

Accompanied by angels

The sun was sparkling on the surface of the water, and a steady breeze was blowing as the boat hummed across the bay.

My children hovered around the front of the motorboat, as fascinated by the controls as they were by the nature around us, and my husband stayed close to them.

I sat in the back of the boat with my sister-in-law, Robin. We hadn't seen much of her in the years since I married her brother, but life had taken a sudden turn. She had a cancer diagnosis that came with an estimate for how much time she might have left. You always want to believe the doctors might be wrong and that there will be more and fuller time, but we weren't waiting to find out.

So, my husband and I carved out a day to visit with Robin and her husband, wanting to connect and seize the moment, knowing there are never any guarantees.

As the boat skated over the rippling water, we sat and talked. Maybe when life is short, you push the pleasantries aside. We spoke about life. We talked about time that had passed, memories we treasured, and people we remembered. We talked about forgiveness. We talked about the reality of death – and the life that awaited us after it.

Surrounded by natural beauty – and enjoying it thanks to the manmade vessel we were sitting in – we talked about angels. I listened as Robin shared her thoughts on angels in our lives. She spoke of people who had been like angels to her. She talked about how she loved that her granddaughter was named Angelina. I was struck by how real angels were to Robin.

Her journey was not an easy one, and she talked about that, too, with gentle directness, but not complaining. I marveled at how, when my sister-in-law might be overwhelmed with fear and anger and worry, Robin continued to be a source of strength and comfort and peace. She worried not about herself, but about those she would leave behind.

As we moved across the water, whenever we hit a wave, the children would laugh

and yell, “Faster! Faster!” Robin was constantly aware of her nephews, pointing out scenes on the shoreline they might enjoy, wondering whether they were warm enough, and noticing how they were enjoying the ride. Perhaps guardian angels do the same, watching and guiding and protecting and accompanying us – while letting us take in the world through our own eyes, in our own way.

As we slowed and glided back toward the dock, we spotted an egret on a pier. We motored past, and the elegant white bird took wing, flying low over the channel, coming close enough to add to the ethereal magic of the day. The ride and the day were too short. But they would have to be enough.

Just months later, Robin was gone, taken too soon. Before she passed on, we had a chance to say goodbye – though I know as Christians we don’t really believe in goodbyes.

When I think of Robin, I see her most often on the boat, soaking in the late-afternoon sun, with the wind moving through her hair. She and her husband had just bought the boat, and she wanted to believe she would spend many more days out on the water.

We all hold onto that faith that we have many days to fill with time with those we love and the beauty of this earth. We want to believe the sun will rise tomorrow and we’ll embrace the fullness of another day. We must live life with that hope. There is no other way.

I am grateful to Robin for sharing her journey with us in those final months of her life. She taught me about love and forgiveness, courage and faith. She lived without fear. And I think of how beautiful it is to believe that we are accompanied on life’s journey by angels.

“Make yourself familiar with the angels, and behold them frequently in spirit,” St. Francis de Sales said. “Without being seen, they are present with you.”

As you encounter life’s challenges and joys, may you, too, feel surrounded by angels.