

## Review by Bonnie Cehovet

"Love Letters - Reflections On Living With Loss" is a series of letters written to the author's wife, after her death from ovarian cancer. It chronicles one individual's path through grief, and that of those closest to him. There is no way that we can be "ready" to lose someone, even when we have some small amount of warning. This is a heartfelt, heartwarming, moving book — one that I wish had been there for me when I lost my father, after a lengthy illness when I was thirteen years old.

The lasting message from this book is that when someone dies, they do not "vanish", they in fact live on in the memories and lives of those that they leave behind — their loved ones, their friends, their coworkers — anyone whose life they have touched. And they live on in the manner of life that they leave behind them, in the manner in which they touched the environment around them, in their own personal touches on life.

Writing this book was a necessary part of the process of working through his grief over his wife, Nancy's, untimely death. Nancy died shortly before their twenty-eighth wedding anniversary, leaving behind her husband, a daughter, Julia (who was in college), and a fourteen year old son, Mac, who suffers from Down syndrome. They had been in each other's lives since they were eight years old. How do you go on without your reflection, your "other half"? Here Baltins reveals the personal rituals and reflections that brought him to his own personal understanding of the process of death and grief.

In his preface, Henry A. Gustafson talks about the transformation of memories that initially bring only a painful sense of loss into a resource that sustains, through recall, inventive creation of rituals, and the courage to do what seems to be helpful, rather than what seems conventional. Again and again we see this throughout the process, beginning with Nancy's death at home, in her own bed, surrounded by family and friends.

There is an incredibly moving section concerning a conversation that Baltins has with an Amish carpenter, one that he wishes to hire to build his wife's coffin, a simple, wooden coffin. The carpenter is steadfast in refusing the commission, for one very sincere reason — he never knew Baltins' wife. To build her coffin, he would need to know what kind of person she was. There is more to this story, but I am going to leave it to Baltins to tell! The end result of this conversation was that Baltins and one of his friends built the coffin themselves. An inadvertent ritual of passing.

Then there are the conversations that he has with two different pairs of police officers — who are looking for answers for the coroner as to why Nancy's body is still in the bed that she died in, and not in a mortuary. A major part of this section

deals with the family and friends that sit with Nancy's body, so that she is never left alone. There are options that many of us never think of, but that are out there. Perhaps they occurred here because Nancy was a seminary graduate, and spirituality was a part of her life each and every moment. But perhaps they occurred because Nancy and her husband paid attention to the living of life. Interspersed with Baltins' letters to Nancy are excerpts from Nancy's own spiritual writings. The two reflect like thoughts — one the thoughts of someone attempting to live an authentic life, and the other the thoughts of someone attempting to come to terms with death.

These letters cover the whole of life — conversations with family and friends, a moving section on the dispersal of Nancy's ashes over the river that she loved so well at their personal "getaway", Mac's intuitive understanding that his Mother existed "everywhere", and Julia's personal path to discovery of her Mother's essence. It is all about planting flowers along the pathways of their personal getaway, the first spring after Nancy's death. It is all about a life well lived.

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