

## DANCING WITH MY DARLING

Rebecca Coffey

For Vermont Public Radio

October 1999

It was Family Hour at the Putney contra dance. Fred Bruenig was calling. I'm not a good dancer but I had an advantage on this dance. I'd danced it last winter—and, in 1959, my overworked kindergarten teacher had filled hours having us dance this very dance *ad nauseum*, or so I remember.

I could see some poetry in dancing my kindergarten dance again, this time with my little girl, Katie. Mind you, last winter when I danced, it I'd pulled a ligament in my knee. So now I can dance only with the help of an ugly black leg brace. It's the kind of device that, were I to be 18 and hoping meet a guy, I wouldn't be caught dead in. Now that I'm 46 and married with children, I call it my Fredericks of Hollywood marital aid—which it is, though not in any graphic sense. In a long marriage a little humor never hurts.

Thumping around the floor, I thought about the poetry of reoccurrences. The length of my marriage. The fact of my children. Then the aeons since my own childhood. Should I feel bittersweet in some way? Old?

I remembered that the week before my dad died unexpectedly he'd announced that he was old. Mind you, he was only 63. For almost 20 years I've wondered why he said he was old. Was he dropping a hint about the state of his health?

To understand what I'm about to say you probably have to imagine autumn air rushing in through the windows of the sweaty dance hall. Fred Bruenig is bouncing around the room and calling out. "heel and a toe and a heel and a toe and a slide, slide, slide, slide," while a bunch of parents and kids bounce around after him, some more

gracefully than others. Mid-bounce, mid-reverie about seasons and poetry and marriage and kids and aeons, I realized that Dad *had* been trying to tell me something, but not about his health. He was trying to tell me about Zen and the art of aging.

He was saying, “The years do slip by—and isn’t that fun!” I’m “in process,” as they say in psychology texts, about the fun part of watching the skin on my face start to slide. But I do know the part about the years slipping by. Just the other day one of my bath towels seemed to spontaneously disintegrate in my hand. I recognized it as one my mother gave me when I left home. That must have been the week Dad gave me his daughter-going-away-to-college advice: “Never give away what a man will marry you to get.” What my mother told me that week was, “Make your bed every day, honey, or you’ll get depressed.” Her advice I followed. For 28 years now I’ve made my bed first thing.

By the way, Dad did give me one good piece of advice the week I left for college. He’d been a smart and ambitious man. Third in his class at MIT. A young V.P. at Standard Oil. The sky would be his limit. And then things conspired. He got laid off. A child died a very tough death. Dad became depressed and sat in a chair for 9 years letting the world and his family go to hell in a hand basket. The good advice he gave the week I left for college was, “Don’t try to be ‘someone’ or get ‘somewhere’. Just work hard, enjoy life, and make a contribution.” Mid bounce at the contra dance with Katie I remembered. I reveled in the squeezes from her hand and in what I know I bring to her happiness. She and her brother will grow; I will watch and give and enjoy.

By announcing that he was finally old, Dad was telling me that aging is Buddhism at its best—the happy relinquishing of wordly desire. I’m not old, but I’m getting older.

And I don't much want to be anyone or get anywhere anymore. I want to revel in the work that I do, in what I'm giving, and in the time I've got to give it.

At Family Hour with Katie, the last dance was a waltz. It wasn't the Tennessee Waltz, but I was dancing with my darling.

--END--