

## ***A Beautiful Death*** by Kit Kirkpatrick

*“I want my death to be like Ken’s,” said Mary Kennedy who was present when my husband Ken died. “He had what we call a beautiful death, and I want to go like that.” Hospice nurses like Mary have seen a lot, lot of death, yet they don’t know what makes for a beautiful death, who gets one and who doesn’t. This was Mary’s deepest desire, and I wish I could tell you that her passing was like Ken’s.*

Mary brought hospice to Sacramento because she established the first hospice program for UC Med-Center. She headed-up Hospice and Home Healthcare, a department with over 200 employees, and became Hospice Queen of Sacramento. She started Hope House, a hospice center for homeless AIDS patients. She was dedicated to caregiving.

More than that, Mary Kennedy was my dear friend of 30 years who’d been advising me on Ken’s struggle with COPD as it came to an end in 2006. Once I called her immediately after Ken’s doctor’s appointment because they wanted to know about intubation, which neither of us understood as life support, or whether we should agree.

“Intubation?!” cried Mary. “Oh My God are we there already?”

*There, I thought. Where is there?* Ken held firmly to the belief that he wasn’t dying and that he would always get better. I pulled that wool over my eyes too, and slid into the

daily routine of having a bedridden husband. Of course he would die, I knew that. But he was still here, and the coming and going of oxygen suppliers, nurses, family, friends had a rhythm of its own and became my life, our new normal.

My life sucked during these years because I had a patient instead of a partner or best-friend. Trips, parties, time spent with friends all fell by the wayside as caregiving took more and more of me, and I became tied-down by his dependency. I felt piercingly alone with every decision, and guilty if I didn’t always put him first. At the time, though, I girded-up, tough-talked myself and somehow found good cheer, for Ken’s sake. One of us had to go first; one of us had to show the

other the way; one of us was going to look after the other – it was unavoidable.

Back to my question about intubation, Mary continued, “Look, I’m late for work and can’t take time to go through this with you now. So let me just say this: whatever you do, don’t let them intubate.”

“What? Never, are you sure?”

“Once he’s intubated it’ll just be one procedure after another, and you won’t be at his side when he dies. You’ll be out in the hall, waiting.”

Ken was in and out of consciousness over a three-day period before he fell into a coma. During that time our house was ablaze in love, a love that you could feel like a sparkle on the skin and a glow in the heart of everyone there. Mary was



***My husband, Ken Snyder, and me on our wedding day, April 12, 1989. We were married 17 years before he died.***

there. At night she slept on a mat on the floor – and Mary was large, usually about 75 lbs overweight, with red hair, big jewelry and a big voice that could sometimes get screechy. At night I squeezed into Ken's hospital bed alongside him, Mary down there on the floor beneath us. During the day, many of our friends came and all of it was love.

Some people can say "I love you" to a big loud guy like Ken, others came in gratitude for having known him and didn't say much at all. Ken's triathlete daughter remembered that as a girl, he challenged her to a footrace. He was a heavy smoker and could never have won, but proudly recalled going to her track meets and supporting her high school track team. Ken and his brother had their usual debate over whose teddy bear it really was, that antique bear that had been worn bald with a little boy's love. It turned out to be Ken's brother's all

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along, and we couldn't stop laughing at this last-minute confession from Ken, the man who'd held the teddy bear hostage since he found it among their mother's things.

"Nothing untoward can happen in this energy," Mary said. Indeed, I felt the heavens open, a warmth and almost a giddiness that seemed like the pulse of God or the hum of the infinite. "It's the same when a baby's born," she said. "There's another dimension that comes in."

I am the seeker who traveled to India and Brazil, the Philippines and Peru to experience that dimen-

sion, through religious ceremony, magical incantations, and the energy of holy and healing sites. But I swear to you, a beautiful death is truly the holiest of experiences. I never knew that, and some people never find out. My son Harry was there, but his wife stayed in LA. "She'll be so sorry she missed this," Harry said afterward, and since

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then, he's made it a point to visit friends and family members who are dying.

There were nine people in the room when Ken died. We counted his breaths, listening for the last raspy exhale. We leaned into the bed, held his hands, arms, legs — not to hold him down, but to pray

him upwards in love. We meditated, prayed and sang Ken's favorite hymn, "Shepherd Show me the Way."

Mary told me to take off Ken's wedding ring. "These comas can go on for weeks," she said. "It's time for you to tell him he can go." Ken hadn't moved for several days, but when I tugged the ring from his finger, he tried to make a fist and jerked back his arm, and he groaned. He tried to say no. He died a few hours later. I cry now to remember this final farewell to Ken, who'd never allowed that ring to

be removed during various hospitalizations over the 17 years of our marriage. "You have to go now, my love. I'll be there too when it's my turn." I cry not because Ken is gone and I'm alone. I cry to have been so loved, so cherished, so important to this teddy bear of a man who never learned to dance and was never going to die.

That's the death Mary wanted, surrounded by love and the gratitude of friends and family, but sadly not what she got. Two months after Ken died, Mary was diagnosed with stage IV ovarian cancer and she died exactly three years from the day of diagnosis, as she believed she would. I became her caregiver, or at least one of them. I was already numb with grief, struggling with being alone for the first time and not knowing what to do with myself after so much caregiving of Ken. I easily took up the role of caregiver again, and appreciated time with Mary. I took her to weekly cancer support group meetings, chemo infusions, doctors in San Francisco, Long Beach and elsewhere. I was driving us to Mercy Hospital in Folsom for the weekly cancer support group when Mary said she wanted a death like Ken's. She wanted my help in achieving it.

*What?* I was so confused that I missed the freeway exit. Hadn't she orchestrated Ken's beautiful passing? Hadn't she been the one subtly guiding the experience? I could've agreed to intubation or worse.

Mary believed that people who had resolved family issues could have a good death. But Ken had been married three times, so there were the ex-wives, angry son, and lesbian niece he never fully accepted. Messy. Nevertheless, Mary flew to Arizona to spend a week with her sister there, her sister the favored, precious one. She passed the time sort of “coming clean” with Nancy the sister, but wasn’t invigorated by it and their relationship remained unchanged.

Ken had a lust for life and as long as a heart beat in his chest, he’d expand and reach for more. “Me? Dying? Who told you that? They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.” His voice was deep and booming till the end.

Mary, on the other hand, thought you could have a beautiful death by preparing for it, so she got a master Buddhist teacher, Gus Koehler, to work closely with her on meditation and on her practice. Once when I picked her up, I noticed dead flowers in the vases on the dining room table and went to toss them, but Mary quickly intervened, “Don’t throw those out! I’m appreciating the full cycle of life and finding beauty in fallen rose petals.”

The biggest difference was at the end because Mary was in pain and Ken wasn’t. Visitors easily exhausted her. She was irritated by them, embarrassed too, and burdened by her felt-need to also be a hostess to them. Mary had spent a lifetime giving and didn’t know how to be the patient. She couldn’t receive the offerings of people who loved her. She couldn’t appear needy and she could never ask for help.

I sat with Mary once when a young nurse came to the door. Mary mostly stayed in her bedroom now. The young woman held a baby. Mary had trained her as a beginning RN and

she wanted to show Mary her baby and thank Mary for her career, but I sent her away. Mary told me to. Mary began banning people from her apartment. Pride. Not wanting to appear needy. She banned visits from the cancer support group people, and from many of the nurses and hospice people who wanted to honor her. Family was disallowed. Soon just a handful of nurses and girlfriends were taking care of Mary as her final days approached. Then it was only Connie at the end, a cancer nurse and long-time friend of Mary’s.

Truthfully, I’m not sorry I missed Mary’s passing. She died in the wee hours of the morning, alone and in pain. Connie called in the morning and we, the girlfriends, weren’t sure what to do since we’d been banned. “Well, let’s get right over there,” I said, but her body had already been taken.

After Ken died, I kept him as long as I could, until I couldn’t feel his lifeforce leaving from the top

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of his head anymore. Everyone had vacated the room and I was alone with Ken’s body. I wrote his obituary then, and made some promises to myself about love, honoring connection and this one precious life we so courageously get to experience. Then I told Ken: *That’s it. Now we’re drinking your scotch.* I brought his collection of single malts and aged scotches on a tray that I put on his belly with

lots of little shot glasses. All of us surrounded his bed again, toasting this life, joking, laughing, even before his body was cold. When the scotch was gone, the cremators came, and it was over. Harry stayed, but Mary was glad to finally get back to her own bed.

I didn’t know Ken had had a beautiful death because it was my first death; I’d barely been to any funerals before Ken.

I didn’t have a model for how to have a home death for your husband. I couldn’t have done it without Mary. I had imagined being swept by grief, and that happened later, but I’d never imagined being in awe of death or treasuring the sacred moments of passing. Her experience, her wisdom, and even the irony of her own death are forever part of death for me. I didn’t know about the love, or that I’d henceforth be so comfortable with death, and willingly accept the honor of being with friends and family who are dying.



**Kit Kirkparick** teaches the *Memoirs Class* offered through OLLI-UCD Extension. She’s a Certified Memoirist, former publicist, and founder of the [OLLImemoirs.org](http://OLLImemoirs.org) website.

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