

AFTERWORD

Along with the gift of these essays, Dorothy offered her friends another great gift, a gift that became a profound lesson and a tender connection: she asked us to care for her. In late June of 2008, she called a meeting of 21 friends. She was just home from a rough week at the hospital, very rough, and was beginning home hospice care. The group gathered in her small living room were college professors, lawyers, publishers, teachers, writers, ministers, and artists. We were nervous. The approach of death does that to the healthy. We all expected to see summer fade into fall, to watch the leaves change color, to set our clocks back. We expected to vote for the next president of the United States and to gather for Thanksgiving. Dorothy did not expect to do any of those things. We were humble, in new territory, afraid, not only for Dorothy but for ourselves. Afraid we wouldn't know how to help her.

She came out on the arm of her son Andy, both of them bright-eyed and smiling. Dorothy was not given to drama, but she made an entrance that day, laughing when she pointed out that she had put on her good robe for the occasion, a gorgeous long red brocade. She looked like herself, tall, thin, alert, her short hair curving around her small head like the curls etched on a Greek statue. She never used makeup, never saw the need for it, and carried herself, even now, with confidence. She thanked us for coming and got right to the point. "I have a gift for you," she said. "I want you to take care of me." Both sons lived out of town. They would be with her as often as they could, but she needed help 24/7. It was quintessential Dorothy—direct, clear, honest, revelatory. She not only knew how to ask for help unapologetically and how to receive it generously; she knew our being there with her was a true gift to us who loved her.

Yes, we said. We'll care for you. She gave us her bright smile, Andy helped her back to her room, and we got busy. Shari and Nikki had read *Share the Care: How to Organize a Group to Care for Someone Who is Seriously Ill*, they described a possible organizational structure, we agreed to four-hour shifts, Denny set up a communications system, Linda V. and I made schedules, we all learned how to use the nebulizer and what to say if we called 911.

When our shifts started, Dorothy was clear and specific. She said what needed cleaning, washing, dusting, what she wanted to eat, when she

wanted to sleep, when she wanted a bath or a foot rub. Her clarity was a blessing because none of us were ever left wondering how to help this dying woman we loved. The single most important thing we all learned was how to make sure her cat, Lizzie, never stepped outside. There was a brick on the back porch that you slid against the screen door every time you went out so Lizzie couldn't push the door open and unintentionally find herself in alien territory. She was a housecat and had no interest in the world beyond, but there was a remote chance that she might accidentally find herself on the wrong side of a door if one of us failed to close it properly.

We were all surprised by how much she worried about Lizzie. We shouldn't have been because Dorothy paid attention to details, every detail. We all have stories of Dorothy telling us to wipe up the single drop of water, straighten the sheet just so, put the plate here, not there, so of course she was worried about Lizzie, concerned that somebody would leave a door ajar or forget to feed her or mind cleaning the litter box. Dorothy had a mental checklist those last weeks: find a home for the cat; leave the house dusted, in good order, clean, dry, ready; spend her final hours in a residential hospice, a place where they knew what to do, where her sons and her friends wouldn't panic or feel responsible in those last scary moments when she let go. She didn't want to go, but she knew when it was time and did what she needed to do to make it easy for us and possible for her.

She did comment on people saying they would miss her. "I'll miss me," she said. That was the closest she got to pointing out that it wasn't about us, we who would grieve, but it was about her. It was her death and she made it as thoughtful and orderly and beautiful as her life.

— *Kathleen Coskeran*