



Mary Allen: The Spiritual Experience She Wanted

By Don Allen

Mary, my wife of 30 years and an M.D. psychiatrist, died of metastasized breast cancer on her birthday in 1994. While considered terminal during the prior two-year period, she took charge of this experience, determined to do it in the most meaningful way possible. Just as she had innovated a medical practice with an expanded consciousness, she put everything she knew into making her remaining time as profoundly fulfilling and spiritual as her life. She negotiated with the predecessor to Pathways Hospice to be able to select and train her own nurses. She faced the specter of coping with pain, and found a way, with my help, to complete the book she had always wanted to write.

A renowned therapist in this region, Mary was a frontiersperson who studied and adapted modalities that proved workable in helping people, especially Jungian methods, transpersonal psych, past-lives regression, and hypnotherapy. She was a spiritual person, loosely a mystical Christian, who joined the Beth Am community and raised her children with me in Reform Judaism. She spent many sessions with the nurses, imbuing them with her sensibilities, wanting to make sure that the people around her brought in the sensitivity, awareness and spirituality that she valued. They willingly participated and became a close group.

As with any of us, Mary had her fears, particularly of overwhelming pain and suffering. I told her she could count on me as a sentry against such an outcome. This wasn't easy to contemplate, but I felt we could do it. Her oncologist kept us informed of every development of the progressing cancer. Although this was highly unusual at the time, he trained me to administer the pain medications. I mastered programming the morphine drip machine, the dose and the bolus controls, ready, when the time came to monitor her day and night.

A tumor led to loss of use of her writing hand in 1992. I served as the scribe and co-editor for her book, *Explorer's Odyssey or Up a Creek Without a Paddle*, an allegorical tale that would reflect the results of all she had learned and developed over the previous 25 years. Willis Harman, PhD., a famous futurist and a friend, wrote the foreword, and Mary managed to design the cover herself. She concluded her book with a striking collection of poems, "Conversations with God," and lived to see the galleys and the finished cover.

Mary went in and out of coma near the end. Only one day before she died, she was suddenly alert enough to counsel a suicidal patient by phone for two hours, reversing that outcome. I was monitoring her lungs with a stethoscope. When the rales started crackling, I panicked. What if the water in her lungs gave her the feeling of drowning? In the middle of the night, I called the hospice nurse. He found a pharmacist nearby who had the necessary injectable Atropene in his car, picked it up, and delivered it at once. I injected her hourly for nearly a day. What a relief to see it work!

Mary died in my arms at 5 a.m. on her birthday, December 26. I woke my two youngest sons (on break from college) told them they could say their goodbyes. It was extremely moving, yet we conferred and decided to celebrate her release with her favorite pancake breakfast. She had brought her own amazing consciousness to the process of dying and trained us all to be in sync with her on the journey.