

‘It all boils down to love’ is final message to voice pal

In the old days, there were ‘pen pals’ – people we wrote to, but rarely, if ever, saw. With the advent of voicemail, I have discovered ‘voice pals’. Because of my eyes, e-mail doesn’t work me, leaving voice messages does – which brings me to the reason for this column. My best ‘voice-pal’ just died.

I first met Morna Berdit as a professional counselor. I rent office space one day a week in Ellicott City, and, she and others rented the same space on different days. Our main contact in those early years was mostly about householding – what pictures to hang, what furniture to include.

Then, about three years ago, I heard that Morna was diagnosed with cancer. I left her a voicemail immediately. I would leave many other messages for the next three years. We rarely if ever, spoke ‘live.’ We often suggested in messages that we should get together for lunch, or just to talk, but we never did. At most I would see her between my counseling sessions when she would be coming from her own counseling sessions with the sainted Dr. Mike Boyle. We would have brief snippets of conversation lasting 30 to 60 seconds.

But our voicemails took on a life of their own. When she would be going through a particularly difficult time, I might leave daily messages. Other times I would go as long as six weeks without leaving any messages. I tried to tailor my messages to the gravity or the levity of the situation.

Sometimes I would ‘have forth,’ and give long reflections on life and God and the meaning and purpose of existence. Sometimes I would just leave some prayer that I found or composed. A favorite prayer that came to me that I shared with her was: “The light of God surrounds me. The love of God enfolds me. The power of God protects me. The presence of God watches over me. Wherever I am, God is. And all is well.”

Another shorter prayer that I suggested to her was: “Lord, let me feel the warmth of

your healing love moving through my mind, my body and spirit.”

I would often joke with her about our relationship, and say something like: “Morna, how did a Jewish girl get a Catholic priest as a chaplain?”

When I was hospitalized with blood clots I said: “We men are competitive! You only think you’re going to beat me to the grave! I’ll get there first if it kills me!”

While I was leaving voicemails, other wonderful counselors and friends like Mary Durning and Suzanne Bierer were tending to Morna personally. One of the great gifts of Mary and Dr. Boyle is that they don’t just rent space to therapists, but they build community among therapists.

Suzanne was really one of God’s angels, tending to Morna in her last and final hours. She escorted Morna to the gates of heaven.

In a terrible irony, Morna’s father died just about a month before she died. I went to Morna’s parents’ home for the memorial service. I spent only a few minutes actually talking to Morna. She had lost her hair. She looked jaundiced.

That night I left my final voicemail. After leaving countless messages, what do you say when you’ve said it all? What I remember saying is something like: “Morna, when all is said and done, beyond all the doctrines and dogmas and beliefs of different religions, I think it all boils down to love. Love breathes us into existence. Love holds us in existence. And one day, when our mortal flesh wears out or falls apart, we go back to Love. We go from form to the formless, from the limits of time and space to the timeless and the infinite.” I referred to the picture I had given her of Jesus holding someone in the clouds. “Just let God hold you. You’re safe. Fear is what humans create. Love is what God creates.”

I never got a message back.