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Ringing the Net?

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ONE OF MY HUSBAND’S favorite books was Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It*. Perhaps because he had at one time been an avid fly fisherman himself, the title story held particular interest for him, and he often used the book in one or another of his classes. We looked forward to seeing the movie together, but when it finally came out, Ed was gravely ill in the hospital and couldn’t go. So I went to see it with one of our oldest friends—appropriately enough the man who had actually recommended the book to us in the first place. The movie was beautifully photographed and well-acted, but we agreed that as fine a movie as it was, the story was still finer. So when I got home, still under the spell of the atmosphere and the splendid landscape delivered so clearly by the screen images, I picked our copy out of the bookshelf and sat right down to reread it. I had always been particularly moved by the ending—which to this day I cannot read without weeping—but in going back over the story this time, I was struck as well by something the narrator’s father says earlier that seems to lead into it.

“Help,” he said, “is giving part of yourself to somebody who comes to accept it willingly and needs it badly.

“So it is . . . that we can seldom help anybody. Either we don’t know what part to give or maybe we don’t like to give any part of ourselves. Then more often than not, the part that is needed is not wanted. And even more often, we do not have the part that is needed . . . .”

Maclean concludes his story with these words:

Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.

Of course, now I am too old to be much of a fisherman, and now of course I usually fish the big waters alone, although some friends think I shouldn’t. Like many fly fishermen in western Montana where the summer days are almost Arctic in length, I often do not start fishing until the cool of the evening. Then in the Arctic half-light of the canyon, all existence fades to a being with my soul and memories and the sounds of the Big Blackfoot River and a four-count rhythm and the hope that a fish will rise.

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of them are theirs.

I am haunted by waters.

Ed died not long after this, in December 1992 at the age of fifty, from a rare form of cancer. The course of his disease was long and, despite extended periods of apparent good health, both physically and psychically difficult to sustain, for
unlike most cancers, which, if not cured outright through various combinations of surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation, either progress rapidly to a fatal conclusion or go into periods of remission, this did none of these, remaining a capricious and sinister shadow figure in our lives for well over fifteen years. Yet through it all we were able to raise our two children; continue to work at careers in college teaching we both found rewarding; travel; write books; hike and ski and sail; lovingly fix up an old house and then happily trade it for a new one; to live a good, full life together, so that in the end Ed’s leaving of it, though profoundly sad, was not bitter or clouded by regret.

This is where I come to the part about friendship, for I am convinced that we could not have lived this life together as well as we did for as long as we did, nor seen it come to its peaceful and dignified conclusion, without the help of our friends. In *Sailing*, the novel I based on the first nine years of our experience with Ed’s illness, Sara Boyd meditates on the nature of help and friendship, and on the instinctive ability some people have to know exactly the right thing to do at any given moment. On the way to see her husband in the hospital, Sara characterizes these friends as “a narrow fringe of upturned faces ringing the net under this fragile balancing act [the two of them] call their life, and as she heads over toward the hospital to check on Phil, thanks them, thanks too (just in case) a God she still can’t quite believe in, but how else to explain the relentless, seemingly vindictive quality of it all? for giving them such friends.” And so in our lives, too. It was the love of friends that allowed us to carry on, friends who with incredible persistence, dedication, creativity, and yes, even humor, surrounded and sustained us through the dark times, and laughed and played with us in the lighter moments, of which there were, I continue to believe, at least an equal share.

Friends. So many times over the years, particularly in the last months, I heard them say the words, “I feel so helpless. I don’t know what to do.” I even said them myself. Yet when I look back over all these years and months and days, I see them coming in ripples, in waves, a creative tide of helping hands and hearts, reaching out, supporting, caring for us and about us, not always the same people, some going out of our ken for one reason or another and others coming in to take their place, still a constant, steadying presence in our lives, so manifest in what they did and said and gave to us over so many years.

These friends became our extended family throughout these years, often acting invisibly or behind the scenes, and almost always unasked, but even in our saddest and most frenzied moments we noticed their reaching out with countless acts of kindness and support, so that we never lost the feeling that there was always someone there with the part that was needed. Thus it was that for us both help and understanding were enacted cooperatively, through the love of many friends acting singly and together, caring and taking care, to create a very special friendship that was the sum of many parts that were given freely and though Ed was a proud and independent man in the fullness of time accepted willingly.

When I brought Ed’s dopp kit home from the hospital, along with the toothpaste and dental floss, this is what I found inside: a water-stained green scapular; a worn moonshell and a branch of coral; a dollhouse-sized plaster...
Christmas pudding; three silver English threepenny bits, dated 1911, 1912, 1916; three pieces of sea-washed glass, aquamarine, rose pink and yellow-green, three smooth, palm-size stones, one tan with the likeness of an antelope inked on it, one gray and striated with igneous intrusions (one of Ed’s favorite phrases, smacking as it does of paleolithic outrage), one maroon—tumbled wafer-thin by water and polished to a sheen from being rubbed between Ed’s fingers. In his desk I found a tiny troll with Day-Glo red hair, a quarter taped to an index card, half of a broken baby rattle, two silver tinkling Chinese balls in a brocade case and more—tokens that he carried with him or kept nearby, for luck. Never a saver of useless objects, if asked he would have said he didn’t really believe in luck or magic, or karma, or destiny, or sin and guilt, or even tokens, but these were things that meant something to his friends, and thus to him, and so he kept them always, because they gave them to him and—who knows?

Friends gave us these lucky tokens, and more. They also gave us food, sometimes both together. Twelve years running as guests at Christmas dinner we watched those threepenny bits that meant luck and good health for a whole year turn up in one or another Kenney plate of plum pudding, usually Ed’s, though to this day our hosts continue steadfastly to deny they had a thing to do with this strange run of fortune. Still, not taking any chances, these same friends sent from Ireland one Christmas the special 1916 coin taped to the bottom of the miniature dessert. Finally, embarrassed, the next year Ed gave all but two back to those who had sat so long, luckless, at the table—and still ended up with another to take home. Others made gallons of chicken soup and lentil soup, scores of matzo balls and blueberry muffins, enough trays of lasagna to cover the Colby football field up to the 50-yard line (I don’t want to exaggerate here). They fed us breakfast, lunch, and dinner, included us in their family meals not just at Christmas, but at Thanksgiving, New Year’s, St. Patrick’s Day, Easter, or any old day they thought we might be hungry or in need of talk or company. They took care of our children when they were little and when they were big, our pets when they were hungry or needed walking, our houses when they needed fixing, even our cars when they needed to go to the garage.

They wrote us cards and letters, poems and stories, and papers. Lots of papers. Our students gave us the opportunity to write glowing recommendations on their behalf to graduate schools, overseas programs, Japan, Nepal, and Disneyworld, and they sent us back picture postcards, sometimes even T-shirts, when they got there. Long-distance friends called from Amherst, Boston, Cambridge, Cherry Hill, Ithaca, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Bonn, Brussels, Cork, Dublin, Jaca, Paris, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Vermont—everywhere it seems but South Dakota. They sent clippings to offer news, advice, encouragement, tell us stupid jokes and make us laugh, or just to keep in touch. They came many miles by land, by sea, by air to visit, and we had good times, as well as good food and talk, together.

Of course there was the sailing. After I chickened out, they sailed with Ed in races and for fun, and as he grew more casual in his expertise, one of them both
flabbergasted and chastened him by tipping over his supposedly untippable boat. They signed him on as crew and took him sailing in blue water to magical places, Roque and Damariscove and Isle au Haut, and helped him gain the confidence to sail alone, which he did often, as well as with good friends. When the time came that he could no longer sail alone, one of his sailing companions made it his mission to go with him at least once a week, and when Ed became too weak to get himself on board Metaphor, steadied the dinghy Ed still insisted on rowing out, and lifted up his legs, so that he could have that one last summer of sailing his own boat on the ocean he loved so much. At the end of the summer, this same friend sailed Ed and Metaphor back to port and sat in the stern while he rowed the dinghy in that one last time.

When the time came that Ed could no longer go on with his work at the college, our colleagues picked up his classes where he left off, met with his students, graded his papers, chaired his committees, ran the department, stood in for him on the dreaded promotion and tenure deliberations. When he had to give up the distinguished teaching chair he’d been awarded and of which he was so proud, the president and the dean of the college brought him an actual chair that he could sit in, with a seal and a plaque that held the honor forever etched in brass—all accomplished virtually overnight.

When there was no longer any hope of further treatment, his doctors gave us enough hope to keep on going as we were, and so we did. Friends rubbed our backs and soothed our psyches; they fed our stomachs and our spirits; they produced pickles, chili, cigars, smoked salmon, lobsters, beer and bourbon on the rocks, martinis so dry the word vermouth was merely whispered over the glass, hot rice packs and cranberry juice for our headaches and stomachaches from all of the above. When he could no longer go outside to do the yard work, neighbors raked our leaves and cut the grass and clipped the trees. As the days grew short and the fall turned to winter, they got up early to shovel the snow and chip the ice from our driveway, our sidewalk, and our hearts.

When it became clear he would not be leaving his hospital bed, as fall turned to winter, they brought him pumpkins and gourds and Indian corn, and then a Christmas wreath to hang in the window of his room. They sent flowers and wrote cards and hand-delivered so many daily bulletins from the department that the hospital wondered if we should install a fax. Our friends did install a VCR, only to find the medical staff (and themselves) profoundly shocked by the revelation that Professor Kenney’s taste in movies ran to Clint Eastwood, Bruce Lee, and the martial arts. One of his fellow professors fell off a ladder and broke his back, just so he could keep Ed company for a week. They brought him books and magazines, tapes and movies, Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, red popsicles and yellow jello. His nurses gave him their full attention and their patient, loving care. His doctor stopped by the hospital long past midnight, just to make sure Ed wasn’t kidding when he told him he wasn’t having that much trouble breathing and of course he’d make it comfortably through the night.

When the word got out that I was going to start spending the nights in his room, magically these same friends showed up, singly and in pairs, spontaneously, a
whole platoon of them, so that, always the good host, Ed sat up one more time and we cracked jokes and sang songs and told stories, and his room was filled with laughter, even though the hallway outside was drenched with tears. His greatest fear was not of death itself, but that he would die choking or fighting for breath, suffering, undignified, alone. So when it came down to those last few days, they logged themselves in shifts, friends and nurses and doctors alike, took turns with our son, James, and me, so that Ed was never left alone. At literally a moment's notice, a priest whom he had never met came and prayed with him, comforted him and blessed him with the rites of his church, so that he felt at peace.

When the days dwindled down to hours, even minutes, and it seemed there was nothing more to do or say, not even enough time for his daughter, Anne, to drive the long miles home from school to be there when he died, once again unasked, they came, singly and in pairs, and took turns sitting by his bed, one on either side, and held his cooling hands to keep them warm. They talked to him, not even knowing if he could still hear, and kept him connected to this life for eight more hours until Anne could get there in time to take one of his hands in hers. Then, unasked, they went quietly away, leaving us alone with him until the last breath came. But the warmth of their love stayed behind and filled the room and surrounded us and comforted us all. And so he died just as he had wished, peacefully, with dignity, and not alone.

So all this time, these long years and months and days, these friends were never in fact helpless; they did know what to do. They were there, and we remember. They were our doctors and our nurses, our students and our colleagues, our neighbors and our friends. They were our family, and they helped us to remember what we were: human, mortal, and alive.

And now, months later, once again recalling Norman Maclean's words about help and understanding, and rocks and rivers and time, what I want to say to all our friends, both near and far, is this.

If, as I believe, our tears are the timeless raindrops, then the river is our laughter, and they all run together to form the current of our lives. You are the rocks by which we held our course, and all of these words are yours.

Thank you.