

Peace of Mind

It was the last day of a halcyon Ohio September and I was driving through the countryside to interview Betty Flynn, a hospice patient. Through the generosity of Hospice of Central Ohio (HOCO), Betty, who has a disabling heart condition, had made an almost unthinkable four-day trip down to Atlanta to visit her son in the hospital. Making my way through the center of a crumbling village which mimicked so many other ghost towns that pepper the cornfields of the Midwest, I prepared myself for what surely lay ahead: a dilapidated nursing home and a sad encounter with a frail old lady.

As it happened, my assumptions had been, well, hasty.

I arrived to find Courtney, Betty's young social worker, waiting for me with the kind of "old soul" smile that spoke of her calling to a career helping people who are nearing life's end. We walked into a fresh-looking Heartland facility, staffed by bustling aides. They seemed, in my passing observation, to have rejected the distasteful singsong we have come to expect, and were engaged in real exchanges with their residents. So much for dilapidated.

Then I met Betty. Her condition may have rendered her too frail to walk far, but that is where the realization of my expectations ended. Smiling, dressed in a soft blue top that matched her bright eyes and holding out a welcoming hand to me, this attractive 81-year old woman looked completely out of place enfolded in bed sheets.

We began to talk. She spoke about growing up in her church and community, about the personal losses that, to my mind, had certainly befallen her in disproportionate measure. She had become widowed at 51 and had lost one of two sons to a car accident. Curious, I probed her responses to life's blows and her answers baited my curiosity about her all the more. We talked about her son John in Atlanta, who had suffered a stroke, and about her caregivers at HOCO.

Betty's character is perhaps best summed up by her declaration after her husband died in 1985, "I wasn't about to spend the rest of my days sitting in the widow's pew at church!" No, indeed. Instead, she set out to live large, which in Betty's world, focused on travel with a purpose, across the western world and the middle east, making 18 trips in all.

Through her church, she went to Jamaica (nine times) on missions to teach and help "some of the happiest people I have ever met." "They had next to nothing, but shared everything they did have." One of her favorite memories was the excitement on their faces when the mission team brought them soccer balls and clothing donated by Nike. No longer did they have to play soccer with stones for balls.

Along this journey of living and giving, Betty signed up to volunteer at the 1996 Olympics. She was assigned to the Dream Team's gymnastics building, "as a body guard," she laughed, and soon was coming within arm's length of such luminaries as the Clintons, Bidens and the Schwarzenaggers. The bombing in the park that killed two and wounded 111 people, took place right outside her building. Undeterred by such close calls, Betty continued with her world travels, and at 75 years old, climbed a mountain at Bucon Thomas in Haiti, flanked by two guides "who held me up at times," she is quick to add!

At home, Betty served on the missions committee at the Fairfield Christ Church and taught 3rd and 4th grade Sunday School for more than 30 years. Always inspired to learn, she enrolled in an intensive satellite program to earn a bachelor's degree in Christian education, and at 75, graduated summa cum laude, one of two to share the top rank in the class.

Throughout these years, Betty always always made regular and frequent visits to Atlanta to see her son John, daughter-in-law Jane, and granddaughter Emily, all with whom she is very close.

Then, twenty-six months ago, Betty was given two weeks to live. Her heart had been weakened by a combination of physiologic defects, leading to a downward spiral. Physically, that is. Betty's nimble mind, her personality and her faith remained intact.

Over the ensuing months, while she was in hospice care and unable to make the trips to Atlanta, Betty SKYPED with John over her kindle "every evening without fail." "We would just catch up on what each of us had done that day. Sometimes it would be 30 or even 45 minutes, sometimes just five or ten." She smiles in reflection. During this time, Emily gave Betty a great-grandson, Ben, so there were even more happenings to keep up on.

On August 20th, however, she received news that no mother should be expected to bear. John had had a stroke that had rendered him unable to speak. The prognosis was, predictably, uncertain at best.

Unbeknownst to Betty, HOCO's chaplain, Mark, a possibility thinker, had put a bug in Courtney's ear, and plans were underway to get Betty and a travel companion down to Atlanta, pronto. Getting quick approval for HOCO Foundation funding, Courtney made flight arrangements and covered the many complexities of the trip - from assuring there would be airport wheelchairs to coordinating with an Atlanta hospice to provide oxygen and emergency care. In the meantime, HOCO aide Sara was helping Betty prepare for departure. Within two weeks, Betty's daughter-in-law Jane was greeting her at the Delta arrival gate, and taking her to the recovery area where John awaited her.

He was unable to speak, but Betty recounts how he lit up and reached out his hand when she entered the room. "Since he was in a wheelchair and I was standing, I bent down to kiss him on the top of the head. After that, several times during the rest of the visit, he would put his head down as an offering for me to give him another kiss. ...which I could have done a million times, I was so glad to just be there with him!"

Now, visits with John take the form of phone calls facilitated by Jane, with John simply able to repeat, "Goodbye" at the end. The Atlanta visit, however, had positioned the crisis in a different light....."I needed to see for myself that he was well taken care of and that's given me peace," Betty said to me. Moving her gaze to Courtney and Sara, and giving Courtney a squeeze, she added, "Everything I want or need, they're one step ahead - they're my family."

At the end of my visit with Betty, I drove back to my home in the suburbs and had to chuckle over my initial assumptions of what this day would bring. I peeked over at my notes to make sure I had faithfully recorded what travel and service had meant to Betty's life, how it had changed her. "It makes you aware that we can't perceive what other lives are like unless we are there and see them for ourselves. It makes you appreciate what you have and it gives you more of a desire to help others," she had mused. Betty was living proof of what it means to be suffer and still be grateful.

When I left the room after my visit, I had taken a cell phone picture of a blanket Emily had made for her grandmother, displaying with remarkable clarity, four photos of a cherubic Ben in infancy and toddlerhood. Ben... by good fortune spared from deprivation, not yet touched by loss, and sure to carry the blessings of love to make him strong when those times arrive. "Ben, my friend", I silently said to the little face in the photo, "Someday you will hear all about your remarkable great-grandmother. When you find yourself at some of the most confounding forks in the road, may her example help make your choices clear and your footfalls resounding."



