, trembling voice. And the board didn’t know whether to applaud or, because of her youth, to put her into Time Out. (Young Jennifer of the Future: “Time out” is something we did, because we were the only generation in the history of our species, which never, ever spanked its children.)

Note to those present here today: Can you hear all the way to COSI? There, right now, ProMusica is playing to a thousand children and parents. It is a ball that Jennifer put in motion years ago.

- When we hear her name, we think of her humility. Jennifer always put others first. She cared about others. Deeply. I could tell by the way she asked about my family, calling them all by name. She wasn’t showing off. She wanted to know they were well. She wanted to see my face light up.

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- When we hear her name, we think of her wisdom. She was wise long before her time. She took me to a class once, when she was learning to be the leader of a not-for-profit organization. She said to the other students, “I don’t think I deserve to be here. You help to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked. I am only helping others to make music.” Another student replied, “No. We need you most of all. That’s why we do our work. Once the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed, they will come to you for music.” Your namesake was wise: she believed in the talents of artists. She fed and clothed artists. And, in doing so, she gave us all a reason to live.
- When we hear her name, we think of her laugh. Some people are too careful to laugh. Jennifer loved to laugh. It was a squawking musical yucking. Like when a xylophone falls down the stairs. Her laugh meant something. It meant it was time to laugh. When she laughed, we all laughed. Because we would rather laugh than get hit by the xylophone.
- When we hear her name, we think of her family. Jennifer loved her family. She was so proud of them. Especially her children. She always told us of their growth and achievements. They made her laugh. This is important to know and to remember: her family, her children made her very happy.
- When we hear her name, we think of how organized she was. Some live by the sword; she lived by the checklist. She would check off the last item and end the meeting by saying, “O.K. We’re done!” She used her skills as an organizer to live with a purpose: to repair a broken world. She did it in ways that were big and small. She established traditions. She brought people together. She fed them at home-cooked feasts. When she was nervous, she cleaned. Once, when her orchestra was running short of money, we found her in her office, wearing a blue dress with white polka dots, and an elegant string of pearls. She was vacuuming. She was like Martha Stewart without the insider trading. We learned that — when the office was especially clean, the orchestra might be in trouble.
- When we hear her name, we think of how she surrounded herself with beauty. She and her beloved husband, Tony, chose not to spend their money on the usual extravagances. They saved their money and bought art, filling their home with beauty. She worked hard — and loved her work — because her work was always focused on bringing people to beauty. She brought people to the Museum. She brought people to a chamber orchestra. And, when they were there, she took their money, and used it to bring more people to the beautiful sights and sounds. She taught us a lesson about the importance of beauty when she first started her job at the orchestra. There was a big vase of flowers on her desk. We asked, “Who gave

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those to you?” We were thinking, “We should have sent those flowers to Jennifer.”

“I gave them to myself,” she replied. “I have decided that life should be beautiful, so I will spend some of my increased income to pay for fresh flowers every week.” For Jennifer, beauty was not an unnecessary extravagance.

- When we hear her name, we think of her inexhaustible energy. It was an energy that could not be contained. She sang, she traveled, she explored, she played. This energy could not be taught out of her. She took ballroom dancing lessons with Tony and friends. The teacher would say, “One and two and three and four.” But she would laugh and sing — “one!-two!-three!-four!” — and wave her arms and shake her hips and skitter all over the dance floor.
- When we hear her name, we think of her intellectual and moral courage. She was well read and well educated. She said what she thought was right, even if it meant that she might be punished. She stood up for ideas and for people. Before her time, she courageously stood her ground.
- When we hear her name, we think of that phrase, “before her time.” We always thought that, because she did everything before her time. Today, we are sad because she also died before her time. We don’t know why she is gone. This is one of those times when the best is taken from us. It is a terrible, heart-breaking reminder that life is precious.

We are glad your name is Jennifer. We wish you a long life of good health, and love, and meaningful work, and happy children, and most of all, *shalom*, peace.

With love,
Signed,
All of us here today

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Well, as Jen would say, “O.K. We’re done!”

(Not so fast, Jen.)

Before we go, let us pray that Jen’s name remain a blessing to us all. Here is that blessing, which we offer to each other in this beautiful church on this sad day:

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“May your daughters and sons grow up to be loved like Jennifer Keefer, who brought forth beauty from the earth.”

And let us all say, “Amen.”

Comments by Artie Isaac
Dedication of ProMusica performances in memory of Jennifer Michel Keefer
5:30 p.m., April 5, 2003, and 7:30 p.m., April 6, 2003
The Southern Theatre, 21 East Main Street

My name is Artie Isaac. I am a former president of ProMusica Chamber Orchestra.

ProMusica dedicates this weekend's performances to the blessed memory of Jennifer Keefer. She died barely a week ago.

Jennifer was our executive director during years of exceptional artistic growth for ProMusica, including our move to the Southern Theatre.

Jennifer loved this space. She loved these performers. She loved the music, the experience, the beauty. And she loved you. In her work here and at the Museum, she was devoted to bringing the beauty of art and music to your lives. It is a great sadness that she died so young, at age 33, an age at which she was still among the youngest people in the audience.