

To remember a death, the dying of a loved person so filled with life draws us into painful and disorienting images. We rightly want to cling to the spirited, loving, invigorating images of the person as among us, walking, talking, filling a space in the ordinary passage of time, of *our* time. I can spontaneously recall engaging conversations and the face of my friend, John. These are treasures filling me with a sense of him and bringing him back from the somewhere where his spirit lives. Rich and deeply invasive inner pictures of John's dying and death claim a major role in my memories. And I cling to these memories with a vitality that sometimes overshadows the former. Memories of John's dying don't disorient me, for John died a good death.

It would be impossible to speak of John's dying without reference to his position in my life and the life of the large community in which he lived. On a grey afternoon a little more than a decade ago, John walked with me at the burial of my dearest friend. We had been friendly acquaintances before, but from that day on he assumed a special place in my life. Over the years, I became aware that John had become not only a dear friend, but an active advocate, a protector, a sensitive mentor. He was personally involved in my life and, as I learned, in the lives of many others.

Reflecting on the Death of a Friend

by Jane Pitz

A member of a religious community, John grew to a position of responsibility in the mentoring of young members. He was enmeshed in the lives of AA members with whom he had walked the long walk over three decades and in whose lives he held a place of mentoring and pastoring.

When John phoned me at Thanksgiving time to tell me he had been diagnosed with cancer of the liver and pancreas, he had lived with that reality for about a month. He spoke of three to six months left and his tears and hesitations over the thousands of miles between us registered in me as a panicky thud. I did not know what to do for him, how to be with him on this unknown journey. How could I walk with him, be of help, enter into this darkness? How could I help him to die well?

Along with others, I found that John took the lead in directing us. He summoned us into his life, into his dying, so that it became a facet of living. His long, acknowledged addiction to alcohol and years of sobriety left him no choice but to talk with his oncologist in very honest terms about what could be worked out to help relieve pain when that became necessary. He found a sensitive medical caregiver who would assist him in relieving his pain without putting him in an altered state. He wrote a direct and compelling letter to his religious community and another to his long-time students, friends and colleagues sharing with them what he had been told about this virulent cancer.

His position in regard to his dying was clear. He would see this as an invitation to live his death to the fullest extent. The invitation to us, those close at home and those far flung across the U.S. and the world, was to enter, if we could, this time of his life. He seemed aware that his deep connections with other human beings was essential to doing this unknown task well.

Over the next months, former students and friends wrote letters, called, and visits. Forgiveness was asked for; forgiveness was given. Questions were pondered; directions were probed. Connections were made and cemented. John

continued to do the leading in particular ways. But as physical control became less, John gave over his care to those around him. The medical staff at the community house where he lived carried out ordinary tasks for him, and his friends became his arms and legs. He consciously allowed people to do this, seemingly seeing this as necessary to both himself and to them. There was a consciousness about this act that made it beautiful, and not pitiful, as his body weakened. He invited us to participate in whatever dying was; to come to know it in the life of our friend.

So we kept vigil. For the last three days of his physical life, John was in bed at the care facility of his community. His friends and family were there; the nursing staff were present. We moved in an agreed-upon rhythm so as not to crowd and overwhelm him. We prayed with him and we fed him. We accompanied him into what for us seemed darkness but for John was a growing light. We waited and watched and burned into our brains the image of John's dying. His pain was relieved in the measure he and his doctor had agreed upon to retain a consciousness and presence to what was unfolding. We formed a circle of protection and nurturing for this journey that we could not really enter. But we were there and that made the difference. It seems that one has to do this alone and yet not alone. That the community needs to have representatives and witnesses on sight as a death is lived. We use contradictory terms — living a death — that fit in the deepest sense. A death that was *lived into*, a life that persisted with integrity to the last breath. And *that* breath was sustained on air that was breathed in by the journeyers who returned to their ordinary lives, but who themselves could never be the same, not just because they had the life of their friend inside them in a mysterious way, in memory and more, but because they had become witnesses to his death and would want the same for themselves.