

Dear Fellow Sojourner,

It is a privilege to share a few thoughts with you who are our new explorers, leaders, healers, and teachers.

What morsel of truth can I offer you? I am still a work in progress and hope to be until my last breath. One word. A very powerful word does come to mind. GRATITUDE.

Some people seem to be born with a gratitude attitude and others with only an attitude. When we are not in a gratitude attitude, we are easily plagued by why, and why not. Dissatisfaction and envy creep into our life and we find ourselves in the endless pursuit of the elusive something more.

Before I learned the blessing of gratefulness, I set up housekeeping with the black coat of grief and watched myself disappear. I became a ghost floating just outside of everything. Gratitude brought me back and took me to others who daily climb out of their dark canyons of loss. Alone, they grapple for the light of hope and reason to go on living. One of the ropes they hold on to is the rope of gratitude. Slowly the gnawing hurt allows a ray of realization that their loved one was a precious gift and the relentless pain allows gratitude a microscopic spot in its midst and the healing begins.

I'm not a pollyanna with pink blindfolds on. I wasn't always grateful, and I did my time in the prison of *its not fair, should, shouldn't, and poor me*. It wasn't much fun there. Slowly I came to realize that the difficult times were molding me into a woman whom I really like and respect. Gratitude for the many people who helped me when I needed it, makes me want to help others. We all want to make a difference, and to leave the world just a little better because we were alive. Yes, I'll admit it, *Pay it Forward*, is my favorite movie. When we go out of our way to be kind to someone, they are likely to go out of their way to be kind to someone else.

Gratitude can and will take you to heights you never dreamed possible, and it will provide you with tools you never knew you possessed. Twenty-five years ago, I had the privilege of accompanying my grandmother as far as anyone can go with another in this life. Eight days and nights constantly at her side, I beheld the grandmother of my youth. Grandma Martha lost the music from her famous giggle when Grandpa Henry died ten years before. Now, she is dying and the music is back. She is about to embark on a most wonderful adventure and she is jubilant. Just before her last bit of breath leaves her body, she squeezes my hand and whispers *Auf Wiedersehen mein Kindshen*. (I'll be seeing you my child) The peace in the room was palpable.

Gratitude for having this beautiful woman in my life and thankfulness for all the lessons she taught by example, including how to die with dignity, grace, and assurance, motivated me to become a Hospice volunteer. I became a hospice volunteer in another county because my county, Keokuk, didn't have a hospice. I drove out of town past house after house where a mother, brother, sister, father, son or daughter was making the painful separation from all they loved. I saw families struggling with their anticipatory

grief, trying to keep a smile while assuming the unfamiliar role as caretaker. I saw them in the grocery store moving like robots, far beyond exhaustion. "I can't do it." I mumbled to my rearview mirror. I can't drive away from the people in my county to take care of others. There has to be a hospice in Keokuk County. I'll find someone to start it. I'll get busy and start doing the ground work and as soon as we find the right person, I'll be able to volunteer right here in my county. For two years I educated myself and others about the needs of the dying patient and their families. I spent many hours in other hospices to learn the day-to-day routine. I checked out two-foot-thick books from libraries on how to incorporate, and turned my dining room into the first Keokuk County Hospice office.

There never was a moment of doubt. I knew that someone would come forward and accept the rewarding challenge of becoming our volunteer executive director, even though no one had yet. Eventually we obtained office space in a huge storage area behind an insurance office. The cavernous room was windowless, and freezing in winter and in summer, too, for some reason. We worked in winter coats and gloves and we were in heaven. We were given two typewriters, three desks, a mimeograph machine to make copies of all the forms, policies and procedures, patient and family care manuals, bereavement manuals, and much more. A copy machine would be a long time coming. We were also given files, a couch and chair, some rickety desk chairs, start up money, and twenty-three eager men and women wanting to take the first volunteer training.

During this time of preparation there were many coincidences, luck or miracles. You take your pick. This is a whole story in itself, and I will not take you there now, except to mention two incidences. The first incidence concerned money destined elsewhere, the exact amount needed for our start-up-cost, fouled by a stopped watch, and given to us. Then, a woman on leave-of-absence from her job, who just happened to be an expert at running a mimeograph, volunteers.

I certainly never intended to start a hospice. The thought of it would have scared me to death. I would never have believed myself capable of such a gigantic undertaking. I wouldn't have been able to see it as first you do this, and then you do, on and on. As I was getting things set up, this is exactly what I did, only I wasn't overwhelmed because I believed I was just filling in until the real person came along. The real person being someone with a medical background, executive training, years of experience in working with volunteers, a degree in psychology, and a few dozen more attributes. There was no limit to my absolute certainty that this position would be filled.

We were ready to start. We had a board of directors. A list of patients, and volunteer nurses, doctors, clergy, a social worker, office workers and people waiting to take the volunteer training. We had plans for fund raising. We had everything we needed, except someone to lead us.

One of the nurses called me over and whispered, "We found someone.."

I screamed and jumped up and down, scattering the papers I had been holding. "See,

I told you we would find someone. My prayers have been answered! Who is it?"

"You."

"Funny. Tell me! Who is it?"

"You."

"Come on, you're driving me crazy.. Who is it?"

"The board has decided that you are the best person to run hospice."

"No, You know that was never the plan. I was only making it easier for the right person. I'm not qualified, and—"

"That's what you said about starting it. Your exact words were, 'I don't know how to start a hospice, but I can start doing some of the ground work.'"

"Well, that was different. I didn't know I would actually start it."

To make a long story a little shorter, I finally agreed, "Just until the right person comes along."

It was my monumental privilege to be the executive director of Hospice of Keokuk County, and to be a volunteer working directly with patients and their families for nine years. I was planning to go back to college when hospice entered my life and persuaded me to take the other road. A good example of life happening while we are planning something else. The dying and their families taught me more than any university could. They taught me how to live with gratitude and joy..

Now, myself plagued by a progressive illness, I am sometimes overcome with dread knowing what is ahead. Not of death, only the dying. Every day I wake with gratitude for what I can still do and try not to think about what or what-may-not be in store for me. I have even more reason to believe in miracles and, yes, I'm still a hospice volunteer.

Your truly,

Margaret Siskow

641-622-2982

806 S Cherry St. Sigourney, Iowa 52591

margsiskow@msn.com

I am part of the Senior Write Your Life Group

You have permission to publish any part of my letter.

I think you are doing a truly great thing.