

Interview for “Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully: A Journey with Cancer and Beyond” by Nancy Manahan and Becky Bohan

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to be joined by Nancy Manahan and Becky Bohan, who are here to talk about their new book “Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully: A Journey with Cancer and Beyond.”

Nancy Manahan, Ph.D., is a community college English, women’s studies, and film studies teacher, now retired. Her writing has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies.

Becky Bohan earned her M.A. in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the retired Vice-President of Knowledge Design and Delivery, Inc., a training consulting company.

Nancy and Becky grew up in Madelia, Minnesota, Diane Manahan’s hometown. Both received their undergraduate degrees in English from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. They make their home in Minneapolis.

Tyler: Thank you, Nancy and Becky, for joining me today. I understand this book was written about Diane Manahan and her struggle with cancer. Will you tell us a little bit about that struggle?

Nancy: Thank you for interviewing us for Reader Views, Tyler. My brother’s wife was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 55. She was healthy, happy, and at a fabulous point in her life. She loved her family, her friends, her community, and her career (teaching mental health and holistic nursing at Minnesota State University). She and my brother Bill were enjoying a second honeymoon since their four sons had left home and established lives of their own. The cancer diagnosis was devastating. Even though Diane had been a very private person, she decided to be open about her whole cancer journey. She shared her experience with friends, family, colleagues and even in her university classroom, which was very unusual.

Becky: Although Diane probably wouldn’t have said that she was “struggling” with cancer, she did agonize over the fact that she would die so young—she’d miss her grandchildren growing up, and they were too little to remember her. She also struggled with leaving Bill. Although we once heard her complain in jest that some other woman would benefit from all her years of training him to be a good listener and a sensitive husband, she loved him, as she wrote in her journal, “beyond words,” and grieved deeply leaving her best playmate and life partner.

Tyler: What was your relationship to Diane, and how did that affect your watching her struggle and writing this book about her?

Nancy: In addition to being my sister-in-law, Diane was a friend. I met her when I was in the first grade and she and Bill were in seventh grade. I adored her and followed in her footsteps, for example playing percussion in the high school band, something girls normally didn’t do in the 1950s and 1960s, and majoring in nursing in college. I was devastated when she got cancer. But going with her to chemotherapy and oncology appointments and taking long walks together helped us connect at an even deeper level. That connection allowed me to hold her as she died, a profound spiritual experience. Becky was at Diane’s deathbed too, which eventually led to our writing this book.

Tyler: How did Diane react to her cancer? What was her relationship with it?

Becky: Diane didn't consider cancer her enemy. Although she recognized that some people find combat metaphors empowering, she chose an approach more consistent with her core values of non-violence. While encouraging the cancer to leave her body, she was living with it rather than waging a battle against it. After all, the cancer was within her, a part of herself, and she didn't want to be at war with herself.

Diane was a wonderful model for dealing with a serious disease. She refused to give cancer power over her life and she was able to do that in part because she felt healthy and energetic. She attributed feeling so good to complementary therapies such as supplements, herbs, acupuncture, Healing Touch, Qigong, spiritual work, and the support of friends and family.

Tyler: Did Diane know you intended to write a book about her and how did she feel about it?

Becky: Actually, Tyler, we had no intention of writing about Diane. Two years after she died, however, we read a powerful book, *Forever Ours: Real Stories of Immortality and Living from a Forensic Pathologist* by Janis Amatuzio, M.D., about her patients' families' after-death communications. Since several people had had after-death communications with Diane, we felt inspired to follow Dr. Amatuzio's lead and gather those stories together.

Another motivating factor was that Diane had handled her cancer and impending death with such openness that we thought her story could serve as a model for others. In addition, the way Diane died at home, was taken care of by friends and family, and accompanied to the crematorium made for an unusual journey that we thought people would be interested in.

Nancy: We shared our ideas with Bill, who immediately came on board. He provided us with Diane's medical records and journal entries she had printed out from her computer and put into her files. It was as if she had made a record of her journey there waiting for us.

Tyler: Tell me more about the after-death communication. Would you share an example of how someone communicated with Diane after her death?

Becky: The last third of the book deals with after-death communications with Diane. Each one was a powerful and comforting experience, some even life-changing. The type of communication was varied—dreams that were more than dreams, a sense of her presence, her voice, and even an image of her.

Tyler, perhaps your readers would like to hear about the communication I personally had with Diane's spirit. Late in the afternoon on the day Diane died, I drove back to Minneapolis from Bill and Diane's house. Being with Diane as she died, I had just experienced for the first time those sacred moments when the veil between this world and the next is permeable. My emotions were in a jumble. I was sad for the loss of Diane, happy that she had finally made the transition, and in awe of death. I was also feeling remorse: I had not participated in the washing of Diane's body. Her intimate friends and family members had gathered around her and bathed her in water suffused with lavender oil. I had left the bedroom because I didn't feel that I was part of her inner circle. Had I done the right thing? I was torn.

I arrived home and unlocked the back door. As I stepped into the hallway an intense smell of lavender enveloped me. "Diane!" I said out loud. She was there. I could feel her. I sensed her exhilaration at being free from her body.

After a few moments, my left brain clicked in. No, I thought, Diane can't be here. A bottle of lavender oil somewhere in the house must have broken. I checked our essential oils and discovered that we had no lavender oil at all. When I returned to the hallway, the smell was gone.

I knew that Diane had been with me in those few moments. I felt that it was Diane's playful way of telling me that it was fine that I didn't participate in her washing—she had just included me in a special way!

Tyler: When you mention after-death communication to people, do they think it strange? Did you question whether people would accept it?

Becky: Yes, I was very hesitant to share my experiences because I thought they were too far out, that people would think I was a kook. As a business woman, the co-owner of a training consulting company, I am down-to-earth, dependable, and practical. But part of Diane's life philosophy was to tell the truth and let go of the results. I

had to do that when writing the book—especially regarding my own experience of seeing the portal in the ceiling above Diane as she died.

The amazing thing is that my chapter is one that seems to resonate with many people, and I've gotten a lot of positive feedback about it. It gives people comfort to know that the spirit continues its journey after the death of the body. And my experience is not a near-death experience that people can dismiss as oxygen starvation. I was not the one dying, and yet I had a glimpse of the path of Diane's soul journey.

When Nancy and I give talks about the family's experience with Diane, I've often had someone take me aside afterwards to share an experience that they've had. It makes me think that this culture needs to talk about death and dying more openly. The remarkable experiences people have are comforting and full of hope—we need to take away the stigma associated with them.

Tyler: The book's introduction was written by Dr. Bill Manahan, Diane's husband. Will you tell us a little bit about his experiences in living with a wife who was dying? Do you think his experience with his wife's death was different considering he is a doctor?

Nancy: Tyler, my brother is an unusual doctor. For one thing, he's an integrative practitioner, one of the leaders of the holistic medicine movement. He was an ideal partner to help Diane research and implement complementary treatment modalities. For another, rather than viewing illness or death as a tragedy, he accepts them as part of the natural rhythm of life.

As Diane wrote in her journal after learning that her cancer had spread to other organs, "Bill is present in all ways, and loving. His peaceful countenance teaches me by example about joy and acceptance of the moment." Bill supported his wife in an amazingly ego-free way, aware of the sacred dimensions of their journey. Anyone who entered their home in the last months of Diane's life could sense an extraordinary peace and joy.

Tyler: What did Bill think when you first told him you were going to write your book?

Becky: Bill was doing the dishes when I went into the kitchen to share with him our idea of writing a book. His face lit up to a thousand watts. "That's a great idea!" he exclaimed, and gave me a crushing hug, wet hands and all!

Nancy and I asked if he wanted to be one of the writers of the book, but he declined. He did write the Foreword, which, given his background as a holistic physician, sets a beautiful personal and theoretical tone for the book. Bill has supported us in every way possible—from providing Diane's files, answering our questions as we wrote and rewrote, reviewing the manuscript, and helping get the word out about the book after it was published. He appeared with us at two book launches in Minnesota and presented with us at the 2007 national convention of the American Holistic Nurses Association, an organization in which Diane had been active.

Tyler: We are always hearing today about breast cancer survivors. Why did Diane's story not end so happily?

Becky: Diane did survive for five and a half years. But she had an aggressive form of cancer and when it metastasized, after three years of remission, it was inoperable. Even so I wouldn't say that Diane's story ended unhappily. Her last years were rich and full, and she enjoyed amazingly good health during that time. She had time to say her good-byes in a deep and meaningful way.

Tyler: What do you think death meant to Diane, and did that change during her journey?

Nancy: Diane didn't fear death. Perhaps being a nurse, she was more comfortable with illness and dying than most people. More importantly, she had a deep and strong spiritual life that accepted the next step on her soul's journey.

A year before she died, during a wilderness trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Diane wrote in her journal, "By experiencing the fact that I am just a grain of sand among trillions and just one wave upon the endless lake of ocean that recycles itself, I know in spades that I am connected to everything and everyone. . . . Maybe my next realization will be a star in the sky. Think of how miniscule one celestial body is in that universe! There are new adventures ahead, new frontiers I can't know about now. Grain of sand indeed."

The next year, five months before she died, Diane concluded a letter to friends by saying, “I don’t feel frightened of death itself. Curious and a bit excited, even. Sometimes I want to be able to come back in some way to tell you all about the fantastic experience I will have. . . . I feel very patient and willing to wait to see what that will be like.”

Tyler: Why did you choose “Living Consciously” as part of the book title?

Becky: Diane had always tried to live consciously. For example, she followed anthropologist Angeles Arrien’s four principles synthesized from indigenous peoples around the world: show up, pay attention to what has heart and meaning, tell the truth without blame or resentment, and let go of the results. Diane’s nursing colleagues and students all knew that these were her core principles.

Another example of living consciously is that every six months or so she and Bill would discuss what they would do if they knew they had only a year to live. Often they would discover they were living as they wanted to. Other times, they would identify big or little changes they needed to make. This regular evaluation helped them to make course corrections so that their lives were more congruent with their core values and more deeply satisfying.

When Diane was diagnosed with cancer, she continued to live with attention and intention. For example, during chemotherapy she would invite a friend to accompany her to the clinic. It was an opportunity to spend precious time with a loved one, and it was a way to share her journey. She agreed to chemotherapy only after she and Bill had researched all the treatment options, weighing their effects carefully. In the last two years, she chose quality of life over quantity of life, foregoing aggressive treatments that would have left her exhausted and miserable.

Nancy: One other example of living consciously is that in the end, Diane was completely in charge of her pain medication. She timed her morphine patch in order to be awake and alert for each morning, afternoon, and evening visitor. In fact, she was conscious the morning she died, sitting up for her grandchildren’s performance of a wilderness song, looking directly into my eyes as I lay beside her, and responding to my words as I held her in a sitting position during her last two hours.

Since Diane was such a great example of living—and dying—consciously, it seemed fitting to include those words in the title.

Tyler: The book ends with a glimpse of Diane’s ongoing journey as friends tell of comforting lessons offered by her enduring spirit. Will you tell us a bit about these lessons?

Becky: Probably the greatest lesson Diane has communicated is that death is nothing to fear. As she told one friend who had a terror of dying, it’s “just like a different frequency” on a radio. That message, which came in a dream-like state several weeks after Diane died, calmed her young friend’s dread of annihilation.

This book is another way for Diane to continue her teaching and healing because it contains the lessons and wisdom of her final journey.

Tyler: What would each of you say was the most important lesson you learned from experiencing Diane’s death?

Becky: For me, it is that death is a natural part of life. When I used to think about my own death, I would get anxious about all the unknowns—the pain, the discomfort, the reduction of physical powers, leaving Nancy and our families. But Diane modeled a way to die that will stay with me until my own end. We don’t know what will happen, but we can be assured that we will adjust and get through it. Diane showed me how to be open and accepting, how to say good-bye, and how to plan for the end. Really, people spend more time planning for a vacation than they do for their final journey. It is never too early to start preparing for one’s end.

Nancy: Tyler, the most important lesson I learned from Diane’s death is that dying doesn’t have to be dreadful or scary. As I sat on the bed with my arms around Diane’s waist, she rested against my chest, and I felt calm, loving, and filled with the profound process of her leaving her body. I found myself saying, “You can just relax, Diane, and let go. Your body knew how to be born, and it knows how to die. You don’t have to anything, just follow the process on out. You’ll be free at last, Diane. Home free.”

After two hours, she just stopped breathing. Diane’s death was so effortless, graceful, and beautiful that whatever fears I had about my own dying just disappeared.

Tyler: What makes “Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully” stand out from other books about death?

Nancy: First, many people facing chemo don’t know how to mitigate side-effects and support their immune system. Their oncologist may not know either. The book details a nurse-physician couple’s integrative protocol, including the complementary therapies that were so effective.

Second, most people don’t want to think about their own death or how to help a loved one die well. Diane’s story can help them see death not as a medical emergency or a tragedy, but as a natural family experience. It can help transform their fear and ignorance into confidence at having tools to help someone—maybe themselves—be in the driver’s seat for their final journey.

Finally, “*Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully: A Journey with Cancer and Beyond*” carries us past death into new realms. I personally find the stories of after-death communication with Diane astonishing, convincing, and deeply reassuring.

Tyler: Does the book offer ways of coping with grief after death?

Becky: It offers ways of celebrating life! Diane’s story is so inspirational. As one reader told us, it makes death seem normal and doable.

That said, we have included a guidebook at the end of the book that compiles the lessons from Diane’s journey. They include suggestions for dealing with grief and loss.

Tyler: What knowledge or understanding of death and cancer do you hope readers will have after reading the book?

Nancy: There are three main ideas that we hope readers will be left with: 1) How we make our final journey is important not only to ourselves but to those around us; 2) We can be active agents on our final journey—we don’t have to leave our medical treatments and dying process in the hands of “professionals”; and 3) Death is the doorway to the next stage in our soul’s journey.

Tyler: Thank you, Nancy and Becky, for joining me today. Before you go, will you tell our readers about your website and what additional information can be found there about “Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully”?

Becky: We’d love to have readers visit our website, www.nanbec.com. It answers FAQs and provides book reviews, photos, links to interviews, and a list of resources related to cancer, complementary therapies, dying at home, and after-death communication. It also links to our blog, [Full Life, Good Death](#), which contains short essays and photos about Nancy’s and my adventures in trying to live as consciously and as fully as Diane Manahan did for whatever time we are allotted on this miraculous planet.

Tyler: Thank you, Becky and Nancy, for joining me. I’m sure Diane would be pleased with your carrying on not only her legacy but her example of how to live and then pass into the next life.

[Read Review of Living Consciously, Dying Gracefully](#)