

Living With the End in Mind

Author Barbara Becker '89 explores life, love, and loss. **By Anne Stein**

Early on in life, **Barbara Becker '89** was curious about what she calls “those big questions.” Why are we here? What are we supposed to do with our lives? What happens after we die?

Coming from a family of doctors (her grandfather, father, and a brother) and nurses (her grandmother and mother), it wasn't surprising that the northern New Jersey native would think about life and death. At age eight, she learned that her father had previously been married to a British woman who died in an accident shortly after their honeymoon. In her young mind, “someone had to die for me to live,” explains Becker, who became even more fascinated by the role of love and loss in our lives.

She continues exploring those big questions in her recently published book, *Heartwood: The Art of Living With the End in Mind*. It's both a tribute to patients she cared for during her three years as a hospice volunteer in New York City's Bellevue Hospital and a memoir about mentors, friends, and relatives—living and dead—who have had a significant impact on her life.

Heartwood grew out of an earlier piece Becker wrote about a childhood friend's final year of life. “When Marisa was diagnosed with cancer, she made the most of the time left, exploring the world, getting married, and spending time with her friends,” explains Becker. “It made me think about how we can more fully live life with the end in mind. It's learning to be present to everything in life, the good and the bad, the light and the darkness.” An editor saw the essay and asked her to expand it to a book, which took nearly a decade to write.

Married and the mother of two sons—one chapter discusses the “taboo” topic of pregnancy loss and her own two miscarriages—Becker spent 25 years in strategic communications and international human rights before turning to writing and hospice work. “I started thinking of my own parents who I loved so much, and realized I was really afraid of them dying,” she explains. “I knew I had to face this somehow.” Becker trained with two Zen monks in New York City who prepared volunteer hospice caregivers.

In one chapter of *Heartwood* she tells the story of Mr. K, one of her toughest hospice patients, who yelled at her and kicked her out of his room after

he had a difficult phone conversation with his wife. “He'd lost the ultimate control, and he couldn't take it out on his doctor, so he took it out on me,” she says. “I learned that our interactions with the dying don't all have to look perfect. And that our job is to love others, as the theologian Thomas Merton said, without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.”

Becker sat with hospice patients who are Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, and Maori. “Our worldview can look really different, and to me it was important to learn the language and stories that would give

Barbara Becker writes about her work as a hospice volunteer as well as her own losses in her book Heartwood.



PHOTO: JAYNE RIEW

me context for being fully there at the bedside with them,” she writes. But the best advice on how to talk to the dying came from the Zen monks who trained her.

“We put so much thought into the idea that people who are dying want to talk about the big questions, but sometimes, you go into the room and the person just wants to watch *Jeopardy!*. Your job is to meet them where they are, pull up a chair, and watch *Jeopardy!*. If they want to talk about their children, talk about their children. And if they want to talk about the Mets, talk about the Mets.”

An important aim of the book was to tell diverse stories about loss, Becker says. One chapter is about a Rwandan genocide survivor who lost her father and three young brothers, was sexually assaulted, and is HIV-positive; she has emerged from that trauma and grief and today helps other survivors.

Another chapter tells about a Muskogee Native elder named Generous Bear, who lives in Becker’s Lower East Side neighborhood. She writes about the visit they made to a site near their homes where more than 120 men, women, and children were slaughtered in 1643 by the Dutch. “He taught me the importance of creating rituals around loss,” Becker says. “We went through a ceremony to honor the people who had died there. It felt like such a healing act. I really believe in the power of ritual to help right wrongs.”

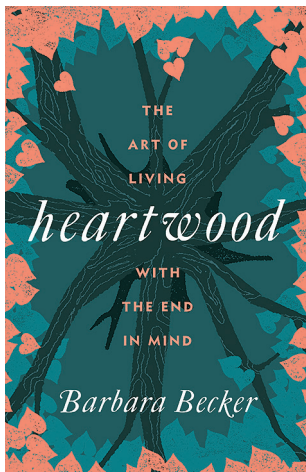
In *Heartwood*’s final chapter, Becker describes her decision to become an interfaith minister; she was ordained in 2017. She’s since been certified as a

disaster chaplain with the American Red Cross. The book’s postscript takes up life during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Becker participated in memorial services at Hart Island—New York City’s ‘potter’s field’ for the unclaimed dead. “It’s often said that death is the great equalizer, but the pandemic disabused me of the notion that all deaths are equal,” she says.

She cites a New York City minister who lost 44 congregants to COVID, mainly frontline workers “who didn’t have the luxury of working safely from home. There’s nothing equal about a death like that.” And she recounts the loss of her beloved Aunt Bev to COVID, and their final goodbye over the phone.

Since the release of the book, Becker has heard from readers, some who have lost loved ones and others who are themselves dying. They’ve found comfort in her stories. “I think there’s a sense of release and surrender for them,” says Becker. “We never tell these stories to one another, so we feel isolated. We don’t know what it looks like to die, or talk about who should be in the room. Do we want music playing? What are our wishes for our bodies? Those topics aren’t regularly discussed. So when someone goes out on a limb and tells some of the stories, it gives people permission to think about how they want to see their final days.”

Anne Stein is a Chicago-based journalist and regular contributor to Haverford magazine. Her features and profiles have appeared in the Chicago Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, LA Times, and ESPN magazine, among other places. She has huge admiration for those who wrestle with end-of-life issues on a regular basis.



In our culture, we are told that death is the last and greatest taboo—as welcome as a skunk at a garden party. Yet most often when I spoke of my experiences with loss, people opened up about their own. Death truly is a great equalizer, it turns out. As I sat with stories of grief and suffering, I began to hear an undercurrent of the inner resources people drew upon when their lives got hard. How people evolve and grow, even as the body withers. How we fare better when our sense of meaning is big enough to hold the things that don’t make sense. Every person, whether they defined themselves as religious, spiritual, agnostic, or atheist, made me even more curious about the ways in which we seek comfort and purpose, especially when we find ourselves in the crucible of our lives. Aren’t we, to borrow from William Faulkner, not meant to merely endure but to prevail?

—Barbara Becker, *Heartwood: The Art of Living With the End in Mind*