

*My Dog's Death Taught Me Spiritual Detachment
Then My Sister Got Sick*

Steven Petrow, NY Times 7.14.22

Shortly after my parents died in 2017, I nearly lost custody of my dog, Zoe, in my divorce. When we were reunited, I remember telling her firmly, “You cannot die now,” even though she had just turned 15. Not long after, the vet told me that new lab work indicated kidney failure. I was quite glad then that Zoe couldn’t talk, at least not in the traditional sense. We had no painful discussions about quality-of-life issues or end-of-life concerns.

I approached her final chapter with intention and indulgence, which is to say I followed her lead. I fed her whatever and whenever she wanted. I let her decide whether we’d go for short walks or longer ones. Before I went to bed, I made sure Zoe had settled into hers. Even as I prepared to lose her, I found myself exulting in our days together. When she died, I consoled myself with the thought that she was never mine to begin with; I was lucky to have known her; we only have anyone we love for a short time.

As it turns out, it’s much easier to practice spiritual detachment from a Jack Russell terrier who is gone than from my younger sister, Julie, who is here, and called later that same year to tell me she had ovarian cancer. It was Stage 4, she said, as bad as it gets. Julie was 55, a lawyer and executive, a wife, and the mother of two daughters, 17 and 21. People with her diagnosis are only 31 percent as likely as those without cancer to live another five years. A surgeon explained that the median life expectancy for someone with her diagnosis was about five years. Meaning, half of patients live less than five years, half more. Julie is the baby of our family, five years younger than me and three years younger than our brother, Jay. The three of us are best friends, closer still since Julie got sick, but she and I have our own history.

When I had my own bout with cancer in my 20s, she walked laps through the halls of Memorial with me and promised that the chemo hair loss would not keep me from finding a boyfriend. I was there when she met her wife and when they welcomed their daughters. When my husband left me five years ago, Julie flew from New York to North Carolina to help me through those first scary days. She kept our favorite old TV shows on, knowing it would make me feel safe and like a kid again, while she scrutinized my investment accounts line by line so she could announce, after too many episodes of “Bewitched,” that I was financially OK. She was and is fierce, an extrovert among extroverts. We once went on a sunset cruise in Florida, and by the time we docked three hours later, she had befriended the entire crew and captain, a complete stranger who told me as we disembarked, “I love your sister’s zeal for life.” And now she would be lucky to make it to 60.

She started treatment immediately and gradually entered what many cancer patients call “the loop” — periods of treatment, remission, and recurrence that then start all over again. It was terrible and manageable.

In the meantime, as with Zoe, I focused on indulgence and intention. Our family rented a beach house in Rhode Island, a shingled cottage reminiscent of the house where we'd spent childhood summers. I traveled from North Carolina. Julie and her family came from New Jersey, and Jay hauled his from Connecticut. After the vacation, which included competitive canoeing, daily cook-offs and a raucous game of Hearts in which Julie was definitely eyeing Jay's cards, Julie sent an email to the adults. "I sat at the house one night with you all there and imagined the scene with me just faded from the landscape," she began.

Looking back, I recognize the gift in that email: She was giving us directions, almost a script, for how to go on without her. In the moment, though, I volleyed back a reassuring response — she was always on our minds wherever she was!

Then, after four years, the loop no longer held her. A clinical trial last October offered hope, only to dash it within eight weeks. A new chemo regimen held out the possibility of remission, which didn't happen. Julie and I planned a trip to Australia and New Zealand for this fall, the five-year mark, but I didn't count on it. Julie, always a kidder, began to joke about dying, here and there, seeming to invite a set of conversations I did not want to have. It had not been five years yet. I was not ready. But I'd learned during my mother's bout with lung cancer to follow up on such openings. I remember once Mom asked, "Will it be painful to die?" and I replied, "What would you like for dinner tonight, Mom?"

With Julie, I wanted to do better, so I followed her lead. She, Jay and I began to have a series of talks about finances, medical decisions and what "the end" might be like. She was focused and calm. I hated every minute. But what I really hated was the virulent cancer.

Julie just turned 60, and even beyond the loop, she is very much alive. She is cycling on Long Island with her best friend, still planning trips to locales domestic and foreign, researching a Hail-Mary-clinical-trial. This past May the entire family spent a week at Nags Head, North Carolina, trapped in a creaky old house, while a nor'easter swirled around us. We cooked. We played card games.

But her blood work looks increasingly ominous, she naps more and we are not going to Australia and New Zealand this fall. Instead, I visit as often as I can, to make as many memories as possible. As year four becomes year five, I am preparing, finally, to lose Julie, while exulting in our days together. Some nights, as she shuffles the cards, I want to grab her hand and say, "You cannot die now."

But I know better.