



LIFE ON OUR OWN TERMS

I have a small office. It attracted me because of the view of the lake. I could have a larger space with better air conditioning, but I prefer the comfort of looking out the window and seeing my view of life.

I promised myself that I would take advantage of the beautiful scenery and walk around the lake when I had a break in my work schedule. Needless to say the break in my schedule has never been used for a peaceful walk around the lake! Instead, I walk out and people-watch. Some are walking with a friend (be it a two- or four-legged kind). Others are riding bicycles, skateboarding or roller skating. All appear to be having a good time. No one is "road raging," or rushing to beat a light or a stop sign. Each participant is taking time to enhance the quality of their lives, through individual personal fulfillment in one way or another.

This has been a very difficult year. I experienced the loss of my father and my cousin. We had to balance family and personal health concerns. I also experienced the loss of a close friend taken too young. Every time I thought I was going into a quiet or peaceful period, something else happened. When did my father become "old enough" to die? My cousin and friend were much younger, but the overwhelming powers of cancer won its ugly war against their determination to live.

Still, they all taught me lessons.

My father had a passion for life. When he could no longer fly an airplane, he joined a group of men and spent Sundays with a group of friends flying model

airplanes that they built themselves in a park. After most of them successfully got their planes off the ground, they would go to lunch and discuss politics and the stories of their business lives.

When he died, my father was still working on a business project. He could use a computer better than most 20-year-olds. He found another outlet to pursue his business knowledge and friendship connections. He was always busy doing something. Naptime was not part of his vocabulary. The message was, "I can sleep when I am dead." I am not sure if that is exclusively his belief or one I actively share with him.

My cousin, Howard, lived life on his own terms. He was the epitome of "anti-conventional." He never really understood what a "support group" was unless it was a way to meet women. He changed that view when he participated in a weekly art class at UCLA, where he was battling Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma for six years. He loved his art class. Still, this doesn't mean he became conventional. His art is not fit for discussion in this column—a child "under 50" may read it.

My friend Ellie was an incredible businesswoman. Frail, she still walked around with "Oscar," her permanent friend. Oscar was the name we gave the IV that provided her nutrition, chemotherapy and medications. She was busy working on her projects and refused to give anything up until a week before she died. She helped me learn more about friendship and trust. Her friendship also made me revisit the quality and need to change some of my existing friendships.

I miss their presences in my life. I miss ongoing discussions with them. Still, their influences will always be a presence in my life. My father did not believe he would die—he had too many things to do. Howard believed that he would beat the odds when he was discharged from the hospital this last time. He really believed he was going home with "a lot of nurses and a physical therapist to get him stronger." He had breakfast and insisted on his chemo the day of his death.

They all did things their own way, just like you should. Make it life on your own terms.

Susan Charney, MSW, LCSW, psychotherapist, has a private practice in Scottsdale. She provides counseling services for individuals, families and couples. Additionally, she handles Employee Assistance programs associated with any trauma or changes in the workplace. Charney also works with people with chronic illness and their families to help them find balance in their lives. 480.467.0223.