

Barrett, D.P. (1992, July). A tribute to Helen and the big circle. *Coalition News*- Monthly Newsletter of the MN Coalition for Death Education and Support, Inc.

Helen came here from out of state to die. Unable to manage on her own due to her rapidly progressing cancer, this eighty-two year old woman finally agreed to spend her remaining days with her only son and his family in the Twin Cities. Her husband had died fourteen years ago and most of her friends have died also...except for Peggy, who at the age of eighty-eight, still mows her own lawn, Helen proudly relates, while digging in her drawer to find a photo of her dear friend.

I have known Helen for about a month, although it feels like it's been much, much longer. I went with my friend, her daughter-in-law, to visit her and asked at the end of the visit if I could visit with her again, to which she agreed. I felt immediately "taken in" (willingly) by Helen herself and by the dying process. Having no time to waste, Helen got right to the point during my first visit, as she questioned the meaning of suffering, the existence of God and an afterlife, her purpose in being in Minneapolis as her life was drawing to a close. Although certainly serious matters, these were addressed by Helen with such a good-natured feistiness and protestation (especially the first two), that somehow these weighty concerns got put into a more manageable perspective. Helen did not seem overwhelmed---far from it.

So, there's been the feisty questioning, the reminiscing about growing up in a large family, and a surprise party celebrating Helen's graduation from the School of Life, and, more recently, hours of sleeping and dreaming and diminished appetite and progressive weakness...and all the while, it seems, with a movement toward completion. I don't really know what completion and healing might mean for Helen, but I have wondered if, in part, it might have to do with feeling connected and loved, as it does for most of us....

One of the first things that Helen said to me was how nice everyone was at the hospice. She was amazed that so many kind people could be gathered in one place. It was obvious that she felt very cared for and loved by her family and by her new friends and seemed to be quietly exulting in the attention and nurturing. There's something about Helen that evokes in me (and in others, too, apparently) a desire to give to her and to be around her---her gracious receiving, her wit, her warmth, her eagerness to be involved. The thing is, Helen, too, has been the giver. Her willingness to receive is a giving, as is her more active reaching out---"Pull your chair up close," she said the second time I visited. "That's it," as she took my hands to hold. It was clear to me that she was holding my hands this day.

While Helen has been pondering her purpose in coming to Minneapolis, I have been pondering the purpose for me in our meeting. Being witness to Helen's dying in the context of a community of love has reaffirmed for me the importance in my own life of not going through life transitions alone, of being open to receiving the gift of companionship that others so gladly offer.... This experience with Helen has reminded me of a dream I had several years ago. In the dream the sirens went off, and I realized, with utter astonishment, that a nuclear bomb was about to be dropped. I found myself running to an underground subway shelter. Many other people were rushing for shelter also and as we were hurriedly going down the steps, a profound sadness came over me. The sadness did not have so much to do with the fact that I was probably going to die as it did with the fact that I did not know anyone around me and didn't feel there was anyone's hand I could hold.

Sam Cook says in an excerpt from Up North, which was quoted in the April edition of the Coalition News: "That's the way the Big Circle works. You never know when you need a hand. You never know when you'll have the next chance to offer yours." It's the passing on of kindness, the sense of a circular connection, which softens even the most difficult of times.

As I write this, Helen is still living, although has withdrawn considerably as she prepares to leave. I regret not sharing more with her my feelings and thoughts about our experience together. Somehow I have the feeling that Helen knows, though, but I would like to say out loud anyway, "Thank you, Helen, for giving me a sense of how the Big Circle works and an opportunity to change my dream image: there are hands to hold along the way." - Megwetch (Ojibwa)

*...Goodbye from the deepest part of my heart.*