

## In Howard's Lap

*By Dr. Jim Rice, brother of Rev. Dr. Howard Rice*

God loves the whole world  
No exceptions  
says the bumper sticker on Howard and Nancy's car  
my brother's lap was kind of like that  
it was big enough for everyone without exception

his lap was never too full to hold another  
another parishioner  
another child of the ghetto  
another seminary student  
another unpopular cause

then came his struggle to accept  
a shower of indignities, losses, and suffering  
from his mysterious, insidious paraplegia  
from his insufficient aortic valve  
his colostomy from colon cancer  
blindness from macular degeneration  
breathlessness from emphysema and heart failure

these maladies fell into Howard's lap  
as heavy as they were, by God, he held them  
I never heard a, "Why me?" from my brother  
and all the while he loved us  
we were inspired

his crusty contrariness was just an invitation  
"Hey! Crawl on up here where we can get a better look."  
perhaps that's why his position on an issue  
sometimes oscillated like a quirky yo yo  
it wasn't opposition, it was just a position to see from

for the life of me, I don't understand how he got that way  
perhaps it was the magical chemistry of his DNA  
it just came with his conception  
I don't think he understood his gift either  
he just accepted it and lived it  
so he didn't **get** that way  
he just **was** that way  
he couldn't help it and he didn't even try  
he didn't allow anyone or anything to get in the way  
not for very long anyhow  
except maybe for Wendy's death  
that nearly did him in

## Howard's Lap page 2

for a long time I avoided Howard's lap  
I guess it was scary for a little brother  
then there was all that living we were doing  
moving around, doing all those things we did

Howard's and my first born were daughters  
they were both meteors to us  
flashing across our skies  
to vanish and become darkness  
way before we were ready

the horrific confluence of our daughters' deaths  
brought a sense that I could be valuable to Howard  
I think I was able to hold him in my lap  
while we began moving into the close brotherhood  
we enjoyed in his last years

I saw a similar pattern between Amanda and her dad  
her value to Howard grew each day after Wendy died  
her value best captured that last afternoon when Amanda  
slid in between Howard in his bed and me in Nancy's  
I held her while she faced her dad and held him  
even through that pesky side rail  
Howard, Amanda, and I  
side by side on the same level

Nancy's wisdom saw Howard's lap  
she grabbed hold and never let go  
Nancy's love enfolded Howard  
for fifty-five challenging years  
now she faces life without him  
without her duties as primary caretaker

Howard asked me several times before he died  
"Please take care of Nancy!"  
he told me how, through their years together  
he had come to appreciate her profound wisdom  
we shared the wonder of the women we had partnered with

with the love and support of all of **us**  
she will slowly and surely move through her loss  
secure in the certainty of her faultless service to Howard  
through his forty-seven years of progressive disability  
their grandchildren knew what to do with Howard's lap  
first it was the oldest, Hannah who said that last evening,  
"Grampa's lap was always there!"

### Howard's Lap page 3

When I was little he was on my level."  
then Ezra, Monica, and Amala added astounding, clear memories  
tales told in Howard's deeply resonant voice  
they recited long passages and descriptions of stories from Grampa  
while they nestled in Grampa's lap

climbing into Grampa's lap came naturally to them  
they showed us how to do it  
too bad, I for one wasn't paying much attention  
I think we collectively got the hang of it  
Saturday evening after spaghetti on the porch  
the last time Howard sat in his chair  
it was a struggle for him to sit upright for that long  
but he insisted we get him up for it

after he was again settled in bed  
Howard wanted John Najarian to conduct  
a "SERVICE FOR THE DYING "  
John did it beautifully and Howard was satisfied  
my wife Mary suggested we remain in ritual space  
to share our most precious memories of him  
and thank him for his gifts to us  
we sat around his bed  
it resembled an Irish wake  
except Howard was very much alive  
he rose to the occasion again

he accurately tracked each of our contributions  
adding his associations  
marrying his memories to ours  
that Saturday evening  
the eve of Wendy's birthday  
only a few hours before he died

there we were connected  
our family network  
being together with Howard  
in conversation with Howard  
sharing grief, joy and love  
that night, all of us were nestled  
in Howard's lap