

Willetta Helene

Willetta and I met in seminary in the early 1980's. By that I mean that we began a conversation and by the end of it she had claimed me – for life - as a twin sister of different mothers.

While I crammed a 3-year MDiv program into 5 years, she got 2 degrees – becoming a Marriage and Family Therapist AND an Ordained Minister in the United Church of Christ. When I was ordained, she laid hands on me. When she was ordained, I laid hands on her. Twin ministers of the same G-d in the same denomination.

Willetta and I shared more than most close friends – our faith and our politics, values that included social justice and healthy relationships, deep desires for love and children, similar senses of humor, empathy and regret.

When we discovered a kindred spirit in Marlene Pomeroy, we planned yearly “Gals Getaways” – usually to one of Willetta's time shares. The woman had a lot of time shares. Beautiful places, good food and wine, deep sharing – and the occasional very odd adventure – were hallmarks of those weekends together.

On one thrift store foray (she was a thrift store maven) we found a skirt we both liked. So, we bought it together and shared it back and forth.

When I finally found my true love and married him at the age of 47, Willetta was there celebrating us. When we finally found and adopted our son – I was 51 – and Willetta was there on Adoption Day – welcoming Peter into the family. She was the obvious choice as Godmother – and was present at both his UCC Baptism and his UU Naming – to make that clear and to claim him just like she had claimed me.

She was much better at maintaining relationships than I've ever been. She was first to remember birthdays and anniversaries, give Christmas presents to her Godsons and call to remind me that we needed coffee or a swim in her pool or an overnight in Palm Desert.

She was more generous and more forgiving than I tend to be. I have to struggle to let go of my belongings – she just gave. I hold onto anger in the face of hurtful behavior or stupidity or ignorance – and she forgave me all of these.

Our lives tended to parallel and intertwine. We were both long-time members of First Congregational Church UCC in Pasadena with shared friends and mentors in this congregation.

We were both ordained in this UCC church by these people and called this our “home church.”

We each served as Interim Ministers at predominantly Japanese American churches – and found ourselves on the receiving end of THEIR amazing ministry to US.

She was an insightful, compassionate therapist to so many clients – and I was the client of many insightful and compassionate therapists.

She was friends with my mother AND my father for different reasons and in different ways – their lives also interwoven through church, women’s issues and veteran support.

She intentionally mothered two Black sons of White parents – and helped me (and my son) immeasurably as I intentionally mothered one of them.

Our last visit with Willetta was a month before she died. John, Peter and I drove out for the day, bringing her homemade chocolate chip cookies and our raggedy selves.

We went out for burgers and she and Peter sat at one table while John and I sat at another outside – so they could have a private conversation and John and I could have a “date.”

Lunch was followed by swimming, of course – the men in the pool, Willetta (not feeling much energy) and me (oblivious of her illness) talking politics between greetings from various neighbors of hers who always stopped to talk with her.

At the end of the day, we watched the Disney movie “Encanto” – reveling in the beauty of the music and the story of family dysfunction and healing – before we headed home.

I was a bit worried when her mother called to tell me Willetta was in the hospital out in Palm Desert. I was stunned a few days later – when I got a call from Kaiser Sunset in L.A. asking me to help Willetta make some important health decisions. I raced over and talked with her for 2 hours – before she decided she didn’t want any extreme measures. Relatives, friends, Godsons, Sandra and I sat vigil for those three days until she took her last breath.

Years earlier she had made Sandra and me legally responsible for her affairs should she die. We didn’t take it very seriously as we all planned to grow old with her and rant about politics and make catty comments about random people from our rocking chairs. But here we are. Responsible – and shattered by the loss of our Willetta Helene.

I still can’t fathom a life without her in it.

I have to rely on my belief that she is with us still –
a Presence larger than life –

 a Love untouched by death –

 her enormous Heart still holding us all

 until we join her at the Heavenly Party on the other side.

Anne Cohen

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