

Introduction

“Peace & Guidance”

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I have put off the writing of this book for many, many years. Not for reasons that amount to simple issues of procrastination, but for personal acknowledgement of the emotional reserve I would need for such an undertaking. I am now ready to share this story.

This story is my tribute to my cousin, Ellen Marie Costello, who died in 1994 after living with HIV/AIDS for thirteen years. It covers my recollections of her as a child—and my respect for her as an adult. It will be clear through your reading, I believe, that this person was and *is* a major inspiration to me. Hers is a story of human struggle, tragedy, dysfunctional family dynamics, survival, consequence of action, personal strength, will of spirit, redemption, spirituality, and.... *Peace and Guidance*.

Ellen re-entered my life after she was “missing” for 20 years. One evening in 1993, I received a phone call from my Aunt Mary Ellen, to whom I am very close. Mary Ellen had opened up her home to Ellen in my cousin’s adolescent years—the beginning of troubled times for Ellen. In fact, of the very few extended family members who “stepped up to the plate” regarding intervention in Ellen’s life, my aunt was one.

Mary Ellen and I had many conversations about Ellen—as well as Ellen’s sister, Mary, who faced the same disturbing lot in life. I believe this connection was partially what added to the bond I have with my aunt today. For some reason, I am convinced it was *meant* to draw us closer. And, it did. And although we have not discussed this topic for some time now, the understanding remains—although our experiences and perspectives, of course, differ in many regards.

Right before Thanksgiving, I received Mary Ellen’s phone call, which I can recall as vividly as if it occurred yesterday. I heard a *very* elated opening statement saying, “Mary! I have great news! Ellen’s not *DEAD!*”

I remember, looking back on it, that this seemed rather odd to me. Wouldn’t it have been more appropriate to say, “*Ellen’s ALIVE?*” I found this to be a very interesting choice of words, psychologically speaking. I suppose the difference is—to many, the way Ellen was living was *not* LIFE. In a sense, she *was* dead or was perceived to be. That is, at least, ...to our family.

Perhaps this was partially due to the fact that we all had just assumed that Ellen was gone. How could someone survive what we had known her life to be? We had basically prepared ourselves, emotionally, that Ellen was no longer with us. Maybe it was easier that way. As you can expect, within our strict Irish Catholic heritage, Ellen was not someone we talked about openly or, understandably so, with much pride. Yet, I still had difficulty with the wording. Yes, it *was* wonderfully exciting news—really beyond any possible words, to learn that she was, in fact, *not* DEAD. But, in my viewpoint... I was more ecstatic that she was *ALIVE*.

No matter the semantics, I needed to see Ellen upon hearing this news. And I did, ...that Thanksgiving weekend at my aunt’s house. The remaining time I had with Ellen was life-altering for me and it brought about not only a closeness to her that most in my family cannot even begin to fathom, but it also resulted in Ellen choosing to leave her journals to me upon her death—though I was unaware of this until I was presented with a box containing them after her memorial service.

Through letters, phone calls, and planning a visit for her to come see me, which was, interestingly enough, tentatively scheduled to take place the day after she passed away—we became very connected. Actually, highly *re*-connected. Maybe through all this, she somehow *knew* I would be sure to tell her story and that I would strive to do so with dignity, fairness, passion, love, and respect. She was right.

During the time that she had been absent from our lives, I learned that Ellen had lived on the streets of New York City as a junkie and prostitute, was informed that she was HIV positive while serving time at Riker’s Island, broke from her pimp and “escaped” the city, tried to rescue her older sister from “The Life,” lived in a tree-fort in the Bronx, lived on a boat in the Caribbean, ran a restaurant on a tropical island, gained the support and friendship of a VERY famous singer/songwriter who tried to help her get off the streets, remained deeply devoted to her alcoholic father, and...*most importantly*, at the end, turned her life around to exit this world as a highly spiritual person and charismatic AIDS activist and speaker in North Carolina.

Before she left this realm of existence, Ellen made it clear that wanted her story to be told. Maybe she knew something I did not at that time, for it was not until more recent years that I discovered that writing is truly my passion. In retrospect, given what I have found to feed this soul of mine, her offering this literary challenge actually turned out to be *her* gift to *me*.

Prior to our re-acquaintance, she had met with an author in New York City who was very interested in this project. My Uncle Tom, who is rather connected in the city, arranged this meeting. As fate would have it, I met this author after Ellen’s death, at Tom’s daughter’s wedding. We had been seated at the same table. I don’t know if Tom had arranged for this, thinking we might have something in common, or if it was just one of those meetings that was meant to occur according to destiny. But before night’s end, we found ourselves in a discussion about writing the book together.

Strangely, despite the enthusiasm and fact we both acknowledged what a tremendous story this was, there was no follow-through by either one of us. I also recall that Ellen had contacted the Oprah Winfrey Show, where, to the best of my knowledge, nothing transpired prior to her passing and she never received a response. Both scenarios seem to make little sense to me considering the offerings at stake—meaning, telling one of the most fascinating and powerful stories I have ever heard. But that is what it was.

Still, in life, I believe that things happen exactly as they should. There are no mistakes. I know *I* was the one to tell her story. I believe that, even though I had no clue at the time, Ellen felt that as well. Even if this story never ends up with publication, I have written it—out of an unspoken promise to an amazing human being who deeply touched my life and an unexplainable personal conviction that her story *must* be told. And so, I have written it with pride, honor, and love—as well as a trust that Ellen would aid me in filling in any gaps along the way. Fortunately for me, in the writing of this partially fictionalized biography, I am *certain* I received a high degree of ...*Peace & Guidance*.

With that, I dedicate this book to my cousin, Ellen... without whom there would not be such an incredible story to tell or the unique contribution to countless lives. But, in doing so, I also dedicate this to all those who live, or have lived, a less than “admired” life—To those folks who have had struggles that most of us cannot even imagine, but who, regardless of the cards dealt, do their best to LIVE.

I did not intend in this writing to glorifying behaviors that society does not typically accept, let alone *discuss*, but, likewise, I will not pass judgment upon others—especially for those whose shoes I have not worn. I have, instead, attempted to separate the behavior from the individual. As I strove to objectively detail the tough, emotionally-draining subjects of drug addiction, prostitution, living on the streets, incarceration, and living with the horrible disease that is AIDS, ...I also felt strongly compelled to fully celebrate the beauty of the person that was my cousin, the lives she enhanced along her personal journey, and her continued presence in my life ...even after her death.

I recently saw a movie where a man with a severe physical disability said to a younger, newly disabled person, “If you want to know what is *wrong* with me, our conversation will be brief. If you want to know what is *right* with me, we will be here a long, long time.”

That is what this story is about. But, to tell it honestly, I needed to also include the parts that are not as pretty. It is the sum of the whole. But, even the tragic parts—while providing for a very intriguing story...also made for a fascinating, inspiring, and strong woman who, to me, epitomized the word “survivor.” She was clearly flawed in many ways, ... as we all are. But that is what makes people and life interesting. The trick is doing the best we can with what we are given. And, that she did.

Ellen Costello was born on the 4th of July. Need I say more? She was a firecracker, a spark, a spitfire, and an awe-inspiring offering to our world. She was colorful, loud, larger-than-life, vibrant, unpredictable as hell, and, at the end of the show, she made a huge impact. True, Ellen *was* explosive and, probably, at times, dangerous if not handled correctly. But, the beauty and power within her was ...nothing short of spectacular.

I miss you, Ellen. Here’s your book, ‘Cuz. Hope I did it justice.

Love...and *Peace & Guidance*,
-Cousin Mary