

*"The Best There Ever Was"*  
**Eulogy for Richard Heaphy Lerch**

Thank you, Bishop Malooly, Monsignor Armstrong, Father Leavitt, Father Hunt and all of the priests celebrating this Funeral Mass. On behalf of my mother and sisters, thank you all gathered here this morning at the Cathedral to honor my father, Richard Heaphy Lerch.

Mom was leery about having the funeral here, knowing that the church can look empty with fewer than 1000 people in the pews. But this was Dad's wish, and that has been a most important thing to Mom for 55 years.

And, it is fitting for us to gather at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, where Dad served for more than 40 years as a parish volunteer and usher for the 11 o'clock Mass. I can only imagine how many miles he walked up and down these aisles – on Sunday mornings, and on Christmases and Easters, when it was so crowded that he saved us seats. Fifteen years ago, Dad walked me down this aisle to marry Jeff – with Uncle Joe presiding at the altar.

There are great memories here beyond the church and school – for example, out in the parking lot. Dad brought big plastic trash cans and set them up as "markers" to teach first me, and then Betty and Ellen how to parallel park – the most daunting skill on the Maryland driver's test. So, under Dad's coaching and watchful eye, we knocked down lots of trash cans in the Cathedral parking lot – until we were finally ready to perform the feat "for real" at the Motor Vehicle Administration.

Another Cathedral memory is Dad's pleasure at the conclusion of a sermon that was concise and focused. So, I'd like to focus today on two of Dad's qualities that particularly stand out – two qualities which can be clearly seen in the major spheres of his life: faith, family and friends, and his profession.

My father was the most unselfish person I've ever known. And, he was the most positive person I've ever known.

Dad lived his life in service to others – his family: his father and step-mother and older relatives; Mom, Betty, Ellen, and me; his extended family and friends, his clients -- large and small. Dad took care of those who worked for our family when they became elderly and infirmed – like Elsie Seabrooks in Savannah and Robert Hausner in Baltimore. Later, after he retired, he provided pro-bono legal services at the St. Ambrose Housing Aid Center to help those who were facing foreclosure or eviction, who couldn't afford a lawyer.

Dad was immensely generous to me and my sisters in all the big things – showering us with love, support and encouragement, time and attention (especially help with math homework). He wrote checks with a smile for dozens of tuition bills and three pretty-big weddings.

Dad was just as unselfish in the “little things” – like our annual summer pilgrimage to Tybee Island, Georgia. He drove us nearly 700 miles from Baltimore – and as soon as we pulled into the driveway at the cottage in Tybee – we HAD to run to the ocean. BUT FIRST, we needed Dad to blow up not one, not two, but three rafts to ride the waves on.

In hindsight, I wonder why we couldn’t have taken that first swim without rafts, but Dad always unselfishly obliged, with a smile. And, one of his all-time favorite photos that was on his desk for decades – long after we had grown up – was of the three of us as kids on our rafts out in the ocean at Tybee. In more recent years, its place as “favorite photo” was supplanted by the one of Mom and him and their seven grandchildren taken on the front-lawn on Meadowood Road.

In addition to her beautiful smile and red hair, I believe my mother’s unselfishness was one of the special qualities that attracted Dad to her. They were amazingly generous and giving together – it took two. And, more recently, when Dad’s health became so bad that he needed much more help than he could give, Mom’s unselfish devotion and care for him was an inspiration to all of us.

But even in his sickness, the other great quality I want to talk about this morning, shined ever so brightly.

Dad’s unselfishness was complimented by his great optimism.

Dad was an unbelievably positive person. And, it was not because he had a smooth or easy life. Before I was born, Dad had lost his mother and son. Later, he would face other hardships – including cancer of the larynx, which was both life-threatening and career-threatening for a trial lawyer. He not only survived, he thrived after surgery, mastering esophageal speech and returning to a successful profession in the courtroom. He volunteered as a counselor for others facing laryngectomies and was featured in a Discovery Channel documentary on cancer recovery.

There’s no question in my mind that Dad’s optimism came from his great faith – and his love of family and friends.

Dad inspired and cheered us up with sage wisdom and sayings. His two favorites were: "Every Cloud has a Silver Lining" and "It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn." Coming from someone else, these sayings might be trite – but Dad believed them so strongly and sincerely, that they were comforting.

Dad would find pleasure in the big things – like all five of us being together – or with our big extended families – the Logans at Tybee and all the Lerches for Thanksgiving with Uncle Joe.

And, he'd find pleasure in the little things too. I know it's hard for Dad's grandchildren – the next generation at Tybee – to understand what it was like to take the long road trip in a sedan without bucket seats, without video games or DVDs – poor Ellen always getting the middle seat over the hump since she was the youngest, but we had a great time. And our pre-DVD entertainment – led by Dad – was finding the I-95 signs. This was during the days when old US 301 was the north-south route – but every summer, some more miles of I-95 had been opened – and Dad would have the three of us hunt for those red-white-and-blue shields that said, "Coming soon – I-95." He'd cheer – and we'd all cheer -- for those stretches of smooth black pavement.

Dad's great optimism found a special creative outlet in poetry. Starting in the late 1980s – and continuing for more than a decade – Dad would pen a "poem of the day" and post it on the refrigerator. Typically, Dad's poems were on little squares of notepaper, handwritten – 8 lines of rhyming verse. No matter what the occasion or situation, Dad's poems were full of joy, hope, and love. Never did Dad write a "downer" poem. We have binders of these collected gems – and were re-reading them to him in the past few weeks. While all of us featured prominently in the poems, Dad's favorite and most frequent subject was his love for Mom. And, on their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he wrote a much longer poem that traced their life and loves together.

Well, I can see Dad looking down at his watch thinking this sermonette has gone on long enough, so I'd like to close with another story from childhood that leads to the thought I'd like to leave us with. And, I'd like to ask my sisters Betty and Ellen to join me.

On Sunday afternoons when we were kids, we'd all get in the car and drive to Memorial stadium to drop Dad off at the Colt games. He and Mr. Hartman had season tickets up in the "nosebleed" section of the bleachers. They'd come back with red faces from the cold, and hoarse voices from cheering so loudly. But, even for those of us driving through the parking lot, it was a special and exciting time in Baltimore.

Three years ago, when Johnny Unitas died, Sports Illustrated published a commemorative issue about him. On the cover was a great photo of Number 19 in the huddle, turning his head to make a call at the line of scrimmage – and I know Johnny U. could hear Dad and Mr. Hartman screaming from the upper deck. Above the photo, across the cover, the headline read: “The Best There Ever Was.”

Those of us here today knew Dick Lerch in different ways – as our Dad, husband, grandfather, uncle, brother-in-law, good friend, professional colleague. We’re very sad today in our loss. But, we’re also very lucky. Because no matter how we knew Dick Lerch – as our father, husband, grandfather, uncle, brother-in-law, friend, or colleague – we were fortunate to know *The Best There Ever Was.*

Marie Louise Lerch  
Elizabeth Lerch Visconage  
Ellen Lerch Thomsen  
November 5, 2005