

Remembering John

Category: Stories

written by Hilton Koppe | August 17, 2012

Hilton Koppe

I remember you the day we met. It was five years ago. I was terrified. You seemed relaxed and at peace. I'd been invited to join the Lennox Head Club, in the town where I live and work; this over-thirty-five match was the first game of soccer I'd played in twenty-five years. I was the oldest on the team. You were the youngest. For you it was just the start of another season, your loping, languid style belying your skill and your speed.

I remember you sitting next to me in my car on the long drive home from a game at Nimbin. You telling me about your long journey with Crohn's disease, about the colectomy you'd had in your twenties and about your two broken bones last year. I couldn't stop myself from being a doctor and suggesting that you get your bone density checked.

I remember you sitting in my consulting room. We had many years of shared conversations—me offering ideas, and you running your race in your own way, not always by the book, but always with great intelligence and equanimity.

I remember you telling me that you were moving to Ballarat, 1200 miles to the south, to be with Helen, your newfound love and the soon-to-be mother of your child. You were so happy, and I was so happy for you.

I remember you getting rectal cancer. I heard it from your brother Mick. If I was devastated, how must it have been for you and your loved ones?

I remember you moving back home to have more treatment after your surgery. You were so positive, despite the rough road ahead of you. It was not so easy for me to be optimistic, but I did my best despite what my medical training had taught me.

I remember you disappearing into the abyss of the hospital system. I used to get letters about you from oncologists and radiotherapists and surgeons, but I didn't see you for a while. My thoughts were with you during this time.

I remember you riding your bike around our neighborhood at night while I was out walking our dog. I enjoyed our late-night conversations. It was hard to see for sure, but you didn't look well. Side effects of the treatment, I thought.

I remember you coming back to see me at work after your treatment was finished. We agreed to work together to prove the gloomy specialists wrong with their poor predictions. I could see for sure now that you didn't look well. The result of fourteen months of treatment, you said.

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and to tell you everything I knew...

I remember you telling me about the lump in your neck. I could not ignore it, as much as I wanted to. It was hard for me to remain positive when the likely outcome was catastrophic. You implored me to be honest with you and to tell you everything I knew. You said you'd rather get any news from me, no matter what it was.

I remember you meeting me at your front door when I pulled up on my bike, the day after you had the lump biopsied. "I hope you're not the bearer of bad tidings," you said to me. Unfortunately, I was.

I remember you sitting at your kitchen table with Helen and your daughter Hannah, trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. It was the only time I saw you cry.

I remember you thanking me for coming over to tell you the news—saying that it was better to hear it from me at your kitchen table than from the oncologist in his office the next morning.

I remember you deciding to have one more go at treatment in an attempt to ease the discomfort you were feeling. You knew that there was no cure, but you weren't ready to die. Not yet.

I remember you deciding to stop the treatment. It wasn't helping. You were getting sicker. You didn't want to spend any more time in the hospital.

I remember you vomiting mercilessly. Not being able to eat or drink. Getting weaker.

I remember you asking me if I could look after things so that you could stay at home. I gave you my word that I would do whatever I could to honor that wish.

I remember you coming downstairs at your home for the last time. We spoke about how quickly things were deteriorating. I said that if there were things you wanted to complete, then it would be a good idea to do them soon. You and Helen got married the next day.

I remember you beaming as you showed me your wedding ring. You looked so happy, and so sick.

I remember you looking like you would die in the next few days. I told you what I thought. You thanked me. You said that it was a relief to know that the end was coming soon.

I remember you telling me how wonderful Helen and Mick and your sister Fuzzy were. How having such a good team made your job easy. We both knew what your job was.

I remember you speaking to me for the last time. You told me how fantastic it felt to wash your face with a frozen cloth. "Like duck-diving through a wave at The Point," you said, with a smile.

I remember you looking quiet and comfortable, as the medication worked its magic and helped me to honor my promise to you.

I remember you at peace shortly after you died, with your father and brother and sister and wife and daughter. I was so proud of you. Of a life well lived and a life well died. I cried tears of sadness at your loss, and tears of joy that your suffering was over.

I remember you for your courage and your openness and your wisdom and your determination and your spirit and your love. It was a privilege to know you and to care for you.

I remember you, John. Rest in peace, my friend.

About the author:

Hilton Koppe is a family practitioner in the seaside village of Lennox Head, on the east coast of Australia, and senior medical educator for the North Coast GP Training program. The combination of clinical work and teaching sustains him personally and professionally. Seeing himself as more of a teacher than a writer, Hilton runs critically acclaimed creative writing workshops for health practitioners around Australia, Europe and North America. (To learn from Hilton how these writing workshops came to be, visit <http://vimeo.com/39318488>.) Hilton's writing has been published in [*The Examined Life*](#), [*Australian Family Physician*](#) and *PrimaryCare*. "I write to help make sense of what I have experienced in life. John died the night before I left for overseas, so while I was able to honor my promise to him to care for him until he died, I was not able to attend his funeral. This piece was my way of saying goodbye to my friend."

Story editor:

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