FOR JIM
Pam Dillon

Jim was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour in August 2009. He underwent radiation and chemotherapy at Grand River Hospital and Regional Cancer Centre. A year later we were informed his treatment was no longer working, the tumour was growing again, and he was offered two drugs in a clinical trial. Jim decided to discontinue treatment and spent his last two months as he had spent the prior year, at home and at the lake with me and the ongoing love and attentions of three children, their partners and five grandchildren.

Prior to his diagnosis, we had just sold our business and happily retired. We had newfound delight – a growing family, individual interests wrapped in a great friendship, and love that started as a blind date, became an elopement and a grand adventure that lasted a lifetime – until it ended.

When Jim was first diagnosed, I spent most nights at his hospital bedside, sitting quietly in the dark – keeping watch. I was the sentinel, the witness and the wife. I thought I could ensure no further harm would come, if I could be present for Jim. I was filled with worry and wonder and fear, those thoughts coming in the middle of the night, often at three a.m.

I wrote a journal during the 14 months of Jim’s living and his dying. I wondered – could I tell the truth? Could I write and not edit away the painful parts, ones that brought me to my knees in grief? Could I dare to write about the joy we found, and would it be believed if I said we laughed every day, and that we talked about his death often and openly and still carried on with hope? Could I dare to believe the time we had been given was a miracle and not one great and disastrous sorrow?

Yes! Jim made this possible, our love and family made this possible. His palliative care made this possible. I remain so grateful for Jim and his great openness about his experience of dying.

On a Monday morning Jim became agitated, he wanted to get out of bed and talked about leaving. In the early hours he said – clearly and with a steady gaze – “Someone is coming through those doors to announce my death, are you ready?” He held his arms out to embrace me and through a descending fog of medication, managed to say, “I love you so much.” These were his last comprehensible words.

Our children came home and helped care for him in the last 24 hours of his life. His palliative nurse Agnes prepared his medications, gave quiet direction, offered her support. Her expression as she left made it clear that she would not see Jim again; she said a gentle and warm goodbye.

Many dark hours passed. We bore witness to Jim’s final struggle, sure in the knowledge that his dying was as much an important a part of his life as that which had preceded it.

“Mom, he is breathing slower”
I looked… and said, “Ah, he is dying.”

Jim died on November 2, 2010, two days after our 36th wedding anniversary. He was 56 years old. He died as he had hoped for, at home, surrounded by family – beloved.

In the weeks that followed a friend asked me to write a sentence about the journey and this is my late night thought: I believe that Cancer cannot steal the vast beauty of the human heart.

Author Biography
Pam Dillon (age 52) is a writer and a former co-facilitator at HopeSpring, a cancer support centre. She is the surviving spouse of Jim Dillon: successful entrepreneur, brilliant builder, master gardener, intrepid traveler, life-long partner, forever friend, charismatic father, joyous and devoted grandfather.