

Elly's Passing

The simple words leave blank astonishment in their wake. “Elly died. She had breast cancer.” Although I didn’t know Elly well, I’m shocked. I didn’t know she was sick. I remember her the last time I saw her, eyes bright, ready to laugh. ‘What happened?’ I think.

And then, of course, personal shock. Here was a woman who ran a shop that was central to the alternative lifestyle my husband and I live. Organic produce, natural herbs, alternative health books, hard to get products – either Elly had them or she was happy to order them in. A warm feeling of camaraderie permeated the quiet, sunlit shop where local customers and tourists browsed for specialty items which to us weren’t specialty at all, but a matter of necessity. The people who worked at Elly’s shop were always knowledgeable, helpful and caring. We all shared hope. And now the woman who founded that circle of hope has lost her battle for health.

So what about the rest of us? Was the whole thing a crock? The herbs, the vitamins, the techniques – they didn’t seem to help her. What about me? What about all of us who believed in working with the body’s natural resources and its relationship with the environment; who believed clean air, water and land are critical to human health? Surely we can’t be wrong?

I piece together what I know of Elly and find my sadness growing. I remember meeting her as she walked her dog, happy to be outdoors in the sunshine. I remember her telling me of the vacation she was about to enjoy.

And I remember being envious when I noticed her trim, attractive figure after she'd lost some weight. And that's it. I barely knew her. I knew of her marriage ending and of her hopes for a new relationship. But I really didn't know the woman at all. I saw what she represented – a savvy businesswoman who employed a small group of loyal workers; someone who supported her community by encouraging people to post their business cards and flyers and announcements in her shop; someone who seemed to share my world view, but ultimately someone who kept one of her most pressing challenges completely secret - at least from me.

My husband is suffering his own health issues and we found ourselves returning to Elly's store again and again as we explored treatments. Never did she let on that she was facing cancer. Not once did we share a moment of fear, commiseration or despair. Not once a sighed comment of "been there, done that." As far as I could see she was in perfect health due to an ideal lifestyle.

And yet –

One of the characteristics of people suffering from cancer seems to be a numbness to emotions – an inability to express themselves. If this is true, then Elly's case is understandable and it doesn't negate all that I – and she – believed in. But am I clutching at straws in my need to understand why she's gone?

Maybe.

But since Elly chose to fight her fight by these beliefs why should I be so quick to give them up? Surely she believed she enjoyed a better quality of life because of the decisions she made daily. She continued to run the store working

as long as she could, supplying customers with information and products and goodwill. What right have I to let my fear rob me of her legacy?

Elly's health food store is a lasting testament to her belief in natural remedies and sustainable living. Near the end of her life she brought in her son to continue the traditions. In the wake of her death, I remind myself of how she believed in those values throughout the personal challenges she faced.

Life isn't easy. And it's often not fair. And there's pain. But there is love and hope and caring and beauty and the infinite variety of life including, as I believe, life after life. I'm missing Elly. But I'm thankful to have known her. I'm thankful for the circle of similar minded people who have gathered around her shop to support alternative health methods. And I'm thankful for her commitment to ideals I share, and that I hope will spread to create more understanding, compassion, and health throughout the world.
