

January 31, 2003

Joy and Pain
By Kenneth A. Sprang

Joy and pain can live in the same house. Neither should deny the other.

--Tan Neng

Last night I received an email from Kevin, an old friend, telling me that Kathy, his wife of many years, “was at peace and [had] died in her sleep” after a five-year battle with ovarian cancer. He was at her bedside when she died “offering prayers and encouragement for the journey.” With love and even a wisp of joy, he closed with “thanks and praise for the life of this wonderful woman.” A week or so ago as he wrote that all the resources of modern medicine had been exhausted and acknowledged the end might be near, his tone was one of gratitude and joy for the years he and Kathy had spent together, the life they had shared, and the adult children of whom they are justly proud.

As the readers of this column know, Dr. Harriet Kramer Becker, whose wisdom has filled this space for the several years, also died of ovarian cancer in December. Harriet was one of those rare people who literally light up a room when they enter it. There is an unmistakable emptiness and void created by her death. Yet, her life was so rich and her spirit so embracing, that she lives on in the hearts and memories of many.

Many faith traditions teach that life continues after death and some suggest that our departed loved ones are still present to us. True? I don't know. However, I do know that when I need solace, wisdom, or guidance in my own life, I often pause in my mind's eye to have a cup of tea with my grandmother, who died in 1995 at the age of 91. She was a “Norman Rockwell” grandmother, and the dearest person in the world to me. Her love and wisdom have contributed much to my life. I don't know whether she really hears me when I chat with her—perhaps I am simply talking to myself. However, I do know that I always find an inner strength and belief in myself after those chats, much as I did during her life.

Some of you have experienced the loss of a spouse or life partner, or perhaps someone else whose absence has left an overwhelming void in your life. Grief consultant Carol Staudacher suggests turning the grieving process into a nurturing process. First, take control of your physical health—don't neglect it. Second, enhance your physical and social environment. Take time to make your home your own unique “nest,” whether by repainting, rearranging the furniture, or completely remodeling. Likewise, reach out to friends and family and ask for what you want—whether it's someone to quietly listen to you share your memories of your partner, or someone to accompany you to a movie. Finally, redefine yourself. The loss of a spouse or partner, in particular, changes our identity. Take time to be introspective and identify and get to know your authentic self. Resolve to continue growing in your self-awareness.

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In this journey, I would like to invite you to "re-image" the one you have lost, not as dead and gone, but as very much present. Sadness and joy *can* coexist. Despite this necessary transitional pain, the voice and the "presence" of one who has been such an important part of our life lives on in us and those who share our memories. Have a glass of wine, a cup of tea, or a conversation by the fire. Talk about your plans. Imagine his or her encouraging and supporting you in your redefinition.

My wife Carol and I have been entrusted by John Becker, Harriet's devoted husband and partner to carry on their counseling and coaching work. Harriet and John's mission was to help couples build and sustain vibrant, fulfilling relationships, and to help those seeking a relationship to find a partner with whom they could build such a life together—their "soulmate."

Carol and I, like the Beckers, are Imago trained (Imago is a particular theory of the importance of relationships) and we share their passion for enriching the lives of others by teaching, nurturing, and coaching them in building and nurturing their relationships. We are thrilled at this opportunity but humbled and keenly aware of the challenge in succeeding Washington's "romantic gurus."

I appreciate the *Georgetown*'s invitation to continue Harriet's column, but I am keenly aware of the responsibility. In the weeks to come it will be my privilege, and my challenge, to fill this space with thoughts that will inspire, teach, and touch our readers. I suspect that in the days to come I will be sipping many cups of tea with Harriet Becker.

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