

Remarks for Wellesley 1966 Reunion Class Meeting
June 5, 2011
Finishing the Future – Marion Kane

I want to start my remarks by trying to redeem myself from the talk I gave at our 20th reunion on What Makes Us Happy. I spoke about the little things in life that made me laugh including the plastic pink flamingos that adorned my front lawn and got covered with snow each winter with only their little necks sticking out. It was that image that led to the profusion of pink flamingos that have flocked to each of our reunions ever since.

I was telling this story to a friend this spring and she replied “You know, Marion, the pink flamingo is the symbol for the passage of the soul from dark into light.” “Really, I replied,” who would ever have guessed.” So I looked up pink flamingos on the web and here is what I found:

“According to many, the flamingo of East Africa might have contributed to the myth of the phoenix. This bright pink or white bird nests on salt flats that are too hot for its eggs or chicks to survive. So it builds a mound several inches tall and large enough to support its egg which it lays in that marginally cooler location. The convection currents around these mounds resemble the turbulence of a flame. In zoology, flamingos are part of the family Phoenicopteridae, from the generic name Phoenicopterus or “phoenix-winged.”

It is this image that I want us to hold in our minds as I talk about Finishing the Future.

I am sure we have all thought at some time about what we would do if we were told we only had a year left to live.

As some of you know, my husband Dan and I confronted that reality in 1994 when he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease. Dan spent that year in many creative ways. He gathered all of the things he had written and put them into a book for me and each of the kids and friends and family; he pulled all of our financial information together, transferred assets, closed bank accounts; he made sure all of his relationships were up to date and visited with many friends; and he continued his work as a patent lawyer – actually going to work and finishing a patent application the day before he died.

As sad as that year was for all of our family, it held many gifts as well. Dan was “finished” when he died and it started me thinking about how to live so we are finished when we die. And it was important to learn these lessons at 50 when I still had lots of time to put them into practice. I wondered how much more and better we would live if we got beyond our fear of death at 20 or 30 or 40.

In the years that followed I had and started many conversations about thinking creatively about the end of life. The more I explored the subject, the more I found that many people

never have that conversation early enough in their lives. As a result, we live out our lives without confronting and embracing death and consequently we miss many opportunities to position our selves to be “finished” when we die.

All of this came home to me when I was diagnosed with metastatic ovarian cancer three years ago. It was at a time when I had already announced that I would be retiring from the Barr Foundation that year and moving from Boston back to Maine. And I had made plans to do something I always wanted to do when I retired – spend the winter in New Zealand. So life went on amid surgery and chemotherapy and I had good conversations with my oncologist about my interest in quality of life, not quantity.

When I got back from New Zealand, I joined the boards of several nonprofits in Maine and the advisory committee of the local hospice. All of which have kept me busy and engaged but also given me time to think about what I need to do to finish my life.

And that is where you all come in. When I agreed to participate on this panel, I had something of an ulterior motive in the back of my mind. Perhaps my Wellesley classmates are the ones who can help jumpstart conversations about creatively embracing the end of life with their families and friends. It also occurred to me that a memorial service may be the best place to initiate that conversation. It is a supremely teachable moment. People attending a memorial service are unusually open and unguarded. And while they often hear from others about the person who has passed away, they rarely hear from the persons themselves about the experience of confronting death and the tools their life gave them to deal with it. So I have written something to be read at my memorial service and perhaps you will want to do something along these lines as well. And since most of you will not be there I wanted to share it with you now.

Reflections on a life’s journey

As many of you know, several years ago I expressed an interest in making some kind of contribution to the conversation about end of life. Having lived with Dan through his 15 month illness from ALS and death in 1995, I was profoundly moved by the thoughtful way he conducted his final journey. Walking with him on that path had many gifts for me. It taught me that you can’t measure a life in terms of time and that there is an art to being “finished” when you die. It also helped me face my worst fear – losing my life partner and best friend. I looked death in the face and in the process lost my fear of it. And together we made treatment and life choices that gave him an incredibly high quality end of life.

Since that time I have thought often about what accounted for that quality ending and here was what I observed:

1. It is important to have a philosophical context for your life. This can be a religious or spiritual framework, a belief system, or reflections on the meaning of your life.
2. The importance of living fully and doing what you want to do when you have the opportunity. Both Dan and I had adventurous lives, filled with travel and new experiences and lived with no regrets.
3. Give something back to the community. There has been tremendous satisfaction in seeing things that Dan and I helped start grow and thrive and provide value to the community.
4. Plan ahead of time for the end of life. What do you want to leave behind, what ceremonies are important to you, putting financial records in order, being clear about disposition of property, open communication
5. Make sure that your relationships are up to date. This is particularly important when you have the gift of time to spend with those you love and who have loved you.

It struck me as I planned to retire that leaving a job you have loved and a life you have loved have many similarities. If you care about a smooth transition, you plan for the transition way in advance of the event – putting systems in place and sharing everything you have learned and know with those who should have that information all along the way. I have often said that the test of a good executive director is that he/she can walk out the door and no one will notice that they are gone. Somehow I think the end of life should be that way too. This is not to diminish the grief and sadness of losing someone you love but rather the sense of closure that leaves those behind you able to carry forward with the knowledge and equipment they need to live rich, satisfying lives and to get beyond the fear of death.

Dan was a scholar of the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead who believed that when you love someone you actually physically exchange parts of yourself with them. Therefore when all of the people who loved you gather together as for a memorial service, they can physically recreate you just for that moment in time. I have actually experienced that at many memorial services and it strengthens my belief that we don't really die but rather distribute ourselves around and are carried forward in parts by those who loved us.

I had a wonderful experience just before I left the Barr Foundation. At our last staff meeting, the staff went around the table sharing things that they had learned from our time together. One said she learned about “quantum physics”, another about “emergence,” another about systems thinking. When I left that meeting I realized that it had really been an encounter with immortality. Dan taught me all about quantum physics and systems thinking and emergence; I incorporated them into my work and the design of the Barr Foundation, and now my staff was going out into Boston and incorporating those ideas into their thinking and the way they carried out their work.

When I said I wanted to get involved in end of life issues, it wasn't clear to me how I would engage in that conversation. That was before I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and never imagined that maybe I would engage in this conversation with my own end of life journey. And it has been a rich journey. I have not been afraid of death, nor have I lived in pain or sadness. I have had the gift of time to say goodbye to the many people I have loved and to tie up all of the loose ends of my life. I regret that I won't see my granddaughter grow up or my children grow old but I can imagine that the gift of immortality, of all of the bits and pieces of life lessons and moments we shared and time together will be carried forward and I rest peacefully with those thoughts.

I am reminded of one of my favorite passages from The Little Prince. It is when the little prince makes friends with a fox who explains that if the little prince will just take the time to tame him it will be as if the sun came to shine on his life. The fox explains "You see the grain-fields down yonder? I do not eat bread. Wheat is of no use to me. The wheat fields have nothing to say to me. And that is sad. But you have hair that is the color of gold. Think how wonderful that will be when you have tamed me. The grain, which is also golden will bring back the thought of you. And I shall love to listen to the wind in the wheat..."

So listen for the wind in the wheat. Thank you all for the innumerable ways you have enriched my life and for coming to this celebration.