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Love Nancy

*They began writing to each other in third grade,
and wrote their last letters after she died.*

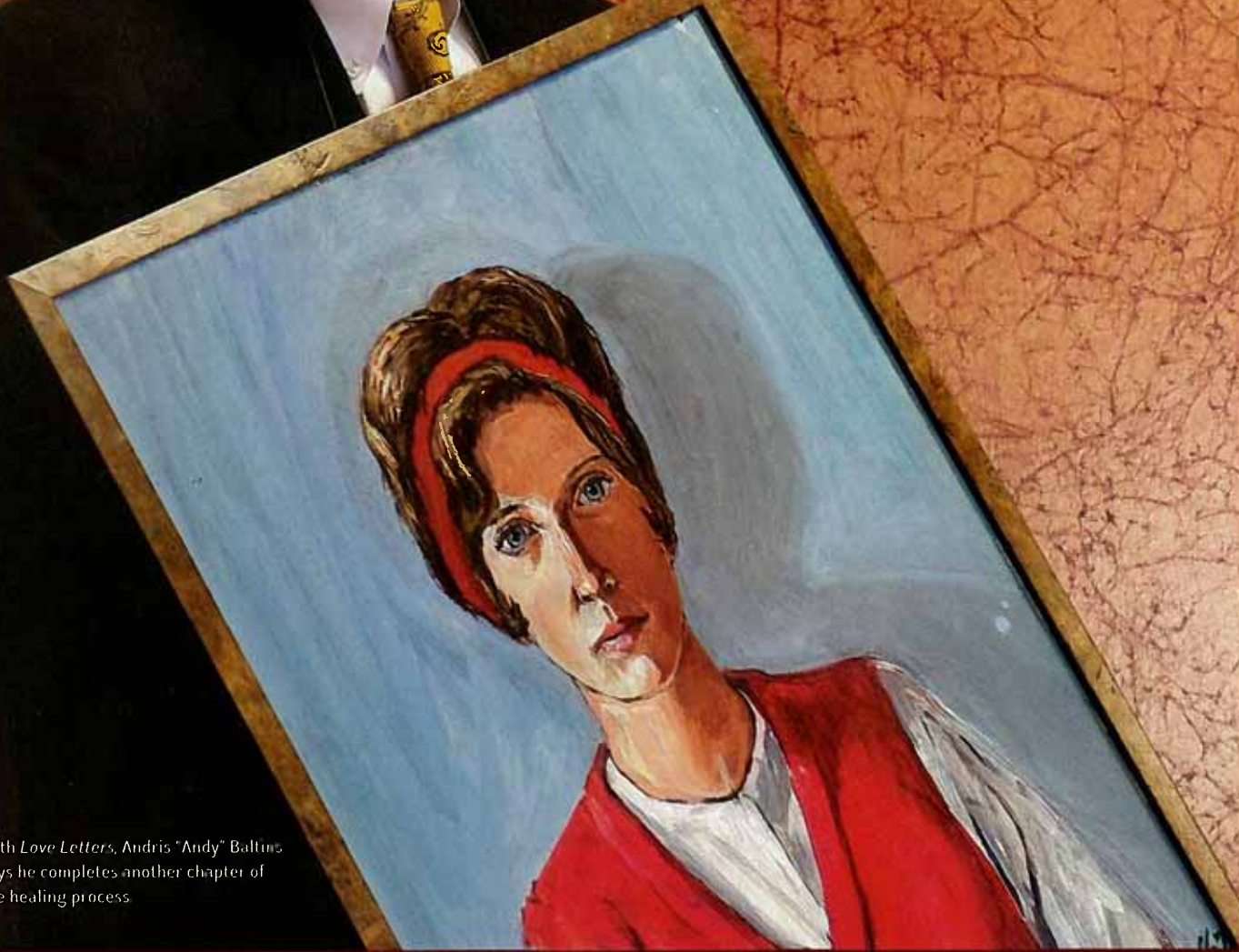
By Erin Gulden ~ Photograph by Marc Norberg

When the sun rose at 5:30 A.M. on June 30, 1996, Nancy Baltins lay in her bed dying, a process that had begun some time in the previous year as ovarian cancer began to spread throughout her body. When Nancy drew her last breath, her husband, Andris, was at the family's "wilderness retreat" in Hayward, Wisconsin, three hours northeast of the Baltinses' Minneapolis home. He returned later that day to find Nancy lying in the bed that the couple had shared for twenty-eight years. The book, *The Bingo Palace*, which Andy had been reading aloud to her, chapter by chapter, was on the bedstand next to her. They were on the final chapter when Andy left for his weekend trip. As he sat beside his wife and prepared to read the remaining chapter aloud, he paused to think what his children might say if they walked in to see their father reading to their mother's corpse. But he pushed those thoughts aside and began to read. It wasn't just Nancy's body, he says, it was Nancy.

"I experienced the presence of Nancy. It wasn't her full presence, but it was lingering," Andy says, recalling that night. "When you read the *Farmers' Almanac*, it says sunrise is at 5:47. Just 5:47. But there's light beforehand, starting at 5:46, 5:45. Death is a gradual process, not a discreet moment in time. Life doesn't end at the moment of the last breath."

For Andy, the process of Nancy's death has lasted more than ten years and will, on some level, last the rest of his life. But in March, with the release of *Love Letters: Reflections of Living with Loss*—a collection of essays on the time before and after Nancy's death—another chapter in that process closed.

"It was a very intense process," Andy says, adding that he didn't realize how "raw" he was from Nancy's death until he started writing.



With *Love Letters*, Andris "Andy" Baltus says he completes another chapter of the healing process.

"I cried a lot while writing some of the letters, cathartic tears."

The book's thirty-nine intimate essays, which Andy wrote as "letters" to his deceased wife, are interspersed with occasional chapel meditations written by Nancy—a spiritual director and active member of Minneapolis's Plymouth Congregational Church—which act as "responses" to Andy's writing. Together, the letters and writings reveal one man's—one family's—struggle with letting go and moving on while preserving the memory of the deceased. The names of places and people have been changed, even those of his children—known in the book as "Mac," who is twenty-seven, and "Julia," now twenty-nine. While both are supportive of their father's efforts, they wish to remain "distant" from the book for the sake of privacy. The book, after all, is not about them. It's about the love between two people, a "love not ending in death," Andy says. "It's as much about living as dying."

Nearly three years after Nancy died, Andy took time off from his duties as a corporate lawyer at Kaplan, Strangis, and Kaplan, rented a room at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, and "began to heal." Each morning for six months, he would begin writing and continue until exhaustion set in—usually around two in the afternoon. He did all of his writing that way, in the room overlooking Lake Calhoun, documenting an event that, oddly enough, started with a walk around another famous Minneapolis body of water.

For years, Nancy had taken "power walks" around Lake Harriet—every day, year-round, even on days when the temperatures dipped below zero. The day in 1995 when she felt short of breath after her brisk walk, she chalked it up to being fifty and to having taken a few days off during a weeklong retreat. Two weeks later, when she felt even more out of breath, she and Andy became mildly concerned. But Nancy had been diagnosed with melanoma five years earlier, and beat it, so shortness of breath seemed like a small problem.

She consulted her doctor, who discovered that her lungs were three-quarters filled with fluid, the result of a cancer of unknown origin that had already metastasized in her lungs. A year later, Nancy was dead.

It was a year filled with challenges, struggles, laughs, arguments, preparation, and muted celebrations—but there were no "lasts." It was never the last Christmas or birthday party or the last trip to the wilderness retreat in Hayward. In a conversation with a friend who had lost his wife to cancer, which Andy relates in the letter titled "Rings," the friend talked of the two-year timeline that doctors at the Mayo Clinic had unapologetically given to him and his wife. The timeline allowed for a lot of lasts—the last Thanksgiving, the last hike to Gooseberry Falls. Andy and Nancy, whether consciously or not, never had the timeline.

"There was a shift in treatment. We went from Abbott Northwestern to the Mayo Clinic for a second opinion, so maybe the people at the Mayo Clinic thought Abbott had given us an amount of time," Andy says, grasping at an explanation as to why they never received a timeline that—especially for stage four cancer patients—often dictates the course of treatment. If, for example, a patient has eighteen months to live, he or she is usually given just enough chemo treatments, sessions of radiation, or surgeries to assure that every second of the eighteen months is realized.

But Andy had little use for timelines anyway. In 1983, he had been diagnosed with coccidioidomycosis, a fungal infection that a handful of people contract each year after breathing in dust from the San Joaquin Valley—the only place the fungus is found in the United States, and a place Andy had hiked. It's a chronic, terminal illness, and those infected "never live past two years." So Andy prepared. Though he struggled with "dying in his late thirties," he ultimately made plans for his premature death while experiencing agonizing treatments that included injecting the harsh drug amphotericin B directly into the back of his head. He had accepted his timeline, and his

death. But by the miracles of modern science and what he believes was the presence of a "higher power," he is still alive. So when Nancy was diagnosed, even after Andy heard the words *stage four cancer* and saw her endure callous chemo treatments and flat-line after abdominal surgery, he never fully accepted the terminal nature of Nancy's condition.

"I don't know if I ever realized Nancy would die," Andy says, and writes in the book. "We thought it was some message—the universe was telling her that something was off and she would heal, and she would heal unto death or heal unto life. That she would be dead in a year didn't cross my mind."

In a chapel meditation Nancy wrote in 1990, she recounts the relief she felt as she realized a teacher was trying extra hard to include Mac, who has Down syndrome, in classroom activities: "It was the first time I really believed that the real world did want to count Mac in," Nancy wrote. "I didn't have to personally be there to make it happen. I didn't have to try to live forever."

More than 1,000 people attended Nancy's memorial service, held at Plymouth Congregational Church, Nancy's lifelong faith community where she would often share her meditations and give sermons in a small side chapel. (Since she wasn't an ordained minister, she was prohibited from preaching in the main sanctuary.) According to Andy, of the 1,000 people in attendance, 500 of them might have described Nancy as their "closest friend."

"She had a way about her that made people reveal things about themselves that they normally wouldn't," Andy says. "She accepted people for who they were."

As an active member of the community, Nancy was always "bouncing a hundred balls," whether it was chauffeuring Mac and Julia to activities or providing counsel at Plymouth Congregational. Because of the hectic schedules, at times the family's home on Fremont Avenue felt like a hotel, says Andy. "We would pass each other in the halls."

But the bond held by the pair had lasted since the third grade, where Andris Baltins—a self-described linear, cerebral introvert—first met outgoing, ebullient, loving Nancy Solstad when they were both students at Kenwood Elementary School. “She claims she knew in the third grade that we were destined for one another,” Andy says with a chuckle. “And who knows? She was perceptive like that.”

That year they were both part of the school talent show. Nancy did a tap number, and Andy played “some simple Beethoven sonata,” which apparently impressed Nancy enough to inspire her to write the burgeoning pianist a note. Andy wrote back. The exchange was the first of what would be many notes and letters.

They attended different junior high and high schools, but reconnected at the age of fifteen, when they once again appeared onstage together. Andy played Jack Chesney in a production of *Charley’s Aunt*, which he and his friends had put together during summer break. When the female lead fell ill weeks before the performance, Nancy took over. The chance encounter included the promise of a kissing scene and a few requisite rehearsals. The peck on the cheek was a “big deal in those days,” and from the moment of that peck, the pair—at least spiritually—was inseparable.

Andy moved on to Yale and Nancy to Smith College, and though they dated others, it was “always understood” that for important events they would show up as a pair. They married in 1968 while Andy was at the University of Minnesota Law School, after Nancy moved home from a stint working in New York City. They waited nearly ten years to have their first child, which allowed them to travel and, among other adventures, spend time working in South America, where Andy helped establish a Legal Aid system in Colombia and Nancy did social work. When Nancy started to push for children, Andy hesitated. “I thought we were having so much fun, why would we want to mess it up?” Andy says. “But she said, ‘Andy, this is a non-negotiable item.’”

In 1977, they welcomed Julia, and Mac came two years later. “Now I

couldn’t imagine my life without my children,” Andy says.

But there was also a time when Andy couldn’t imagine life without Nancy. Left alone with two teenagers who were dealing with their mother’s death in vastly different ways—Julia leaning toward the cerebral and Mac the emotional—Andy says he was forced to learn not only how to be a more attentive father, but a mother as well. “Jung says the second half of life is for learning what you were missing from the first,” Andy says, citing the famous psychoanalyst, who he mentions often in the letters. In the Baltinses’ marriage, there had always been clear definitions of roles and

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~Andris Baltins~

character. According to Andy, Nancy constituted “150 percent of the feeling, 150 percent of the extrovert.” In her absence, it was Andy’s turn to write thank-you notes, buy birthday presents, and plan memorials—events that are all relived through the letters.

Perhaps some of the most poignant scenes from the letters are those when Andy drives with Mac and listens to his son proclaim that the sky is the exact color of his mother’s eyes, a sign that she is watching over them, or that his mother was indeed at his piano recital, even though the chair next to Andy was empty.

“For a cerebral, linear person to be exposed to someone who sees magic in the world . . .” he pauses. “He is the teacher, he is the wise one.”

There are days, Andy says, when he still struggles, as he did during the process of writing the book. He put the letters away for a year and a half after he finished writing and took another six months to edit the book before finding an agent and attempting to find a publisher. Editors at many of the major New York publishing houses liked the book, says Andy, but the marketing departments found little reason to push the paperback in a market already oversaturated with books on grief and healing. “I gave up after that. I was ready to put it away,” Andy says. “I wasn’t attached to having it published.”

He was referred to Syren Book Company, a small publishing house based in Minneapolis, and though the publisher’s size meant Andy would need to be more involved in promoting the book, a move the introvert resisted, he obliged in hopes that people would find as much solace in reading the book as he did in writing it. “It’s not for everyone,” Andy says, acknowledging that some parts may be too intimate, too blunt, too analytical, too spiritual, or not spiritual enough for some. “Take from it what you will,” he says.

Andy has taken what he could from the experience, and is moving on the best he can. He’s now engaged to be married and has sold the house he and Nancy shared. Though Baltins still practices with Kaplan, he finds himself spending more time at his property in California than at his Minneapolis home—especially since Mac, Andy’s traveling companion, has found both a job and a girlfriend on the coast. At the encouragement of his spiritual director, he tries to “live every moment” like it’s his last, but acknowledges that in the real world “no one lives like it’s their last day.” Still Andy is moving forward, though he will never fully leave behind his forty-two-year relationship with the free spirit he met in the third grade. He’ll never dispose of her wedding ring or all of her things. He’ll always have their letters.

“I feel like I coauthored this with Nancy,” Andy says. “It’s a way to continue our relationship.” ▲

Erin Gulden is Mpls.St. Paul Magazine’s editorial assistant.