Reflections on Living with Loss - An interview with Andris A. Baltins

Love Letters to Nancy
by Tim Miejan

from the November 2007 issue

It is a love story that began in 1953, when Andy Baltins and Nancy Jean Solstad were each eight years old. They grew up, fell in love and were married. They lived full lives, raising an academically talented daughter and a son who was born with Down's Syndrome. Nancy was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Surgeries followed. Chemotherapy at the Mayo Clinic. The ride home from Rochester to Minneapolis, when Nancy said she wanted to stop the chemo, when she spoke of not fighting death, but accepting it. The time together in the bedroom, Nancy sleeping in bed and Andris reading chapters of *The Bingo Palace*.

Andris, accompanied by his friend Kevin, went up north for a weekend at their wilderness retreat--at Nancy's encouragement. The call came that Sunday morning when they were preparing for their drive back to the Cities.

This love story, one might suspect, ended that morning. But it did not. As part of his way of processing grief, Andris began to write more love letters to Nancy, sharing his experiences in learning of her death, of having to take care of the funeral details, of experiencing wisdom from his son who began to experience the presence of his mom everywhere, in every thing. Thirty-nine letters in all, *Love Letters: Reflections on Living with Loss* (Syren Book Co., 2007) is a very real glimpse into the love between two people, and between all people--and a love that does not die when the soul leaves the body.

The author, an attorney who now splits his time between Minneapolis and California, spoke by phone about his love letters to Nancy.

I was struck when reading your book about what a good storyteller you are. How important were stories to you and your wife when she was alive?
AB: Nancy would be surprised to hear anybody call me a good storyteller. She was an excellent storyteller, and she loved to tell stories and believed that all wisdom came through a personalized anecdote and not principles that are lofty and global.

I'm the guy who tends towards the globalization of stuff instead of the individualization.I think these letters are really wonderful stories, though.
AB: Well, thank you. I think that through the ages people have helped each other at times of loss and other significant passages in life by telling stories. Stories are healing things.

To me, your love letters to Nancy seem to be meditations on particular aspects of your journey following Nancy's death. When you were writing your letters, what were you experiencing?
AB: It's interesting that you should say they're like meditations. They were written in the Minnesota Zen Center. The head teacher there had died about five years before Nancy died, and his office was vacant. I was looking for a place to write. I knew that there would be too many leaky faucets at my office, for sure. I thought that there would be too many leaky faucets at

home, as well, and I needed to find a space where I would be removed from the effects and impulses of the outside world, at least for part of the day. It turned out that I had the ability to rent the former head teacher's study at the Minnesota Zen Center, overlooking Lake Calhoun. That space is imbued with silence and a meditative kind of energy, and it was conducive to what you were describing, a meditative kind of environment. So, I don't know to what extent that had a direct impact on the way the letters came out, but that is where they were written.

I know that you were doing some journaling as a part of your process after Nancy died. Did some of the letters come out of that work?
AB: They did. I'd journal on a regular basis, and the letters were written with a view to being of service to others and making these available. They didn't have quite the same cathartic effect that the journaling initially did, although I was surprised at how cathartic that writing process was, even though it was, in some instances, second hand. These letters were written more than two years after Nancy died, so quite a bit of time had passed, but reliving those experiences had some of the same immediacy as recalling them when they first occurred

What was your personal spiritual practice and how did it prepare you to journey through the experience of losing someone you loved?
AB: I grew up in a family of scholars. They were linear, cerebral, rational people. I didn't have a traditional spiritual upbringing, although I was brought up in the Latvian community.

My parents came to the United States as displaced persons in 1950, and they were both very active in the Latvian community. My mother was a linguist, and so the language was very important to her. We went to Latvian church, I think more for the cultural and the linguistic aspect of it than the spiritual and religious part of it. Christianity was brought late to Latvia. Latvia is considered a Lutheran country. It was pagan before the time of Luther, so it didn't have the history that's imbued in much of Europe, where countries were Catholic before Protestantism came into place and had a long history that came from Italy. Latvia has much more immediate pagan roots, and I think that both of my parents felt closer to those than they would have to a Christian religious tradition.

Having grown up in this more linear cerebral environment, my real first exposure to the spiritual path was when I got coccidioidal meningitis, which was diagnosed to be terminal. No one had lived for more than two years with it at that particular time, and I was in my early thirties. It didn't make any sense to me, logically or cerebrally or linearly, that I should, at that age with young children, get a disease by walking through a valley in California. That's supposed to happen in the Third World, but not here. That was before AIDS publicly became a a matter of consideration. My spiritual life opened at that time, in trying to explain to myself what was going on. It didn't make any sense from a medical standpoint.

Nancy, of course, followed spiritual traditions. She was a therapist who was more psychologically oriented for most of her life, but she went to the seminary later in her life and became a spiritual director, and so we had a lot of discussion about spiritual matters. Her path was much more Christian-based than mine, but I think our paths crossed quite a bit. We talked about things a lot.

I would put myself in the category of a mystic. I understand mystics to be people who have unintermediated experience of the Divine, and after my experience with coccidioidal meningitis,

I think that I had some of those kinds of experiences. I feel very spiritually connected to the non-material, the other world, and I now have a daily meditation practice. At that time I didn't. **So you were given two years to live?**
AB: Yeah, that was the prognosis. I think that I've learned a lot about the disease. There are very few people who get it or die from it. I think that the population is self-selected to be adversely affected by the disease. It's in the San Martin Valley. If you're exposed to the dust, you breathe it in so it presents itself as a cold or a bronchial condition--or a pneumonia in more severe cases. Once your body's been exposed to it, you've got an immunity that's immediately developed. Rarely does it disseminate into the rest of the body and cross the blood/brain barrier to become meningitis.

What did you learn about the grieving process, and what advice would you like to share with others who find themselves at that place now?
AB: I think it's a very personal process. I think that it's different for every person. I don't think that there's a right or a wrong way to grieve. I did find in my experience that, paradoxically, the closer I got--and the rest of us in our family got--to experiencing the grief itself, the more it eased. I think there's wisdom that goes beyond grieving that has to do with not resisting things. I think our culture is more accepting of both the birth process and the dying process and is becoming more intimate with it. I think we're taking both the birth and dying process more into the home than we as a culture used to, and I guess I see that as a very healthy development.

And now there is more discussion about death and the realization that it's a natural part of our experience of life.
AB: Talking about death gets one to talk about life. Death is such a difficult thing to describe except in reference to life. It's the absence of life, I suppose, when you look at it that way. I think we spend very little time thinking about what it is to be alive, about what we're doing here as a species while we are in this physical state, and whether there are other states that we connect to. In my experience, our loved ones die, but they don't cease to exist.

In one of the chapters of the book I talk about an experience I had with a friend of mine who was going through a divorce process. It's interesting in divorce, because the person still exists, but you don't have a relationship with them anymore. In death, the relationship continues, even though the physical body isn't there. I wonder if in that sense divorce is not even more difficult than a physical death, where the relationship can continue. Now, that's not true of every divorce. Of course, there are friendly divorces. This was a divorce in which there was no continuing relationship. Some people are able to manage the process in a way that has an ongoing intimacy.

I like the letter in which you mentioned the movement of your son's softball coach's head and how it was reflective of the way that Nancy used to gesture that way. It seemed to be a suggestion that we do cease to be in the physical body, but perhaps we can move through Spirit in different ways and express ourselves in different ways after we pass.
AB: Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we "inter-are" at some very profound level. [Thich Nhat Hanh: "In my tradition we speak of 'interbeing.' We cannot 'be' by ourself alone; we must be with everything else. So, for example, we 'inter-are' with a tree: if it is not there, we are not there either."] Intuitively, it does seem somehow correct that we inter-are in some very profound way, and express ourselves through others and both while we're alive and thereafter.

I also found joy in some observations you gave in your letters about your son, descriptions and insights suggesting the wisdom and the gifts that your son is capable of sharing, just as a lot of people who are developmentally delayed do. I think that is a good thing to share with people who don't have that experience.
AB: Yes, my son has been both Nancy's and my teacher from the time that he was born. One of the things that I think we develop as we mature is what we call sophistication. We know better what's really happening, and we lose that genuineness that exists in children.

I remember when my son was maybe 4 or 5 years old, when we first took him to Disneyland. There's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Well, by that age our daughter was already sophisticated to know that those are just kids dressed up in costumes. Her approach was, "Cute. What's next?" Well, for my son, who is not that sophisticated, this WAS Snow White and these WERE the Seven Dwarfs, and he treated them as such. And guess what? They treated him back as if they were more real.

So we create this magic of heightened experience by a genuineness and an intimacy and the acceptance of the experience in a way that I think we are programmed out of being, because we know so much. We know that they're really just kids dressed up in costumes. Being able to accept something at a deeper level, that non-tangible, non-physical level, Spirit or Soul or whatever you would call it, does create a magical universe. There's no question about it. And he seems to be able to connect to that, and still does, in a way that teaches me every day about where the real riches of life are.

How is he? You indicated in the book that he's found a life in California. How does he like it there?
AB: He's doing very well. He's got a job and he's a third degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do. He teaches it to younger students with lower-level belts. He travels back and forth to Minneapolis with me occasionally. One of the things that has happened as a result of Nancy's death is I've learned about mothering in a way that I think I would not have but for her death. I thought I had a close relationship with Mack before Nancy died, but there is a big difference between fathering and mothering. I've learned to do some mothering since Nancy died--and my relationship with him is more intimate as a result.

Before Nancy died she said that all Mack needed was to be loved, and that's been absolutely true. Just loving him is all that's required.

Looking at Nancy's passing as a part of your journey through life, how did that experience change you as a person?
AB: That's a question I haven't been asked before. I've changed a lot as a person since Nancy's death. We knew each other from the time we were in third grade. Nancy claimed to know in third grade that we would spend the rest of our lives together, and I'm a slow learner. I didn't figure that out until later, but we'd had a long relationship while she was alive.

When two people are connected for such a long time, I think that they sometimes have a tendency to be efficient by doing 100 percent of one emotion or one activity because they're better at it. Nancy did the extroversion function for both of us. I spoke about mothering. She did that for both of us. If I thought about it, there probably were other functions, as well, that as a

part of my personality were not developed as fully as they might have been, because it was easier for her to take over that role.

Since her death, I've learned to become a little bit more extroverted, which doesn't come naturally for me. I'm an introvert in my deepest being, and I've learned to connect with people in a way that I hadn't before. I've learned more about a spiritual path of connecting with Nancy since she died, in a way that doesn't involve communication through words. There have been many changes. Jung says that in the second half of your life you have to get in touch with the unexplored parts of your raw character, the dark side, as it were, the unillumined side. I think that Nancy's death has accelerated that process of exploring the unilluminated parts of my being.

Do you have a favorite story from the book that you can share?

AB: It's hard to pick one. They are vignettes of different aspects of our experiences together and my experiences after she left. Some of them are more lighthearted, some of them are more serious. At book-signings and book-readings, I tend to read the story about the scattering of the remains of Nancy's body at our retreat property up in northern Wisconsin, and I tend to read the chapter about my reading from a book that was on the nightstand when Nancy died, Louis Erdrich's book, *The Bingo Palace*.

There were only a couple of chapters remaining to be read, and I had this unfinished business of reading out loud to Nancy. There were chapters that needed to be read, and I ended up deciding to read them out loud, just as I had the rest of the book, even though she was not physically able to hear them. And there was some wrestling with issues involved in that. I mean, if it was her spirit that was still in the room, would her spirit hear it even if I read those last couple of chapters silently to myself? Did it make sense to read out loud?

The point of the bingo palace chapter is about intimacy with the experience of death and being present to the body in a way that is respectful, but intimate and close and accepting. The chapter on the scattering of ashes makes the point that we are interconnected and inter-are in some kind of fundamental way. Everything on the planet and beyond is interconnected.

Basically, the book is a love story. It's a story of one man's enduring love for his wife after her death. My the introduction to the book sets up the story of being able to love people in a way that is non-traditional. That is a story that Nancy, herself, had told at her last sermon. That might be actually my most favorite, and it's not my story. It's her story. **As you note at the very beginning of the book, Nancy was known and loved by many people. For those who never met her, can you describe her soul to us?**

AB: I would imagine that there were a thousand or more people at her memorial service. I would not be surprised if half of the people, 500 or so, would have said, "Nancy is my closest friend." These were not all people with whom she had an intimate relationship. She had an ability to be close to people by accepting them as they were, without criticism or judgment. She was a good listener. I think people resonated to the fact that she would accept them and listen to them and hear them in a way that was profound. She had a wonderful sense of humor. She was a trickster and a joker. She took herself not too seriously, and she was a person who, at the same time as not taking herself seriously, saw the seriousness of the bigger condition, that there are injustices on this planet that needed addressing, and that those injustices were best addressed one person at a time, face-to-face. That was work that was important to be done, and she did it. So, she was an activist.

How can reading the book, "Love Letters" help others?
AB: Steven Levine, in his introduction to the book, says that the book provides comfort to him in seeing a path that someone else has gone through as a bit of illumination for one's own path. I like to think that this is not me telling anyone what to do or how to do it, but the case of someone casting a little bit of a love light in an area that is dark, and providing some illumination for one to find one's own path.

What did Nancy expect to experience when she died?
AB: I write in one of the chapters that I surmised that perhaps Nancy knew that she would die on the day that she died, and that she intentionally didn't want to have me there. She knew that despite all of the work we had done on not clinging, that there would be clinging energy that would emanate from me. For her, I think it was important to have at least the beginning of this transition in a way that had no clinging energy attached to it. I don't know. She never said that to me, but I hypothesized that that might be a possibility.

We did talk a lot about clinging and the negative effect that clinging would have on the process of transition and the dying process. From the description of the person who was with her at the moment when she died, I sense that her passage was one in which there was very little clinging energy around. I think that was the way she would have wanted the transition to go, having it be accepted without anxiety, without clinging, without energy that would not allow the transition to mature in a way that was wholesome and complete.

That's interesting. That's a very thoughtful approach to the next journey of her experience. What do you expect your experience to be like when you die?
AB: I've learned a lot from my experiences with Nancy. Frankly, we had assumed that I would be the first to go after my experience with coccidioidal meningitis and the diagnosis that I had. We had talked a lot about death, more really in the context of what would happen if I were to die and how I would prepare for that process. Having faced that possibility now quite a long time ago as a very real possibility, and having a sense of connection to Nancy in a Spirit world, it's not something that I dread or want to avoid. I'm not seeking to die. I think that I could still contribute, and while I'm given the gift of being physically present, I think that there are things that I can do, but I have very little fear associated with the concept of death. And yet I suspect that the hypothetical is completely different than the real. Hypothetically I say these things, but I'm fully expecting that I'm not evolved enough as a being to actually let go without any clinging or without any fear. When the real moment approaches, I suspect it will be a lot tougher than what I say and think now, but that would be my goal.

Have the letters stopped, or do you continue writing to Nancy?
AB: The letters haven't stopped in my writing and correspondence with Nancy. But they have stopped in this formal context as they're set forth in the book. These were intended for reading by others, so they were formally created. As a practice, particularly in my dream work, what I find that is helpful for me is to have a written dialogue with Nancy in which her voice speaks back to me, and I write that voice in a different font than in my own voice. In doing so, I have a conversation with her. I'm looking for clarity and find that having this kind of dialogue with her is helpful in understanding what wisdom there might be from an unconscious part of our lives, the dream, and bring that to consciousness.

So, I continue a dialogue with Nancy, but they're not always in the form of letters of this kind.

So, the relationship continues.
AB: It does.

Excerpts from Love Letters: Reflections on Living with Loss and reviews of the book are available at baltins.com. All proceeds of the book go to support the charitable work that Nancy was involved in.

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