

## Calling and Recalling Time

By Mary Ellen Blizzard

My Aunt Billie is in the process of dying. Kay, her daughter, called me to Florida in October because my aunt was in hospice and they thought she was getting closer to death.

I left New York for Sarasota the next day to see my beloved aunt; the only person in my family whom I think truly loves me. I went to her nursing home to ask Aunt Billie if it was time to let go, to join Ressie and Ross, her parents from the hills of West Virginia in heaven, to see Howard, her only husband in a group of siblings that married three or four times each, sometimes the new spouse having the same first name as the last.

Billie is 91 and her under-five foot stature and slender 1920's hands are indicative of another time, when little cameo rings that wouldn't fit on anyone's fingers today were worn with pride. Her fine hands have made golden threads out of cream candy that she pulled on a candy hook that was formerly a pair of 1930's ice tongs. Aunt Billie had many talents: her iambic pentameter poetry was published in the Sarasota newspaper, she had an antique business, she has given me much of her costume jewelry, and she appeared as a clown for one night in the Ringling Brothers Circus after winning a writing contest.

Now her usually dyed red hair is gray and unruly and she is in a world that has its own language that we don't understand. And we can see that she is angry, sad, and full of anxiety that she can't express. Although her daughter Kay and I, but most importantly Aunt Billie, have died one thousand deaths as we have watched dementia diminish her, is there life that is expressed through her that God sees, cherishes, loves, upholds, and nourishes?

I quickly saw that the answer made visible was yes. Recently, Aunt Billie won first prize in a nursing home art contest. My aunts Billie, Jeanne, and Thelma were all a part of the nature painting craze of the 1960's. Billie's best nature scene from those days

hangs in her nursing home room. When Kay showed me her recent prize winner along with another one, Kay wanted me to take the blue ribbon painting home to New York. Instead, I chose the other one, an impressionistic painting of a plant in green and blue, which are my favorite colors. In my heart, Aunt Billie reached me with this painting.

Before I spoke with Aunt Billie about letting go, I prayed. I went to one of my often-sought readings in Ecclesiastes. "For everything there is a season, and a time under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die". I read Psalm 103, which I had used as a final goodbye for a Jewish patient in a nursing home when a rabbi never answered his page. Chaplaincy puts you in many tenuous positions where you are at the crux of things you aren't supposed to do and what you know in the very moment is the only thing to do. From Psalm 103, I read "He forgives all your sins and heals you from all your infirmities; He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving kindness". I thought I was ready for the conversation that she could only hear, but not find words for a response.

This was the hardest conversation that I ever had and I couldn't help but think, "Who am I to call time? Who am I to tread on God's domain to speak to Billie about letting go, naming all of her dead siblings one by one with the promise that she would join them." I let her know that Roy, her older brother forgives her for the afternoon driving lesson she gave him right before he died that evening in a car crash. The sad memory of Roy's death has always been packed up inside of my aunt while on the outside she always had a wide smile and a kind word for everyone.

Her doctor said that she now thinks she is fifteen years old and that was confirmed by Kay when Billie first entered the nursing home and spoke of Roy as if he had never died. I realized this on my first visit to see her in the nursing home three years ago. Aunt Billie said that she was mad at my father David, who would have been four years old if she was fifteen because as the youngest, David always got to take the first bath.

Fifteen was another important year for Aunt Billie when she started making pulled cream candy, learning it from a girl who worked in a candy factory in Kentucky

and brought the recipe back to Billie and her friends in West Virginia. She later repurposed this recipe into her own fudge recipe that was sold nationally. She sold very few copies of her recipe, but I was always proud of her.

Fifteen was an important year for me, too. Aunt Billie and Uncle Howard and my cousin Tommy, Kay's much younger brother, came to stay with us for six weeks in Cincinnati in 1969. We had just had a bad tornado in Ohio and Uncle Howard was a claims adjuster. Billie suffered through my first attempts at cooking the family supper, putting a tablespoon of cloves in the spaghetti rather than chili powder. She stayed at the dining table with me and ate every bite as early on other family members peeled off. Remarkably, Aunt Billie was serenely calm as I clung to the curves on the roads of Cincinnati when I drove, with her in the front passenger seat, as I practiced with my driving permit.

Before Aunt Billie went to the nursing home, she had said, "Life is a party a minute!" The two years prior, she was living with Kay on twenty acres out in the country in Myakka City, Florida. The parties ended when Billie had a brain bleed. Preceding that day, she had almost burned down Kay's house one morning at 4:00 AM by stuffing hamburger buns into the toaster and then pushing the lever down causing the house to fill with smoke. When she tried to jump out of a car with six lanes of traffic in every direction, there seemed no alternative but to get her round the clock care in one of the best nursing homes in Sarasota.

On this visit, I had not seen my aunt for a year. When I greeted Billie in the nursing home dining room the day of "the talk," she pulled her hand up from under the tray that catches the food that doesn't make it to her mouth and held my hand tightly for an hour. I don't believe that she knew that I was Mary Ellen, but it seemed obvious that she knew that I was one of her own.

Alone with her in her room, Aunt Billie listened as I spoke to her and eventually, I cried. I soon realized that this was one of the last times that I was telling her about one of my problems---my fears for my health as a 9/11 responder. I told her that wherever she's going, I would join her someday. She held my hand tightly and listened. Then I

held her face tenderly and she fell asleep with my hands holding her head. The nurse came in to put her to bed for her nap. I said, "I'll be here when you wake up" and Billie surprisingly said, "Okay, sweetie." These were the only intelligible words that she spoke that day.

Despite being a chaplain where I have found myself in the grittiest of situations, I had never had the talk with anyone about letting go. When working with nursing home residents in California, they seemed to let go on their own. The AIDS patients I worked with in the 90's couldn't stay alive. Some of my work for 9/11 was suicide intervention with the living that had lost their loved ones. Letting go, death and the ensuing grief, and offering hope for the living: this was the trajectory of my ministry.

It is now February and Aunt Billie is still with us. The custom in her family is cremation and then a large party with lots of food. When I get the sad call from Kay, I'll fly out the same day. For her celebration of life, we have a beautiful picture of Aunt Billie as well as two books of her poetry and short stories ready and I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't make some of Aunt Billie's Fudge to hand out to those whom come to call. I remember her like a queen at Christmas time handing out presents to everyone in her large family. Christmas, a holiday that she is no longer remembers, was her favorite holiday. One of my favorite holidays is May 26th when this lovely lady was born, who later became my aunt and my godmother. Aunt Billie saw me for who I am, cherished me, loved and upheld me, and nurtured me as no one else has ever done.

***Mary Ellen Blizzard***, a member of St. Bart's, is a 9/11 chaplain who responded both at ground zero and The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. She is working on a memoir in the form of interlinked short stories about growing up in West Virginia in the 1960's.