

A Good Death

by Donna Woodard Ziegenhorn

Did you ever have the chance to walk a good friend home? I did. Right up to the edge of the bridge. Until then I didn't know much about dying, up close and personal. My dad died unexpectedly with an aneurysm when I was away from home, and poor mother fell into a state of shock and lost her hair. Her fingernails quit growing, too. The next time I saw my dad was at the end of his funeral service when the preacher opened up the coffin. I wouldn't call that a good experience with death.

On the other hand, with my friend Jill--the one I got to walk home--that's a different story. She knew her time was short and took it as a blessing that she could prepare for it.

I had known Jill for 15 years. I'd seen her face realities that made my knees wobble. As a single parent of three assertive teenagers who didn't want to move, she pulled up stakes in Chicago to start a new job in Kansas City. When her career in corporate life collapsed, she took on a risky consulting start-up. She overcame breast cancer, celebrating her five year all-clear the same week that her lung cancer (a new primary site) was diagnosed.

Somewhere along life's path Jill latched on to a saying by a Brother Ramos. Suddenly it occurs to me. "I can choose a response to every thorn or rose I meet. I am response-able." She lived that.

Lung cancer was definitely a thorn.

Six months after the pneumonectomy, the cancer metastasized to the chest wall. I accompanied Jill to the oncologist with her long list of questions, ending up with "What's the average life expectancy in this situation?"

"Six to eight months, average," Dr. Taylor said. "I'm not talking what's possible. I'm talking average." The reality of Jill's prognosis began to settle in. At the same time she kept living as fully as she could, she said she wanted to be intentional about her leave-taking.

"The diagnosis compelled me to put into action some of my thinking relative to my dying process." Jill said.

She expressed two goals:

"One is to open myself to dialogue about death. I decided to invite people who are important to me into conversation about death. I also decided to create rituals that would incorporate my values and guiding life principles. The dialogue and rituals are intended to help me and those who are important to me create a bridge, a transition between my being alive and my death," Jill said.

She fashioned a bridge that included one-on-one outings, conversations and small group events.

One was a get-together with her family of origin, five siblings and her mother. That was a tough proposition to consider. In addition to typical family emotional stress, she recalled that when Uncle Bill died, her parents took great measures to avoid the funeral. Death and grief were viewed as private matters and not discussed.

In contrast, Jill was an avid believer and practitioner of family systems theory. She favored openness and connection. If the subject were difficult, then likely it was all the more important to talk about. She wanted to change the historic family pattern around death.

She invited family members for a simple, lightly planned weekend to celebrate the family. She wanted everyone to feel at ease and be able to participate and benefit from the time together.

That's how Jill hit on the idea of the cocktail hour. There in her living room, in a setting they found comfortable and familiar, she toasted her family and their importance in her life and in her dying process. She thanked them for their love, care and support and gave each of them a candle as symbols of light in her life.

Another ritual Jill initiated was a Celebration of Life. My husband, Dallas, and I hosted this intimate happening at our home with Jill's two sisters, three children and close friends, 18 of us in all. It was an honor to help Jill plan it and to facilitate.

Several of this crowd were friends through the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) with experience and receptivity to ritual, allowing for a more structured dialogue. The event was designed to reflect Jill's beliefs that included a wide and rich view of life.

"I came to an understanding inside of me that all of life is celebrated within nature, within the creative process that is ongoing in nature. It is so real, touchable, inspiring. I most often see this manifest in the mountains. A more specific symbol within the mountains are the many trees that inhabit them and are in many stages of living and dying," Jill said.

A tree took root as Jill's personal symbol of the changing, dying and turning into something else that was happening in her. A tree appeared on the invitation to the celebration, the program, and ultimately on her obituary.

The event included celebration of all of life, human life and Jill's life.

Those invited were asked to bring items for an altar in appreciation for life. They also brought symbolic gifts for Jill to symbolize their unique relationship with her.

The open space was set with a round table in the center where Jill placed treasures of her own, a fledgling Norfolk pine, stones from the mountains, a candle and photographs of her children.

Those gathered added their contributions to the altar, speaking about their connection with all of life and human life itself. The altar swelled with a crimson hibiscus bloom, a weathered gray branch, a line of sand dollars, a brittle brown leaf, a pot of pansies, a book and photographs.

The celebration unfolded with singing, poem readings that Jill selected in advance and sharing from the circle.

Individuals spoke their words of appreciation and love directly to Jill, presenting her with their symbolic gifts. Kleenex circulated.

Jill gave each of us a gift, too. It was a longer version of this Gaelic blessing, "Deep Peace." She read it.

Deep Peace of the running wave to you

Deep Peace of the flowing air to you

Deep Peace of the quiet earth to you

Deep Peace of the shining stars to you

Deep Peace of the gentle night to you

Moon and stars pour their healing light on you

Deep Peace to you.

Then we enjoyed a meal together.

A few months after the celebration, Jill had a major stroke that left her failing and unable to walk or communicate. Her bed at home was set up overlooking a wide open door with a view of her beloved backyard trees. Three nights later, the small circle standing at her side read Jill the blessing she had given us at her celebration of life. A quiet musical version of "Deep Peace" drifted onto the air from the stereo. Calmness came over the room. Then thunder sounded outdoors. Jill's bridge was complete.

Before she died, Jill said, "What I've come to appreciate is that the journey toward death can be very intentional, rich and a blessing. Rituals are a way to do this journey. They're a way to build the bridge."

I'm grateful that I got to walk with Jill those twelve months. I had a rare chance to experience something priceless, profound and intimate I never knew before. A good death

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