

Chapter 14.

A Personal Story

Risse, my second wife, died of cancer after a life-and-death struggle with the grim reaper. Risse's chief characteristic was her love of life. She loved people and especially her identical twin granddaughters, Katey and Betsy. She wanted so much to see those girls through high school, college, careers, and marriage. Risse had given them devoted attention during their formative years. She wanted to "be there" (as the TV commercial puts it) for the two girls and never lost the hope, even to her last breath, that she could win.

After she had retired from thirty-six years of teaching and then marrying me, Risse had been active in our Berea community. She became President of the local chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution and was employed as Secretary for the Berea Chamber of Commerce—until the cancer started to take its toll. She fought the cancer valiantly. I took a leave of absence from teaching at Berea College and fought by her side. It wasn't easy.

The medical monitoring, the various treatments, and the cancer itself were not pretty. There were times when I would have given up—even welcomed an end to the struggle. But Risse chose to live and I respected, even admired, that choice.

On April 8, 1991, after two and a half years, we lost the battle. Her daughter, sister, and granddaughters were there, but it was during my shift that she expired. It was a warm spring morning and we had the window to the bedroom open. Just after she took her last breath, the College chimes rang five o'clock. I woke my stepdaughter, Becky (the twin's mother); Risse's sister, Ramona; and, after a time of sharing and calling Hospice, we woke the twins. The funeral director was called, and the coroner notified. Betsy, age thirteen, with great courage and in an expression of the deep love she had for her grandmother, asked to be allowed to help Ramona prepare Risse's hair for the final viewing at the funeral parlor.

There are so many decisions forced upon you when a loved one dies. The immediate ones demand your attention for the first few days and carry you through the initial time of adjustment. It wasn't until after the funeral and taking care of the required legal matters that the enormity of the loss began to sink in emotionally. Each of us went our own way. I joined my sister and her husband on a trip to Arkansas to visit their daughter and her family. Then I journeyed to Denmark to be with my son and his family. I needed to get away from the failure, to let my wounded spirit heal, to apply the generous love of family members, to sit alone under the Danish sky with larks' exuberant cadences high overhead. But, too shortly, I had to return home to face unanswered questions which no one other than yourself can answer. Facing them was scary because I realized that I may not find the answers. The dark pit of death is indeed the arch enemy of life.

One night, after a citizen's forum about world affairs in which John Ed Pearce, Risse's favorite *Courier Journal* columnist, in person painted a hopeless, dismal view of the world's economic, moral, and social condition. Afterwards, I could have gone out with friends to discuss the only remedy Pearce offered: "In small, little ways try to remove yourself from the evils of the system." But I went home alone. Somehow, the time had come for me to take responsibility for my own life rather than running to others for comfort and answers. At first I couldn't face it. I finally screwed up enough courage to admit to myself that I couldn't be alone and, after great hesitation, telephoned my son, Martin, who lived in town. I asked what he and his wife were doing. They perceptively invited me to come out to watch TV with them. But when I arrived, they turned off the TV and they gave me their full attention. We didn't discuss weighty matters and I went home after a couple hours of chatting.

When I returned home, suddenly, a great weight was lifted from my shoulders! I had exhausted all of my detours. There was no where else to turn. I had reached the end of my rope. Now I was finally face to face with ultimate reality and was emotionally forced to acknowledge that—*I was not in control of the universe!*

Risse and I had loved briefly, fought death, and lost. How could one accept that? It was beyond me. Somehow, the necessity to figure it all out was taken from me that night. But, not only was any responsibility for Risse's death taken from me, so was responsibility for all the ills of the world, even those beyond the ones so convincingly outlined by John Ed Pearce. I was no longer hanging onto the rope to which I had tied myself. I could drift and operate in a world I didn't understand.

My mother often spoke of "acceptance," and I had thought that I understood what she meant: that we do not always understand what God has in mind but by faith can accept whatever happens. Yet, my faith had been egocentric and I had assumed that I *did* know right from wrong and had a responsibility to set the world aright. This implied that I knew the mind of God. That kind of faith, which put my personal limits upon God, put a tremendous burden on my shoulders. I had seen myself as a special emissary of God Almighty to the world—a heavy responsibility indeed.

But now, my view of acceptance broadened considerably. I no longer tried to second-guess God; I could accept the world as it is; I was demoted from special emissary to an equal rank with all of God's creatures. I had fought death and lost; I couldn't understand why and suddenly had no need to understand. I could revel in all of life's experiences.

One option at this point was to lose my faith entirely, but, instead, my faith deepened and broadened and I finally, and truly was able to let go. I believe, now, that is more likely what my mother really meant when she talked of the importance of acceptance.

By letting go, I was no longer required to make sense of it all. By accepting God's creation as given, and as I experienced it in small little ways, life became a marvelous adventure and death an inscrutable end to my small part in it. The lives of all people--those I understood and those I did not understand, alike, became new windows into the divine arrangement of God's universe.

I was still responsible, perhaps even more responsible, to use my life in the highest and best service according to my understanding. I did not change my commitments to being honest, generous, loving, and faithful. Curiously, I became a joyful person, delighting in the great vistas and the minute details. So much of the adventure of life is filled with joy. Not having the responsibility to understand and realizing that my own perceptions might be cockeyed, meant that even the gruesome, painful, and violent parts of life held less threat and had new lessons to teach. This has freed me from myself and allowed a love of life far beyond myself. Death has no hold on such a life.

We live, we die. Some love—except I can't be sure they do. Some take a chance—or maybe they don't. Some step into the unknown and life responds while others step into the unknown and become unknown. Some speak—and are understood or misunderstood. Are there no answers, only questions? The answer is there, buried alive.