

Jay's Eulogy



It's very fitting that Virginia's memorial is being held at the Strand Bookstore. Virginia loved books, loved reading, and in turn loved visiting this store growing up. When I first visited New York City with her, Strand was one of the must-see destinations she wanted to show me, up there with the Empire State Building and Statue of Liberty.



Virginia's also indirectly responsible for me getting a job at the Strand, since when we moved to New York, her best friend Val was working here, and he gave me a referral for the job application. It was Virginia's love of books that got us together in the first place.

After high school, both Virginia and I attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and ended up on the same floor of the same dorm. We were passing acquaintances for the first semester, but in the second semester a group of us dorm residents, moving from room to room, eventually ended up in her room, and I was immediately struck by her

bookshelf. Because, there on her bookshelf was a near complete collection of the Discworld books by Terry Pratchett.

Now, for those who don't know, Terry Pratchett is a comedic fantasist best known for his series of novels set on Discworld, a flat disc on the back of four elephants, who in turn stand on the back of a giant turtle. You know, magic stuff. That series eventually grew to a massive 41 novels, but back in early 1998, it was a much more manageable number of merely 21 novels.

Now, I was a fan of these books myself, but I had yet to meet someone else in person that had even heard of this book series, let alone had read them all.

It's at this point that I, as they say, "geeked out," and started gushing about the series with Virginia. At some point during our reminiscing of the series, we reached a point of contention where she and I remembered a particular plot point happening in a different book.

Now, keep in mind this was early 1998, and the internet was still in its nascent stages, and wasn't the easily searchable fount of information it is now, even if you took the time to dial in, yes, dial in, over a phone line with a modem, to access it. Google wasn't started until several months later, and Wikipedia was still years away. It's true; I checked the starting dates on Wikipedia while writing this.

So while the rest of our little pack of friends and cohorts moved on to another room, or just went back to their own room to sleep, Virginia and I were taking Discworld books off the shelf and skimming through them, both of us looking for the passage we were sure existed that would vindicate one and correct the other of their error. Well, as it turned out, we were both wrong, with the plot point not in the book either of us thought it was. Which meant only one thing; we had to find out which book it actually was in. And so the first time I stayed in Virginia's room long into the night was with both of us squatting on the floor, with a pile of books around us as we skimmed through them. I loved it.

In addition to books, Virginia also loved animals. This was readily apparent to me since she had come to UW-Madison specifically for its veterinary program, on that was of national renown and so extensive it included a functional dairy on campus, with a barn full of cows and an ice cream shop where students could buy ice cream made from the milk of said cows. Virginia even ended up working in that barn for a while, desperately trying to herd cows several times her size into the right stalls.



This is a horse, not a cow, but it's a big horse



In addition to that, she had somehow managed to smuggle two pet rats into her dorm room, and managed to keep them for nearly the whole school year, until late second semester an RA caught on and we had to spend a night quickly finding someone living off-campus who could take them for a few weeks until school ended.

After the semester ended, she got off-campus housing of her own, so she could have rats and any other pets she wanted, and soon retrieved her dog Ninja, which she had left back in New York, to live with her in Madison. Ninja was very fearful of strangers, so I worked extra hard to get Ninja to like me, which likely endeared me to Virginia even more, but I felt I didn't have much choice. I'm pretty sure if I had delivered an ultimatum of "it's either me or the dog," she would've chosen the dog.





Over the next few decades Virginia and I would own several more pets, including more rats, a pair of sugar gliders, various fish, and even some extremely noisy and messy zebra finches, which I didn't like at all, but Virginia found somehow soothing. And of course, a number of cats, 4 total, including the two we currently own, the Tuxedo Twins, Nibbler and Astrid.

Of course, there's an irony in us having that many pets consider both Virginia and I are allergic to animals. Virginia didn't realize this until after she had started working at the dairy in the barn, where she developed allergies and also asthma. This didn't stop Virginia, or even really slow her down, but it did give us a few scares, and it was one of these scares that brought our relationship to the next level.



See, our relationship up to this point had just evolved gradually and organically. When it was coming up on our first anniversary, we actually didn't know what date to peg it on, since we had gone from just "hanging out" in our dorm rooms to being "a couple" before we even went out on a formal date. We eventually settled on the date of our first kiss, since that was a date we knew, or at least were able to figure out working backwards. According to that anniversary date, Virginia and I were together for over 24 years. Likewise, after Virginia got her own apartment, I started coming by after class, and then occasionally staying overnight, with the frequency increasing to the point I was essentially just always over there, so I then got out of the lease of the dorm room I was sharing with my friend Nic. So Virginia and I were de facto living together before any "official" decision was made.

Similarly, in regards to the "next step" in our relationship, i.e. marriage, we had very casual, informal discussions about it, along the lines of:

"Hey, we should probably get married at some point."

"No doubt, but there's no rush. Maybe after graduation or something."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

Just super casual, no firm commitment types of discussions.

And then, one night at home, Virginia had a really severe asthma attack, where she couldn't breathe, and her inhaler wasn't helping. So I drove her to the Emergency Room, where they took her in back to use a nebulizer, while I sat in the waiting room. And while the doctors assured me that she'd likely be okay, it was still very scary. So I sat there thinking she could've died without knowing that I truly wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. So I resolved then and there to propose to her, because whatever the answer, she'd at least know for sure how I felt about her. Now, when I tell that story to people they often say it's very sweet, but Virginia always found it a bit morbid. But when I did propose, she said yes, so I must've been doing something right.

So we got engaged, and then we got married, and all through this Virginia was going to school, as well as working several jobs. Now, I had dropped out of college pretty early on and was working full time, but Virginia wasn't one to feel financially dependent on her boyfriend, or even husband. She had left the job at the dairy, but got a job working at a pet clinic on weekdays after class, first as a Veterinary Assistant and then as a Veterinary Technician after getting the certification. Then she got a second job helping out at a kennel on weekends. Then she got a third job working as a Vet Tech at an emergency clinic. Now, it seems crazy that someone was holding down 3 jobs while also going to veterinary school, but if you know Virginia, just imagine her determination and drive paired with someone in their 20s.

It was when she started a fourth job that I finally put my foot down, one of only a few times I ever did so. I was like, "what are you thinking, having four jobs while also still going to school? That's crazy. I want to be able to see my wife some-time." And then I looked her firmly in the eyes and asserted: "No more than 3 jobs! That's the limit." So she quit the fourth job.



So we spent 8 years in Madison together as she went through undergrad and then veterinary school. She even learned how to drive a car, getting a license and her own car, since you basically need a car to get nearly anywhere in Wisconsin. She learned from me, until she switched to a professional driving instructor after I made her nervous. Apparently I had a habit of strongly gripping the armrest and pumping an imaginary brake on the passenger side. The car and license came in handy in her final year of vet school when she did a round visiting farms upstate, bewildering some old farmers that such a tiny woman was going to take care of their horses and cows, becoming impressed when she handily did so. And then we moved to NYC and she never drove again. At least, not on any trips that she took with me. She always hated driving. She was never under any delusions of her own abilities as a driver, but it seemed to her that nearly everyone else on the road drove even worse than her, and it pissed her off.

So she graduated from vet school, and we fairly quickly moved to New York City, where she had a pathology residency lined up at the Animal Medical Center and Memorial Sloan Kettering. We sold our two cars, and sold or gave away a fair amount of our other belongings to fit into the resident housing the Animal Medical Center provided for her. And she started working hard on focusing on the field she had decided to specialize in: Pathology.

Virginia actually had a bit of difficulty choosing the field she wanted to specialize in. The two that really stood out for her were emergency medicine and pathology. I think for emergency medicine she liked the fast paced, think-on-your-feet problem solving, and for pathology she liked the slower, in-depth problem solving.

When she asked me which one she should choose, I said “I love you, and I’ll support you fully whatever choice you make, but all else being equal, I’d prefer the one where you have regular hours and weekends off.” Which is definitely not true of emergency medicine. I doubt what I said was the deciding factor, but I was happy when she opted for pathology.



Virginia loved being back in NYC. She never liked that stores closed early on Sundays and that almost no place stayed open all night in WI. In NYC, one could walk to the nearest bodega in the middle of the night and buy something. When I pointed out that we don’t actually ever do that, she retorted that it’s the principle of the thing. She also liked the noise of the city, the constant hum of activity. Some parts of Wisconsin can be eerily quiet at night by comparison. She was a true New Yorker.

After the residency, she got a fellowship in comparative pathology as part of the Tri-Institutional program with Weill Cornell Medicine, The Rockefeller University, and Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. And then after her fellowship she got her dream job at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai as Head of Comparative Pathology. Her full list of job titles were, let me pull out her business card:

Assistant Professor
Head of Comparative Pathology
Director of the Comparative Pathology Lab
Center for Comparative Medicine and Surgery, aka CCMS

It's an impressive list of titles, right? And she loved the job. She loved the work, and she loved her co-workers. She told me that this was the job she wanted to do until she retired.

So, after landing that plum gig, our income increased so much we were able to actually purchase an apartment, in Manhattan even, albeit Upper East Side. Not the trendiest neighborhood, but we liked to think of it as up and coming. Finally, after 8 years of college, a 3 year residency, and a 1 year fellowship, we were finally starting to enjoy the fruits of all her labor.

Also, with no more studying to do and no 2nd or 3rd job, Virginia finally had a lot of free time on her hands, which she used to pursue various crafts, starting with knitting. She actually had been knitting off and on for several years, but spent that whole time finishing one scarf. When she started, she said she was going to knit me a scarf. I said I don't like scarves. Whenever she pulled it out to work on it a bit more, she'd let me know it was for me, and I'd remind her I don't like scarves. When she finally finished it she gave it to me, to which I replied it's very nice but I'm never going to wear it because I don't like scarves. This upset her.

But she got over it and started knitting me socks and hats, which I do wear. I'm wearing a pair of her socks now. The only socks I wear are the socks she made for me over the years. I've worn some out to the point she had to darn them. One of the last pairs of socks she gave me is an astoundingly loud neon green and orange striped pattern.

I hate it, but I wear the socks because she made them for me.



(a few of the many pair she knit for him)

After she picked up knitting again, she went fully into it. Virginia was not one to do something only halfway, she'd get fully invested in it. So she started knitting A LOT, and started using an online site called Ravelry to keep track of her projects, and then started getting interested in other forms of crafting. I'll let her Ravelry profile describe this to you in her own words:

I love to create and decorate 'cause it makes me feel so damn clever. Knitting is my gateway craft - I started spinning with a spindle in March 2012, bought my first spinning wheel June 2012, and 2nd spinning wheel Sept 2012, a couple of rigid heddle looms in 2013, a couple of inkle looms in 2014. A collection of spindles, fiber, yarn and knitting needles live happily in many nooks and crannies in my apartment despite corralling efforts by various 2-legged and 4-legged inhabitants. I also sew, embroider, tat, make jewelry, quilt, and draw (mostly mandalas). Multicraftual is my MO.



So the last few years Virginia gradually converted our guest room into a full on craft room, and was often on the couch knitting or otherwise crafting something while we watched TV together. She seemed pathologically unable to just sit still, she was always doing something.

Anyway, that's the end of the biographical section of my speech. How are we doing for time?

We're good? Great.

Chapter 2

So now that I've finished summarizing what she did, I'd like to expand a bit more on who she was.

She loved food, all types of food. And like many things she was interested in, she was adventurous and enthusiastic about trying new things.

One thing she loved about New York was both the breadth and the depth of the food offerings here. It seems like for any style of cuisine, from any country or any ethnicity, you can find a restaurant in New York that serves it. And Virginia was not afraid of trying new things.



This enthusiasm and adventurous nature transferred over to her cooking, where she loved trying new cuisine and recipes. And she loved sharing her love of food and cooking. There were several home gatherings where friends would come over just to make lots of batches of dumplings, and we'd go over to friend's homes for gatherings where we'd make other dishes Virginia was interested in learning how to make, like home fried Naan.



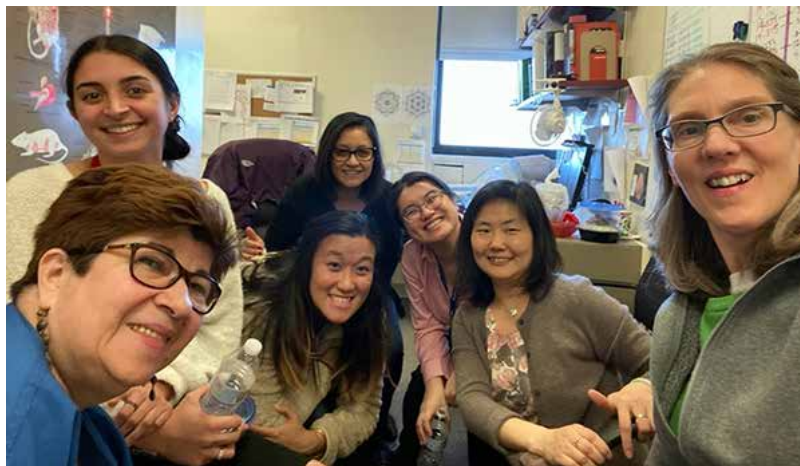
She also made friends easily, or at least in a way that looked effortless. Everywhere she went she made friends quickly. I remember when, during her residency, she did an externship of sorts at a pharmaceutical company out in New Jersey for a few weeks, I think 2 or 3 weeks. By the second day there she had a lunch group of a half dozen people, and when she left, the lunch group threw a goodbye party. And I was just astounded, asking “how did you get a goodbye party after being there for only a few weeks?”

But people just seemed to take an instant liking to her.



I think part of that was due to her unbridled enthusiasm for the things she loved, and her willingness to share that with others. Her enthusiasm and joy was infectious, and you wanted to do what she was doing, because she plainly enjoyed it so much. In the condolence cards I’ve received so far, one common thread is Virginia’s enthusiasm and joy and how she often inspired others, whether in their professional career or with their hobbies.

She was also very honest. She was very direct and to the point, and unguarded in her responses, sometimes to the point of bluntness. She was never mean, she wouldn’t say something to hurt you, but if you asked her for her honest opinion, she’d give it to you.



She was fiercely loyal, both to her friends and co-workers. I remember when she started at Mount Sinai and was now “the boss” to a lab of employees. She felt that it was now her job to support them the best she could and to help them succeed.

In the budgeting for each year, she argued for equipment to make their jobs easier and more efficient, and argued for raises. When the pandemic hit, her priority was making sure that her team was still paid while they were stuck at home.

Likewise, with her friends she was always willing to help when needed, no matter if it was in real life or virtual. I remember when the site Ravelry had a site design update that caused accessibility issues with some members. Virginia was very upset, talking to me about it, which isn't something she did often with her online antics.

She was cheap, I mean frugal, and wasn't one to spend money quickly or lightly. She worked those 3 jobs while in school to keep her student debt low. Even after getting a high paying job she kept from spending extravagantly, focusing instead of paying off what we owed on the apartment faster and saving for retirement. When she did splurge, it was often on a sale of wool or yarn or other crafting supplies, with the rationale that she was actually saving so much money by buying it cheap on sale.



But she was also extremely generous. If someone on Ravelry needed a particular batch of yarn or other supply and Virginia had it, she'd most likely just send it to them for free so they could complete their project.

When someone needed a place to stay, we'd take them in, whether it was for a few days or for a few years; although, the ones that stayed longer did pay rent. But she just loved helping others, whether the aid was financial, instructional, or just moral support.

When in 2014 she got hit with the triple whammy of me breaking my leg, her mother getting diagnosed with cancer, and her dad suffering a subdural hematoma, all within the span of a month, she just buckled down and gave us all the support she could, taking time off work so she could focus on helping us or even just being there for us.

In turn, when she was in the hospital, several doctors and nurses commented on how dedicated we her family were in being there for her and caring for her and each other, but I think for us, or at least me, I was just following the example Virginia had already set.

She also had a dark side. I feel blessed to be one of the few to witness the grumpy, introverted Virginia, who didn't want to go out to a restaurant, or to a movie theater, and in no way shape or form wanted to go to a party, of all things. This Virginia just wanted to stay home all day, sit on the couch, watch TV and knit. This Virginia secretly reveled in using the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason to not go out, not see anyone, and just stay home for days on end. And when we went out, she'd come home exhausted.

It was very hard to reconcile this extreme introverted Virginia with the extremely friendly Virginia that other people saw when she did go out, but I think I figured it out. The thing with Virginia was she never did anything halfway. Whether it was work, crafts, or friendships, she went all in. And so when she did go out and socialize with you as a friend, she was 100% invested in that. She was fully present and there for you, to talk to you, indulge in your interests, etc.

She made you feel like the most important person in the world to her, because for that time she spent with you you were. She just gave of herself fully in those situations, so it's not surprising that when she got home, she'd be all worn out, and needed some alone time to recharge. Fortunately for me, Virginia felt safe around me to be grumpy, be a bit selfish, and even to just ignore me and pursue her own interests, whether crafting, reading, or watching the many Chinese Historical Dramas she saw.

One of the things we did home alone together was watch a fair amount of TV, her simultaneously working on a knitting project and me actually paying attention to what was on.

And during this difficult time, I've actually reflected on some parts of a show we watched called *The Good Place*. If you haven't seen *The Good Place*, you should, it's great, Virginia and I watched it twice all the way through. I'm not going to spoil the show for you, but there is a point in it where one character asks another about the concept of soulmates, and they reply thus:

"If soulmates do exist, they're not found. They're made. People meet, they get a good feeling, and then they get to work building a relationship."

And I truly feel like that quote applies to us. Virginia and I were soulmates, not because we found each other, but because we built our relationship up until we were soulmates.

Another quote from *The Good Place*, a Buddhist parable about death:

Picture a wave. In the ocean. You can see it, measure it, its height, the way the sunlight refracts when it passes through. And it's there. And you can see it, you know what it is. It's a wave.

And then it crashes in the shore and it's gone. But the water is still there. The wave was just a different way for the water to be, for a little while. You know it's one conception of death for Buddhists: the wave returns to the ocean, where it came from and where it's supposed to be.

And to tie this all together with a callback to the beginning, a quote from Terry Pratchett:

"No one is actually dead until the ripples they cause in the world die away"

Based on all the condolence cards, personal messages, and the turnout here today, I say that the ripples Virginia introduced in the world are going to last a long time to come.

