

A Home Death on Peaks Island

Martha passed away at home last night on Peaks Island. It was not an unexpected death. Her retired minister husband, Sam, called me at home. “Can you come by and sign the death certificate? The funeral home needs it signed before we can transport the body.”

Martha had anticipated her death for years and written detailed instructions for her service, even naming the pall-bearers and minister for the service. “Out came the white-out every few years when a pall-bearer inconveniently died,” Sam said as he sat drinking tea at the kitchen table when I arrived. “It got so even the minister kicked off. Out came the white-out: one name out, a new name in.”

Three months ago, Martha was diagnosed with colon cancer. Initially, the tumor was felt to be operable and potentially curable but at surgery it had spread beyond the bowel and the surgeon closed without a word. I saw her later that day in the hospital. The cancer couldn't be resected, she informed me, but she'd consider chemo. But the treatment only complicated an increasingly hopeless situation. Her counts plummeted. She survived an infection. She grew despondent. One day, she and her family decided enough was enough and brought her home for good.

Her spirit reemerged. The nausea temporarily resolved. Lying in bed, propped up by a mountain of pillows she received visitors and read her mail, sipping now and then on honey-sweetened tea. Sam screened her calls but it was Martha who made the schedule, entertaining a steady stream of visitors who tentatively made their way from the ferry landing to the house to pay their respects. As a minister's wife she had not lived the life of the nodding, silent woman behind the man. Her outlandish observations and trademark, impish laugh endured as her strength failed. She was good company.

Martha balanced family time with her visitors and scheduled the harder visits when she was fresher following morning vespers with Sam. What soon became apparent was a remarkable transformation in the relationship between Martha, who was clearly dying, and her friends. Most didn't realize it at the time, but they came for her to comfort them. Martha didn't mind talking about her impending death. She recognized that many of her friends needed time to come to grips with her inevitable demise. She didn't challenge them directly but quietly allowed their grief to be replaced by a feeling of peace and acceptance. And Martha could still tell a good joke.

For some visitors, it took three or four visits. When Sam asked Martha if it was okay if Doreen stopped by, or Kathleen, or Sheri, Martha's schedule seemed to have as much to do with her friends own personal struggles with death and dying as it did with how close they'd been. One elderly couple seemed to be having a particularly hard time accepting Martha's impending death. He and his wife had never spoken about their own death. Martha recognized that they had

work to do. “They’d stay in the Holiday Inn downtown Portland and take the early ferry to Peaks,” Sam said. “Finally on their last visit they were able to really talk. It did them some good.”

As the days turned into weeks, the trail of visitors to Sam and Martha’s continued. People she knew only by a nod on the ferry or from a brief chat walking up the hill to the corner store wanted to say good-bye. How odd to feel better, lighter, more appreciative after visiting a dying woman. Martha’s gift was her dignity and acceptance of death; a belief that the process of death may be fearful but death was not to be feared. It was the beginning, not the end.

In Martha’s death there was only grace. Her major worry as the days drew nearer was her horror that she would die on her daughter’s birthday, forever ruining it. Martha loved birthdays and she simply wouldn’t permit her death to cast a bittersweet shadow, an intrusion, into what had been for so many years a day of celebration. And so she hung on. On the day before she died she became confused and then abruptly cleared only to say, “I’m confused! ‘Good god!’ you’re probably saying, ‘Oh poor Martha, she’s finally going.’ Well,” she paused, “it *is* a sign, isn’t it?” She coughed and relaxed her head back on her pillow, privately enjoying her insight.

On the night she died the family gathered. Thayer, another son, somewhat restless, went downstairs from where she lay and absently turned on the radio to a jazz station. He returned to her bedroom to stand vigil. She stirred and the family as one leaned in, straining to hear, who could know, perhaps her last words.

“I’m dying and I have to listen to jazz?” she whispered.

Shocked that she was hearing anything at all, much less expressing a preference, Thayer paled and sheepishly turned the radio off. He returned to find her smiling as if to say, “That was not on my list of funeral preparations.” Not long after, she passed.

Leslie sits with me and her father, Sam, as we eat cake and ice cream at the table in the kitchen---another last request of Martha’s. “I’d been washing her and bathing her these past weeks so it seemed natural that after she was gone that I would bath and change her one last time,” Leslie says. “She was down from 160 to only 100 pounds. I can’t believe how hard it was to move her.”

“Dead weight,” Sam interjected. “That’s why they call it dead weight.” Martha was not the only one with a sense of humor in the family.

“Anyway,” Leslie continued, “David worked with me. I’d work for a while, and then take a break and sip a glass of water. It was hard work. She was kind of stiff and to get her into a proper nightgown, well, it was awkward. But I had this realization all of a sudden that she was with us, looking down and laughing at us struggle with her body. With all of her planning, I don’t think she planned on this. We just decided to do it.”

Our desert finished, Sam pushed back his chair and suggested we go see the old girl. We quietly made our way upstairs and opened the door to the bedroom. A hymn played from a tape on the bureau. Several roses lay in a vase by the bedside, and Martha, her gray hair washed and brushed, her hands folded above the neatly creased bed covers, held a cross and chain. We stood

at the bedside for a few minutes without a word. Then Sam put his hand on my shoulder and guided me downstairs.

At the kitchen table I signed the death certificate. I gave Sam a long hug and turned to go. "I'm so pleased you were able to come." Sam said. "She hoped you could."

Walking home, I felt lighter, less troubled. I slept deeply and awoke rested, my mind ready to embrace the day. The feeling lasted. That was Martha's gift to me. But after all, she had it all planned.