

## **Traveling Companion: Peace at Last**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

I look at the two-inch thick folder of emails from her. It all began with an email on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1999: "Dear Father Tracey. I am not exactly sure how to address this to you since I have never written to a priest before. Never really that comfortable around them too much. I just hear people call priest like I did you." The day before, she visited our church for the first time. "It was different and I can see the people there like going there. It seems to be very friendly. It has been a long time since I have been to Mass and it seems to have changed a lot."

I responded and told her that I would be glad to sit down with her anytime and discuss some of her questions and concerns. Over the next eight months, almost daily the stack of emails grew in stature and size.

Continually, she tested the waters, hesitant to get too close to a priest, afraid to ask her questions, fearing rejection but still continuing to email. Of course, she couched her fears in statements like, "but you wouldn't understand," "priests are all the same. They don't care." "What would a priest know about what a woman is going through?" "I'm just waiting for you to drop the other shoe and stop emailing. I don't expect you to do anything else. Why would I?"

Yet, pieces of the puzzle of her life gradually began to fit into place. She had been married and had a daughter. Her daughter was murdered some years ago. The tragedy was so great that her husband could not handle its pain and he committed suicide and so she was left alone. She decided to go back to college and become a teacher.

Some time later, she discovered a lump in her breast but didn't do anything about it. Finally she went to a doctor who ordered tests. The results were positive: cancer. She was sent to M.D. Anderson Clinic in Houston for further evaluation and possible treatment. The diagnosis – the cancer had spread throughout her body. The doctors recommended treatment. She refused.

The emails continued, filled with struggle, questions, inner healing and peace. Her close friends rallied around her and she changed them.

On Monday, February 28<sup>th</sup>, she emailed me saying, "It is quiet now. And it is peaceful. And it is good. Ok. I am ready Father. I am ready. I did the confession bit. It does make all the difference to have done such....thank you Father Mike Tracey. Thank you for giving me a chance here and for all the ways you have been there for me and helped to deal with so much...well, Mike, I have nothing more to say! My breathing is bad now and I cannot seem to concentrate though I fight so hard. But I know I have to let go. I have to now. It's time! It is time to go! I know this. Pray for me, ok! Please! God bless you Mike, Jan."

I stood staring at a blank email screen for a long time, wondering what to write. How does one respond to a young woman who has said her final goodbye? I ended my email with the blessing of Aaron from the Old Testament, why, I don't know, but it just came to me: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord let his face shine upon you. May the Lord be gracious to you and give you his peace."

A few hours later, she slipped into a coma and at nine o'clock in the morning of February 29<sup>th</sup>, she died.

I still ponder Jan's impact on my life and on the lives of others; how a hurting spirit sought healing; a body crucified by cancer, resurrected to a new life; how the shadow of God's hands passes through all our horizons; how, even at the darkest times of our lives, there is the promise and hope of a new dawn.