



Chapter 12

CHOOSING LOVE AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Nancy came for her weekly psychotherapy session this morning. I have worked with her, off and on, over a period of years. Her mother raised her with a strict and suffocating religious philosophy that Nancy feels stunted her emotional growth and caused her years of unnecessary suffering. I have never known her to have other than both a very loving and a very angry relationship with her mother.

This morning Nancy came to tell me her mother died last week. She has surprised herself with feeling very, very sad. With a lifetime of disagreements, it is clear that most of all, Nancy loved her mother.

Several weeks ago her mother's old hymnal fell apart. When visiting with her adult granddaughter shortly thereafter, from among the unbound pages she removed a favorite hymn she had sung for her infant granddaughter. Puzzled as to what to do with it, the granddaughter folded the paper and placed it in her wallet. Then, in the last moments of her grandmother's life, she remembered the hymn. She removed it from her wallet and showed it to Nancy as they sat in the hospital room. In that moment Nancy made a decision, from her heart, to share the hymn with her dying mother. Together, she and her daughter read aloud the words of that favored hymn, unable to sing it because her lifelong resistance to her mother's religion never allowed her the opportunity to learn

the tune. The hymn was one important to her mother, and that was what really mattered. Repeatedly, feeling strong in their love and respect for the dying woman, Nancy and her daughter read the hymn aloud, until Nancy's mother passed from this world to the next.

Knowing her disdain for the mother's religion, a close relative later criticized Nancy for reading the hymn, accusing her of hypocrisy. Nancy's response was inspiring: "At that moment, it wasn't about what I believed," she stated emphatically, "it was about what my mother believed and what was important to her." She looked elated. That criticism meant little in the face of the joy Nancy felt as a result of the decision she had made in her heart. She reported feeling happier than she had felt in years.

Nancy had paid profound respect to her mother through her actions. "Respect," I told her, "is about accepting others exactly as they are, without attempting to change a hair on their head. Respect is one of the skills of love." I pointed out that she had been respecting both her mother and herself. Notably, Nancy informed me that she had not felt nearly so angry with her mother since reading the hymn at her deathbed. For years she had dreaded the moment of her mother's death. Now that it had come and she had given this gift from her heart, Nancy had achieved a peace and happiness she had been seeking for years.

Love is both a set of skills and an art. In reading this hymn, Nancy had practiced some of the skills, including truly desiring to know the other person, respecting, and giving. But these acts would have been hollow without Nancy's internal decision to share with her mother at this crucial moment by reading something important to her, instead of holding on to the anger that was also there. This kind of decision that comes from deep inside of us is part of the art of love.

The Search for Happiness

Over the 31 years I have been a psychotherapist, I have listened to countless individuals lament about not being happy. So many of them seemed to be "seeking happiness," as if it can be found "out there" somewhere. But true happiness comes from inside. It derives from acting in ways that are right for you, and focusing on those things that are positive and uplifting. True happiness comes from living a life of character and integrity, one in which each of us lives according to our ideals and principles. This means making every action a conscious choice, as well as having the willingness to take full responsibility for the consequences of those choices.

For years, I struggled with how to teach people how to be happy. So many people seemed to believe that once they were married, or got that promotion, or retired, or won the Lotto, **then** they would be happy. Some of them actually achieved these goals. But, I observed that if they were not happy before achieving those goals, their achievement brought only a very temporary happiness. The kinds of goals they sought were really desires. It is the nature of desire, once filled, to beget other desires. A person directed toward desires must constantly strive toward new desires, since satisfaction lasts for only a short time after achieving them. Clearly, I could see, happiness did not come from achieving desires that are set up as life goals.

Happiness eluded me for many years, too. Eventually, I found some answers that worked for me. Happiness accompanies harmony—internal harmony. Achieving such harmony means living a life that is true to the person each of us is.

Paths to Harmony

I have learned to view this world as a giant school, to which we all come in order to learn. Our major lessons here are those of love and faith (some call it trust). Viewed in this way, every experience we have is an opportunity to learn, and, each action becomes a choice. When we decide to actively accept life as a long string of choices (with attendant consequences), the way we relate to our world changes. We become responsible partners with whatever or whoever it is that is larger than us. We begin to live according to our principles, not allowing ourselves to be influenced by others or by circumstance. A person living life in this way achieves a level of harmony that brings balance and happiness.

Becoming emotionally literate, too, enhances harmony. Most of us have learned inaccurate information about emotions. We most often view them as something we need to control or manage, especially because the last thing we want to do is to “break down” emotionally. To many, “falling apart” by crying is shameful. A lot of us attempt to shove emotions so far down inside of us that we don’t even know they are there except at times of extreme crisis.

Emotions are nothing but tools. They are designed to help us navigate life more easily by acting as signals showing us which way to turn and where we need to look to learn our lesson. After all, just as in the fifth grade, as soon as we learn the lesson presented to us in a particular situation, we are free to be promoted to the next level. When we realize that each emotion gives its own special signal and learn to use that signal in making our life choices, we achieve an emotional balance that leaves

more room for experiencing happiness. For example, fear signals us to be cautious, to be ready to deal with something heading our way or to take flight to escape it. Love, on the other hand, signals us to come closer and to offer ourselves with greater vulnerability.

To take full advantage of our emotions we need to make friends with them. We need to notice, feel, process, learn from, and share (in positive ways) the feelings that are part of each one of us as human beings. This allows us to reach an internal state of harmony. Happiness is also an emotion. When we hold down one emotion through suppression, repression and harboring, we hold them all down. Conversely, when we open up to one emotion, we open the door for all others. Achieving emotional literacy opens the doors, enabling us to more fully embrace happiness.

Harmony also depends upon our focus. Everywhere around us there is loving energy. This loving energy is totally supportive—of who we are, what we think, and what we experience. A unique quality of human beings is our ability to choose where we focus our attention. If a person gets up in the morning and bangs his or her head on the kitchen cupboard, it is easy to say and focus on “this is going to be a bad day.” With such a mindset, everything that follows during the day turns into “proof” that this is a “bad day.” If that same person bangs that same head on the same kitchen cupboard, yet says and focuses on “this is going to be a good day anyway,” everything that follows during the day turns into “proof” that this is a “good day.” Why? Because the loving energy that surrounds all of us is totally supportive. When we focus our attention on something, it receives this full support. Whatever we focus attention on is fed energy, and grows. Thus a “good day” focus brings us more good days. Happiness comes from consciously focusing your attention on things that are true in you and to you, that are positive, balanced, beautiful, and loving. Even when challenges hit, the principle to follow is “Pay attention to what you want to become, not to what you want to overcome.” Living by this principle can transform an unhappy person to a happy one. It did for me.

Balance and Happiness, Even with Loss

Nowhere is it more difficult to be happy than when we experience loss, especially through the death of people we love. Is it possible for human beings to feel happiness at the passing of loved ones, rather than pain? If, indeed, our world is a giant school, then perhaps sharing a person’s death with them could teach us so much we would feel happy. Talk to a first grader who has just learned to read. She or he is ecstatic.

Learning brings joy and happiness. Shared learning, at death as well as at other junctures in a human life, can bring similar joy and happiness.

Americans have for several generations been shielded from death. Countless treatises have been written on “The American Way of Death,” exposing our shortcomings in dealing with death, and pointing out how we don’t directly face the emotions and realities accompanying death. It has been several generations since we gave up the practice of dressing bodies for burial on the dining room table, necessitating that everyone face death squarely. We have turned dealing with death over to professionals, and have forgotten how to deal with death and the dying. It has become a tremendous challenge to help the people we love through the transition called death. We don’t know what to say. We don’t know how much to say. We don’t know how to talk with people who seem to be “out of it” or “not here.” We have a hard time relating to people who cannot actively relate to us. And, what do we do with our own feelings? Death of loved ones stumps most of us, because it scares us and takes us into little-known territory; and, we do not really know what to do.

Grandmother Helen taught me about death and how to relate to the dying. I will be forever indebted to her. She was the grandmother of my first husband, whom I had met when she was 78. Helen had been a well-respected legal secretary for many years, and loved words, conversation, and intellectual discourse, along with classical music. She most feared two things: losing her mental capacities and going into a nursing home. Long after my divorce from her grandson, he was obliged to place her in a nursing home not far from where I lived. I wasn’t happy at all about going through this process, because I didn’t want to lose this wonderful and supportive woman, and because I was terrified of death. But, since it was Grandmother Helen, with whom I had a close and loving relationship, I chose to visit frequently, thus requiring myself to learn and expand.

My second husband, my daughter Liz, and I often visited together. Gradually, Grandmother began to slip away from us. Increasingly, when we arrived for a visit, the nurses would report that she was “out of it,” intimating that we would not have a satisfying visit. One day we didn’t see any of the staff when we arrived, and began our visit without knowing what kind of a day she was having. We were in the midst of a wonderful chat with Grandmother about a dream she had the previous night, which included visits from her long-dead mother, father, and sisters, when a staff member came in to perform some function. Suddenly, Helen’s speech became garbled, her eyes drifted, and our close visit went askew. Just as suddenly, when the staffer left the room, saying Helen had

been “out of it” all day, Grandmother returned to conversing with us, totally present. Her behavior was remarkable. Clearly, when talking about the transition to death she was undergoing, Grandmother made perfect sense. But, when dealing with the everyday world, with people who were not attempting to reach in to where she was in consciousness, Grandmother was “out of it.” It is important, when dealing with the dying, to talk with them about what they are experiencing and realize that they are in the process of turning loose of this world, most often not caring about what is happening here. This is exactly what they need to do. Your loved one will be very grateful to you for recognizing and working with their need to gracefully turn loose of this world.

One summer day Grandmother Helen sighed and said to me, “I’m so glad you and I were able to come here together and sit next to the river.” I looked out the window of her nursing home in a town in northern California, seeing trees on an expansive lawn and not a body of water in sight. “Do you see a river here, Grandmother?” I asked her. “Why, yes. Don’t you see the river?” There was much anxiety in her voice and fear on her face. I thought it important to be truthful. “No,” I replied, “I don’t see a river. However, just because I can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t here. Tell me about what you see.” She described a wide, lazy river with a sandbar in its midst, with us sitting along the grass-covered bank. “It sounds beautiful, Grandmother. Thank you for bringing me here. Just because I can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t real.” Her eyes filled up with tears; her face filled with gratitude. Reaching out her little wrinkled hand, she patted me on my cheek, proclaiming, “I love you.”

Over the months, Grandmother made pronouncements. “I don’t much like my body anymore,” she said one day. We talked about what it was like not to want to be in a human body any longer. Few physical things brought her pleasure now. Only when I brought her favorite dessert, chocolate éclairs, and fed them to her, did she seem to enjoy being in a physical body. Another day she lamented, “I don’t know why God is still keeping me here. Almost my whole family is gone now.” I was pushing her wheelchair when she announced, “I don’t really like my name anymore.” It was clear she was getting ready to let go of this life. We talked about that together. I told her I would miss her terribly, but I knew she was ready to go, and I wanted her to do what was right for her.

What to Say to Dying Loved Ones

A question that frequently arises when we deal with loved ones who are dying is whether to talk straightforwardly and truthfully to them. The answer is the same as that given to parents who want to know how to

deal with the “facts of life” with young children: let the person going through the transition set the pace. Respond in kind to what they ask or talk about. Even if, in life, a person has not demonstrated a strong ability to face difficult things squarely, you may find they do so as they near death. To “face fact” is to look at things squarely for what they are, not for what we are told they are, or for what we hope they are. When you “face the fact” of something, it sets you free. When our dying loved ones address “the facts” of their passing (such as “I don’t like my name anymore” or “Am I dying?”), they are trying to get free. If we can assist them to face fact, it is most helpful. Interestingly, it can set them and us free. Helping the people we love to face the fact of their passing, as they indicate they are ready to do, is a loving act. Perhaps someday, when we are ready, someone will do the same loving act for us.

Relating to Grandmother Helen in this way filled us up. We were nearly ecstatic after our visits, and had difficulty being “in the world” for a while after we left. We felt so filled up with love and gratitude we could burst. Grandmother took us through her dying and helped us to experience it as a happy, natural, and ordered occurrence. I felt privileged, joyful, and not at all afraid to be accompanying her on this incredible journey into the unknown. Grandmother’s transition to death brought me a profound peace and joy that changed my life forever.

In the last weeks of her life, I arrived at the hospital one day to find Grandmother Helen tied into her wheelchair, head drooping. The staff shook their heads and repeated that pronouncement that she was “really out of it.” I stood in front of Grandmother and said in a clear voice, “Well, Grandmother, I see you’ve decided to die!”

Nothing happened for almost a minute, as Grandmother slowly lifted her head and worked to focus her eyes through the thick lenses she had been wearing since cataract surgery. “What?!” she demanded. “I see you’ve decided to die. Is that right?” She stared at me briefly and then declared, “Yes, I’ve decided.” Grandmother taught me then that those who are dying are engaged in the process of dying. It was up to me to go to her, where she was as she dealt with this tremendous transition, in order to connect with her on her journey. When I got there, she and everything she said and did made perfect sense. Instead of being “out of it,” Grandmother seemed to be spending more and more of her time “somewhere else,” and was totally uninterested in matters of this world. It was a new idea for me that a person might reach the point where they **wanted** to leave this earthly life. Seeing Grandmother face this so squarely, along with her willingness to share so intimately with me, left

me sublimely happy. Who would have thought that such an experience would be so personally fulfilling?

Often we are afraid to talk about death with the dying. We fool ourselves into thinking such talk will be “too much” for our loved one. Perhaps we also think discussing the situation will hasten their death. Grandmother Helen taught me that talking about death with someone who is dying is a comfort to both the living and the dying. This is because we both get to face the fact of the coming death. “Facing fact,” that is, looking at a situation squarely for what it is (and not for what we are told it is, what we hope it is, or not looking at all), sets us free. Whether you are the person doing the dying, or the one helping another to die, “facing fact” regarding the impending transition sets you free and leaves room for the joy and happiness that fills in the surrounding spaces.

Sharing Sadness

A lot of people also feel reluctant to tell the dying our own feelings. Grandmother knew I was sad at her passing, and that I would miss her. Telling her this did not hinder her progress. She was on the road to her death; my feelings were not going to stop this process. We did notice that she seemed to perk up when we visited, and at last determined that she was perhaps staying alive for us. On our next visit, we told her: “If you are trying to stay alive for us, please know that we don’t need you to do that. We love you and will miss you, but we will be okay after you die. It is okay for you to leave when you are ready.” Even without this statement, there was only so long that Grandmother could hold out before she let go fully and moved on, but there seemed a lessening of tension in all of us to have it said out loud.

Grandmother was 94 when she died. Not everyone who dies has had such a full and long life. It seems harder for us to accept the death of children, people who are in the prime of their life, or those who die suddenly. It was such a gift to me to observe and participate in the process of death as it progressed naturally. Seeing the process in such minute detail allowed me to consider the possibility that there is a “right time” for each of us. The people connected to one who dies may not feel the time is right, but for the person who dies, it is.

Honoring Those We Lose

Norma Wandesforde was a strong, loving, patient, and thoughtful person who became my mentor when I, as a 20 year-old married woman, moved to the Seattle houseboat dock owned by Norma and her

husband, Jim. Though married, I knew so little about the real world. Norma coached me on how to live life as a married woman (no longer a girl). She took me shopping and taught me how to purchase clothes that looked attractive on me (a lesson that had been neglected in my upbringing). She shared recipes, introduced me to many finer things in life, and talked me through the many ups and downs that occur in a young marriage. A social worker, she also made sure I entered psychotherapy to work out the tortured feelings left from my challenging childhood. Intellectually brilliant, artistic, a violinist in the Seattle symphony, world traveler, astute businesswoman, teacher, and psychotherapist, Norma was truly a remarkable woman. Even after I had “grown up” and moved away, Norma kept in contact, as she did with people she had mentored who lived all over the world. Schooled in the home arts, Norma made it her business to embroider three flannel blankets for each baby born into this world to people she cared about.

Three years after I moved away from Seattle, just two months prior to my daughter’s first birthday, my marriage fell apart. On that important first birthday, no one in our family—not my daughter’s father, grandparents, aunts, or uncles—acknowledged her presence. Norma Wandesforde remembered with a gift and a call. I could always count on Norma.

When the call came in from Geoff, her son-in-law, informing me that at age 42 Norma had died from complications of lung cancer surgery, I thought he was pulling a prank. Not so. Ever the practical one, Norma had told few people of her diagnosis and expected to be in and out of the hospital, with one less lung, before anyone even noticed her absence. But, on day four following the operation, she inexplicably took a turn for the worse and died. My mentor was gone!

I hung up the phone, collapsed onto my kitchen floor, and sobbed. It was then I heard Norma’s strong and practical voice in my head. “What are you doing, Ilene?” she demanded. Without speaking out loud, I answered: “I’m crying, can’t you see?” “Of course I see you crying,” she continued. “But what are you crying about?”

“I’m sad—about you! About the fact that you died! I’m crying for you!” came my response. Norma would hear none of this. “That’s ridiculous,” she stated. “You’re not crying for me; you’re crying for yourself. I don’t need you to cry for me!”

Puzzled, I asked one last question. “What would you have me do instead? I have lost you and all your wonderful support and kindness. Can’t I be sad about that?” “You can,” she retorted, “but it would be better if you stop all that crying and do something different.” “What?” I

begged her. “If I truly offered you something in this life, then spend your time passing it on to others.”

She left. I never heard her voice again. Even in death, Norma taught me a most valuable lesson. To truly pay homage to our dead, we need to take what they have given us and pass it on to others. Accepting her challenge has brought me nothing but joy over the 31 years since Norma’s death. Others often tell me now, for example, that I am a generous person. I was not generous prior to Norma. Generosity is one of the gifts I am passing on from Norma.

I do not know why I “heard” Norma’s voice that day. The message I received, however, was invaluable. Love works best when it is released to move around and circulate. If a person close to you has given you a lot during your time together, the grandest tribute is to do unto others what has been done for you. Love and anger or hate cannot occupy the same location at the same time. When you are busy “passing it on,” you add a quantity of love to our world that automatically crowds out anger or hate. Imagine if we all took the love that has been given to us, no matter how small or large the portion, and were determined to make certain to pass it on to others at every conceivable opportunity. What kind of world could we create together?

Respect and Love in the Most Difficult Places

Grandmother’s dying process made me unafraid of death. It helped me to have an idea of what a dying person needs and what can be gained from someone’s death. I once heard it said that the way a person dies is designed to bring the greatest learning and benefit to those surrounding that individual. This was certainly so for me with Grandmother’s death. It also proved to be the groundwork for a death experienced only a few years ago with someone I didn’t like very much, who also didn’t like me. Grandmother Helen’s death prepared me for the most difficult death situation of my life, that of the ex-wife of my husband. I was grateful for all Grandmother Helen had taught me about what is **really** important as one faces death.

Unfortunately, circumstances were such that my husband’s ex-wife was angry I had come into his life. During the four years prior to her illness, despite the fact that their daughter, Anne, spent part of her life with us every week, the ex-wife had been unable to bring herself to meet me in person. I had made numerous offers, eventually realizing that a meeting was not going to happen. My focus had been to live my own life as separately from hers as I could, allowing my husband and stepdaughter to interact with her, and supporting my stepdaughter in her relation-

ship with her Mom. Like most children of divorce, Anne often felt herself tugged in two directions by those she most loved in this world. It was not always easy to keep separate because my husband's divorce had been acrimonious, two years long, and, there was still much animosity between him and his ex-wife.

My husband and I had been married just over a year. He was sixty, and I was about to turn 56 when Anne came to stay with us on November 5, 1999. Anne's mother asked us to keep her while she pursued her quest to find the source of the abdominal pain and jaundice she was now experiencing acutely. In December, Anne's mother was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. The night we went to her house for her to tell Anne of her diagnosis was our first real meeting. Anne never again lived with her mother. Most people only live up to a year after their diagnosis. Anne's mother's disease was already quite advanced, making it likely she had closer to six months left to live. In fact, she was gone in four months. There was a lot that would happen in that brief time.

Before the meeting, when we heard the diagnosis, my husband and I talked. "I want to ask you something," I began, "I know you are still very angry with your ex-wife. However, it looks like she will most likely die. I think we have a sacred duty and opportunity here that we should use. We can show Anne how dying can be accomplished in the most loving way possible. I want to ask you to set your angry feelings aside so that we can be as loving to your ex-wife as possible. If this means she needs to come live with us, let's invite her. Let's do whatever we can do to put love first in this situation. Do you want to do this? Do you think you can? It would mean setting all your anger aside, forgetting the past, and focusing on loving and caring for her, instead."

At that moment, I knew why I loved him. My husband didn't hesitate to say "yes."

A Campaign of Love

The ex-wife's situation was terrible. In order to attend school, she had accepted an accelerated alimony, which had run out. She had held only one part-time job since the divorce. At this time, she had no income, no medical insurance, no personal physician, and was refusing to look at the possibility she might die. Her home was a 25-minute drive away from her only child and us. She did have good friends who formed a personal support system for her, and a family that lived at a distance, but stepped in to assist, especially financially.

In the face of all this, we began our campaign of love. Daily, whenever she was up to it, we delivered Anne for a brief visit with her mother.

My husband, a physician, located qualified doctors and searched the Internet for experimental treatment opportunities that might offer her a chance of recovery. My husband's eldest daughter, from his first marriage (whose mother had also died of cancer), got her enrolled in an insurance plan. On Christmas Eve, I made a small dinner, wrapped presents, and transported them to her home for the four of us to celebrate Christmas together while she lay on the sofa. Some of the ex-wife's friends (who had formerly been on "her side," and "against" my husband) joined us. We ate, sang, talked, and opened presents together. Anne said it was the best Christmas Eve she and her mother had ever had. She felt herself in the midst of a supportive extended family.

Anne knew everything that was likely to happen. We answered the questions as she asked them, but did not discuss our dire expectations. She had come home immediately after learning from her mother the doctor's diagnosis, and found out via the Internet all about pancreatic cancer and how difficult it was to treat. She held out hope that her mother could survive, though we tried to offer a balanced picture by discussing all possible outcomes. We wanted her to be prepared for the worst, but not to dwell on it. She was only twelve years old.

The few times that her mother was hospitalized, I took Anne there, sitting outside the room while she visited. Sometimes I was there when the doctor examined her mother. Anne would be infuriated with how the doctor talked to her mother. "Why doesn't the doctor tell my mother the truth?" she asked. But, none of us broke the unofficially agreed-to silence that would give Anne's mother the full facts of her illness. The ex-wife was not asking direct questions. We decided it was not our place to make her face her impending death if she did not indicate that as her choice.

With increasing frequency, the enormity of Anne's situation broke through her everyday reality. When it did, we held her as she sobbed and writhed in the knowledge that she was only 12 years old, was losing her mother; and there was nothing she—or any of us—could do about it.

In January the ex-wife's relatives visited and brought her to see Anne at our home—the house she had shared with my husband when they were married. Anne and my husband escorted this frail woman through our home, showing Anne's room and the changes I had instituted throughout our home. I entertained the relatives and allowed the three of them the time together. I was a little bit uncomfortable, but thought the three of them going through the house together was the best way. Exhausted, the ex-wife returned and sat for a while in the living room. "This is a house full of love," she announced. "It is a good place for my

daughter.” Now she was also turning animosity into love. Our decision was working! The warmth we all experienced could not be described.

Love Begets Love

A few days later we received this hand-written letter.

Dear Bob and Ilene,

I wanted to share some thoughts I had with you. I enjoyed visiting your house the other evening. As I toured the house I saw that you, Bob and Ilene, and the house seem happy. You are working to bring your two families together. You both seem to be prospering and happy. The house seems happy too.

It reminded me of how in its own time and way, healing always takes place. It’s good to see you happy and to share in this happiness. I see that Anne is happy in your house. I see the girls [Anne’s older sisters, children of my husband and his first, deceased, wife] and their lives moving in positive, productive, loving and creative directions. I know that Anne will be all right because she knows she is loved.

Who would have thought such things possible two months ago? There have been many changes between us—each a miracle in its own way—each further insuring and creating good will and peace between us. All of this for Anne’s and your and my benefit.

Love,

P.S. I am truly grateful for these miracles and for the chance to experience them with you.

A few weeks before her death she was frustrated when we arrived for Anne’s daily visit. The battery on her car had died, and she didn’t have the ability to replace it. Her friends would be unable to take her out of the house on highly anticipated drives through the neighborhood. “I can replace that battery,” I announced, and left for the auto parts store. On

my return, I found the necessary tools and quickly had the car running once again. The ex-wife was immensely grateful. Her emaciated face lit up with a smile as I passed through her house on my way to the kitchen sink to wash up. She looked even smaller than her five-foot stature. At 5 foot seven, I felt like a giant passing by.

Before I could complete my washing task, her bony arms encircled my waist as she laid her head against my back. "I love you," she said. "You are a wonderful, loving person. You are a wonderful stepmother for my daughter." With tears in my eyes, I turned and embraced her back.

Choosing Love

Love is so powerful! In the early 1990s, I had been paid to research and write a treatise on love, offering parents methods for teaching love to their children. One of the authors I consulted in my research laid down this challenge. "At some point in your life, to be truly loving, you will have to decide to make Love the most important thing. Love above all. It won't really matter whether you love yourself or others, because Love is Love is Love. But you must actively **choose** to place love above all else in your life." I had accepted this challenge. Now, my husband had chosen to join me in this endeavor. The illness and death of my husband's ex-wife felt like my final examination in this subject in this school we call life. We were all responding remarkably to the power of love. As we passed through the portal of a new century together, we were behaving in new ways. Formerly estranged, we talked or visited together almost daily. Friends and family on both sides came back together as we supported my husband's ex-wife through her transition. The choice my husband and I had made to set aside past hurts and angers and choose love instead was healing wounds and relationships in ways we never could have anticipated. We never told his ex-wife of this decision. She felt it, however, and often stated that something magic was occurring among us.

Magic seemed to be happening for Anne, too. Six days before her passing, Anne and I were visiting and taking a turn keeping watch over her mother. The visiting nurse advised us that she might die during the night. Her chances could be improved if she were hospitalized and given fluids intravenously. Several people, including her sister, my husband, the visiting nurse, and the nurse supervisor begged her, in vain, to go to the hospital. She refused. She seemed unaware of the true nature of her situation.

Upon learning this, Anne marched to her mother's bed. "I'm not ready for you to die, Mommy. Please go to the hospital like the nurse says." Anne's mother assured her she was not going to die anytime soon. Hoping this was true, Anne nevertheless did not lose her way. "Whether you die tonight or some other day, Mommy, the nurse says you are in danger now. Please do what she says. Go to the hospital tonight." We followed the ambulance to the hospital and stayed with her for several hours. It was an exhilarating, loving, and happy experience to be able to support this brave child and her dying mother as they faced separation through death.

Love Creates Miracles

Friday, March 17, 2000, was a day for the most profound and healing miracle. Anne's mother was lucid and confined to her bed in her tiny bedroom. Anne and her father were the only other people in the room. Knowing the end was near, my husband bent over her to tell her "I still love you." "I love you, too," she responded. In front of their daughter, these two people who had been spewing anger and flinging accusations for nearly two years, kissed tenderly. Within 18 hours the opportunity for such reconciliation was lost forever.

As I write this, I have shared this passage with Anne, who tells me that the memory of this event survives strongly in her mind. At 15, she remembers when her parents shared love instead of animosity. Their action was healing to her in her pain. Perhaps her mother was right about miracles.

What better thing could have happened through this process than that love and forgiveness should triumph over all? The decision we both made to be as loving as possible through this challenging situation restored everyone, especially my husband and Anne. Anne's recovery, following her mother's death, was remarkable. The following year Anne was celebrated as primary valedictorian of her middle school graduating class. After singing in the choir and playing saxophone in the band, she stepped to the dais to make her valedictory speech. In it, she talked about the challenges of middle school, which for her had included the tragic death of her dear friend and Mommy. There was not a dry eye in the house. Less than three months earlier, by mutual agreement, I had become Anne's adoptive mother.

Life brings us many opportunities to learn. We all have a choice to make about whether we will learn, and about whether we choose to accomplish this learning by putting love first. One of the hardest places to be loving is with ourselves. Another is with the people we love when

they are dying, mostly because we don't want them to leave us; and we don't know what to say or how to behave.

When each of us chooses love as our primary path in life, even the most difficult situations become remarkable experiences. More than at any other time in their lives, our dying loved ones need us to give them respect, that acceptance of people exactly as they are, without needing to change them. They need our support for what **they** are going through. We can do this by talking with them about their experiences, sharing our own, and talking with them about experiences they are having, even if those experiences don't seem real to us. We can do it by acknowledging and feeling our grief, but not staying stuck in it. Instead, we can busy ourselves "passing on" the love and benefits we have been given. When we courageously and graciously face fact together with people we love as they transition toward death, and allow them to do what they need to do, we benefit them, our world, and ourselves. With our decision to be respectful, giving, and loving to the people we care about as they are leaving this life, everyone concerned maintains greater balance. Balanced people are happier. And, happy people embrace themselves, others, and their world with love.

After all, love is all that truly matters.

About The Author

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Ilene L. Dillon, M.F.T., L.C.S.W., a leading teacher of Emotional Literacy and Conscious Parenting, motivates people to solve their most difficult personal and professional challenges. Her audiences learn to create profound, practical and lasting change in their lives. With humor, natural story telling and practical techniques, Ilene reaches diverse groups, helping ordinary people to extract life-changing lessons from everyday experiences. Ilene is author of 12 books, a teacher's manual on emotional literacy, and a professional multimedia training course on Anger Mastery. She has been featured in publications such as The San Francisco Chronicle, Care Notes, Feel.com, Marin

Independent Journal, Excellence and Woman's Day. Her proprietary systems for Mastering Anger, Consciously Parenting self-directed children, and eliminating Co-dependency free audiences for greater productivity. A two-decade professional member of The National Speakers Association, Ilene's clients include California colleges and probation officers, Dallas Presbyterian Hospital, San Francisco CASA, American Family Cruises, Kaspar Roth, California Council for Self-Esteem, California Personnel and Guidance Association, and Adelaide, Australia's C.O.P.E. She presented to Beijing's China Rehabilitation Research Institute, women's conferences, federal and state penitentiary inmates and has appeared on radio and national television in the U.S. and Australia.

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