

KAY'S DEATH, MY BEREAVEMENT, AND HOSPICARE

By E. Kimball Milling

Kim Milling's wife Kay died in November 2005. He wrote this account about a year and a half after her death. This article appeared in Hospicare's June 2007 newsletter.

After years of my wife Kay's fight with breast cancer, with wonderful periods of remission, I received that fateful phone call from the oncologist informing me that my beloved wife of 34 years had rapidly growing metastatic cancer of the liver.

I hurried home and gave her a long, deep hug, and told her that I loved her. We had consulted Hospicare for help managing Kay's pain while she was in treatment, so when the doctor told us that he had contacted Hospicare, we were confident that their staff would be able to help us through this difficult time.

What followed was amazing. The next morning the social worker from Hospicare came by the house and made arrangements for a hospital bed; a nurse recommended adjustments to Kay's medication. Family members and friends were contacted by phone and e-mail. They started arriving immediately to provide love, food, quiet hand holding, massage, soft music, words of caring and appreciation for Kay, and supportive hugs for me. On Saturday evening the house was full of family members and friends. A number of us gathered around Kay's bed and sang old favorites as she smiled and drifted in and out of consciousness. On Sunday our son, Jacob, said his final goodbye to Kay; her mother and sister arrived from Kansas City, and Kay became increasingly lethargic and non-communicative.

After a restful night's sleep, she died peacefully early Monday morning. I e-mailed family and friends, inviting everyone to come over to the house to say goodbye to Kay and informing them of a memorial service to be held later in the week. It was an astounding day of fellowship, story telling, sharing, singing, crying, and hugs. Later that evening, after sitting by her side and holding her hand for a long mournful period, I said, "Kay, I love you. Goodbye, my beloved." I kissed her for the last time and they then took her body away. I could not watch.

On Thursday evening there was a wonderful celebration of Kay's life at the funeral home. It was moving, funny, sad, and captured Kay's spontaneous, joyful, and creative spirit. A large crowd of community people came to share enthusiastically how Kay had enriched their lives in loving, caring, and giving ways. The spiritual care coordinator at Hospicare sensitively facilitated this remarkably genuine and emotionally satisfying end-of-life service.

Kay's ashes were buried several weeks later in a rural church cemetery in North Carolina, near my mother's ancestral home and where three prior generations of my kin are buried. Following a loving and touching family service, I returned to Ithaca, to come home and tearfully take off my wedding ring. I put it away in one of Kay's special small, inlaid jewelry boxes. There it will remain along with Kay's ring that I had given to her 36 and a half years ago.

Early Grieving

After Kay's passing my initial thoughts and emotions centered on the loss of my beloved. I contemplated how she was complex, full of life, and engaged with many people, projects, and issues. I also became aware of frustration and anger: she left so much unfinished business. Not only did she die without achieving all of her own life goals, she left me with a sense that I had never quite been the man that she wanted me to be – more communicative, sexy, suave, debonair, and physically fit.

Also during this early grieving period, in addition to a sense of loss and anger, I had thoughts of liberation. In the midst of my sorrow I felt myself at the beginning of a life that could be happy and adventuresome again after our years of struggling with cancer. Grief is hard, complex, and confusing work. The emotions of loss, anger, and liberation were flitting in and out of my consciousness like butterflies on a hot summer day. I couldn't get a focus on them, or get them to settle down so that I could have a sense of closure.

I wanted to be done with sadness and anger and move on to a new life. I read books on grieving, and I continued to see the counselor that Kay and I had started seeing two years before to help us maintain equilibrium in the face of the threat to her life. Most helpful of all, I began to journal. I wrote about what I was doing, thinking, feeling, and then shared my reflections with family members and friends by e-mail. The responses were warm understanding, caring support, and expressions of love. I found journaling to be a healing process as I was able to collect my thoughts sufficiently to express them on paper and then to share them with those who knew and cared about me.

Finding Support with Other Grievers

Four months after Kay's death a friend suggested that I consider attending the drop-in bereavement group at Hospicare led by bereavement services coordinator Donna George. I received a warm welcome and was able to express my confusion about dealing with the trauma of my wife's death and yet wanting a transition as soon as possible into a new life beyond Kay. That evening I learned a lot from others who had also lost loved ones, and I realized that I had found a community of understanding that would nurture me in my bereavement journey. Thus began a new phase of my grief work, a period in which I conscientiously set about affirming my loss and sorrow, acknowledging my vulnerability, reaching out to others, rediscovering myself, reordering my life priorities, seeking refreshment, and envisioning new possibilities.

The drop-in group met on the first and third Wednesdays of the month. I eagerly looked forward to each gathering. It was a comfortable setting for letting me express myself, when and as I needed. The sessions allowed me to learn from others, to listen attentively, and to experience the camaraderie of fellow grievers. I told the group that Jacob, my son, and I had gone to North Carolina for Mother's Day and that I had placed a bouquet of yellow flowers in front of Kay's tombstone. While there I had a few moments alone at Kay's grave. I felt a powerful sense of loss and loneliness; I joyously remembered her love and laughter; I gratefully thanked her for being an awesome mom for Jacob, and a supportive helpmate for me. And finally, I told her again that I loved her and that I wished her peace and happiness for eternity.

The next Wednesday, when I shared this extraordinarily rich experience with the members of the bereavement group, it brought tears to my eyes — ones of loss and joy, of sorrow and blessing, of grief and reassurance. In the summer I continued to meet with the drop-in group. I shared conversations that I had with myself as I walked my dog, Pupper. In particular I am fond of a story that I wrote about walking Pupper around Lake Treman and confirming that the goodness, beauty, and promise of life is not diminished, even after Kay's death. I told the group that someday I shall return to the lake with fond memories of the past and for the delight in present realities. I further ventured that it is even possible that I will be able to go again to that wonder-filled woodland paradise with a new love, to celebrate the power of creative life to restore wholeness and to enrich the joy of living.

In the fall of 2006, a year after Kay died, the staff of Hospicare's bereavement services provided me with three exceptionally fine and nurturing opportunities that have gone a long way toward helping me find relief from the pain and suffering of my loss.

The first was a six-week focused group with limited enrollments facilitated by Donna George. Participating in the group allowed me to establish ongoing and trusting relationships, and encouraged me to examine the nature of my grief and to explore avenues of moving on with my life. I found the structured nature of our discussions extremely helpful. Each week we were encouraged to complete a suggested assignment.

One of mine was a short piece that I titled "Saying Goodbye to Kay." It enabled me to express my love, regrets, and sorrow in a more comprehensive way than I had been able to do previously. I was particularly gratified that it was read at the Hospicare Annual Memorial Service in November. Two other members of the Hospicare bereavement services team were extremely helpful to me in my healing process. In addition to discussions at the bereavement group meetings, I felt the need to speak to someone privately about some very personal matters. I was blessed to have three counseling sessions with Ellen Abrams. Her acceptance and keen understanding of my grief process gladdened me, and further, I was strengthened as she helped me realize the value of holding sorrow and hope in a creative balance.

The Power of Music

In quite a different modality, Jayne Demakos led a guided musical meditation at one of the focus group meetings that I found very inspirational. But even more healing to me was a solo performance she provided at the Bookery II that was part of a fundraiser for Hospicare. That event occurred shortly after the anniversary of Kay's death. Sitting near Jayne and her harp, I became entranced. I was swept away into a wonderful transcendent state of mind. It nurtured within me a serenity that invited me to be open to new dreams and new beginnings. I went home as a person who had been transformed in some astonishing and blessed way.

These combined bereavement services provided by Donna, Ellen, and Jayne affected me profoundly. They were blessings beyond measure that helped me move along my grief journey. Yet in spite of it all, I still did not have "closure" in regard to my loss of Kay. As I moved into 2007 I realized that there was some unfinished bereavement business that I must tend to. I was too embarrassed and reluctant to speak about it, for it had to do with intimate memories of Kay, sensual desires, and the need for female companionship.

At the beginning of the year I had started attending another Hospicare bereavement group designed for those of us who had lost loved ones more than a year before. Finally, during the February meeting of this group, I felt that I was in an environment safe and trusting enough that I could share my hidden thoughts. The experience was awesome. It freed me from some of the last remaining emotional aspects that I had associated with Kay's death.

In the days since then, I have felt more empowered to move forward with my life. Stepping into the Future I am still on my bereavement journey; however, I am doing so with more spring in my step. I do not know when this journey will end or what else lies along the way. But this I do know: I have the friendship and support of a talented, caring, and loving support team of bereavement counselors at Hospicare. And what is more, as I achieve healing and wholeness again, I will be giving of myself in voluntary service to help others as they face death and grieving.

Kim Milling still participates in and helps facilitate groups for the bereaved at Hospicare. For more information about Hospicare's support group see www.hospicare.org/grief-support-groups/