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How to Help a Friend Die

By Dr. Kathleen Begley
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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley recently launched a new blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her one-paragraph musings on life, death, and how to make your hair look thicker.*

At the end of a recent business trip, while browsing in a shop at Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, I noticed a copy of a hot-off-the-presses book called "My Journey with Farrah: A Story of Life, Love, and Friendship." The author is Alana Stewart. The book is a chronicle of her relationship with onetime Charlie's Angel Farrah Fawcett, who died last month after a three-year battle with cancer. "You're not going to spend good money on Hollywood gossip, are you?" an imperfect stranger said as I perused the book. "Indeed, I am," I replied, walking straight to the counter where I plunked down the full \$23.99 listed on the cover jacket.

To be honest, I am a long-time fan of celebrity biographies. This year alone, I have read "Resilience" by Elizabeth Edwards; "My Remarkable Journey" by Larry King; and "Wishful Drinking" by Carrie Fisher. I make no claims to be a highbrow reader. But my reason for buying Stewart's book went beyond my near insatiable and inexplicable curiosity about famous people. From years of reading Hollywood tabloids, I already knew that Stewart had stuck by Fawcett's side throughout her illness, putting her own family and career on hold to help her dying friend.

When I saw the book in the airport, I thought instantly about another woman who endured a similar cancer ordeal: my good friend Suzanne. I so wish I had been as wise as Stewart in knowing during her illness the importance of accompanying a friend to the finish line on life's most important journey. The last time I saw Suzanne looking healthy was back in the early 1990's when, during a brief period of remission from her cancer, she visited me and my soon-to-be husband at his home outside Philadelphia.

About a year before that trip, desperate to kill the cancer cells ravaging her body, Suzanne had traveled to Seattle to undergo a bone marrow transplant at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. I had planned to be with her but, unlike Fawcett's friend Stewart, I had canceled out of sheer fear. In my mind, my reason was and continues to be unforgivable. My ex-husband, who had dumped me a year or two earlier, was living in Seattle. I was terrified of running into him. Yes, at a very weak point in my psyche, I gave all my power to the past rather than to the present. But Suzanne forgave me for my weakness. Having gone through two failed marriages herself, she was incredibly compassionate about irrational matters of the heart.

Less than a year after Suzanne's trip to see me, I flew to Florida for what would be our final encounter. During our few days together, she and I stopped the charade that she would be around for her teen-age son's adulthood, her dentist husband's retirement, or another visit from me. She talked mostly about her profound sadness at leaving the world she so enjoyed. She worried aloud about her cancer's long-term impact on her adolescent son; she asked me to keep in touch with him after she was gone.

A few years after Suzanne's death, I wrote a letter to her husband expressing my feelings that I had miserably failed her. Very sweetly, he wrote back saying he disagreed. In the decade since, I



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have tried to strengthen a bond with her son, who was only a toddler when Suzanne and I met. In the last few years, he received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Florida, got married, and opened his own recruiting business. It thrills me that all of Suzanne's dreams for him already have come true.

Considering my parallel experience, you may now understand why I so avidly followed Fawcett's much publicized illness. No, I said that wrong. What I followed was Stewart's caregiving, which emerged in news reports several years ago. Ergo, my purchase of her book; some of the proceeds are going to support cancer research via the Farrah Fawcett Foundation. Here's what I learned from Stewart about being there for an extremely ill loved one no matter how heavy the pressures of your own busyness:

Express your feelings. In the introduction to her manuscript, Stewart opens with a truth known intuitively by most women of a certain age. "Men come and go, but girlfriends are forever." In my view, having a good one means never having to say you're lonely.

Advocate for the patient. During several grueling treatments, doctors gave Fawcett little anesthesia. Stewart, who was at her friend's side during one such procedure, demanded that doctors administer more intravenous pain killers.

Be there. In an awesome show of love, Stewart repeatedly accompanied Fawcett to treatments both in California and in Germany. Toward the middle of the book, I actually lost count of the number of times they flew here, there, and everywhere in a desperate search for a cure.

Refuse to martyr yourself. In one of the few romantic departures in the story, Stewart reveals that she fell into a passionate affair with an Italian restaurateur on one of their European journeys. When she shared guilt feelings about her unexpected romance with her dying friend, Fawcett delightedly – and without a tinge of jealousy -- told her to go for it.

Communicate openly. Stewart talks eloquently about her confusion trying to balance optimism and truth when Fawcett's life quite clearly was coming to an end. I related. Interestingly, during Suzanne's and my last days together, it was she who made it OK to talk about death. With her glorious humor, she began joking about her own funeral. The main thing she wanted, Suzanne said, was to avoid being buried in a huge metal Cadillac-type casket "that looks like you could drive across the country in it. Plus, I want a phone so I can let everyone know how I'm doing."

Forgive yourself. Several times in her writings, Stewart says she felt she wasn't doing enough to support Fawcett. I honestly am unable to see how she could have done more. Among other things: Stewart held back Fawcett's legendary hair for an entire evening as her ill friend vomited almost 100 times following a particularly nauseating cancer treatment.

Love now, worry later. Despite her Hollywood connections, Stewart apparently has financial problems. Currently, she is trying to sell a house bought decades ago with divorce settlements from tan-man George Stewart and rocker Rod Stewart. Yet, despite her money concerns, the author put aside fears of her own future during Fawcett's trauma. Intuitively, Stewart recognized another truth I fully comprehended only after Suzanne's death: jobs come and go, but a friend's life is not forever.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.