

Jamie Tobias Neely: Memories of Ream live on in the art of meditation

[Jamie Tobias Neely](#)

October 15, 2006

Marilyn Ream's friends were devastated to lose her.

A family practice doctor with a wide smile and a deep sense of compassion, she inspired them by taking her vacation time to volunteer in Bangladesh and made them laugh by dressing up like Mae West on Halloween.

Despite her demanding schedule, she learned to practice mindfulness meditation, a method of stress reduction and healing, as well as guided imagery and acupuncture.

She began teaching classes on mindfulness to patients at Group Health. Developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, this approach teaches people to tap their inner wisdom through breath work and keen attention to the present moment. Studies have shown meditation can be effective for many stress-related disorders, such as chronic pain, allergies and cardiac arrhythmias.

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Her friend, Carey Chilton Charyk, a former nurse, is married to one of Marilyn's partner physicians, John Charyk. Over the years, Carey heard of Marilyn's mindfulness classes. The two women belonged to the same book group, and sometimes Marilyn's classes conflicted with the book group's meeting night.

But Carey never quite found time to learn to be mindful. She was volunteering at her children's schools, serving on the boards of arts organizations, even acting in local plays. Life was busy and full, and it didn't seem to slow down long enough to make time for another evening commitment.

It wasn't until after Marilyn was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and nearing the end of her life that the two women began to talk about this aspect of her work. Carey would drive Marilyn to chemo treatments, and the topic resurfaced in their conversations in the car.

Marilyn urged her friend to read Kabat-Zinn's book, "Full Catastrophe Living." Carey found it fascinating.

As Marilyn faced her last days, Carey was undergoing one of life's less harrowing, but still daunting transitions. Her children had gone off to school, it had been nearly 20 years since she'd been employed, and she was struggling with some midlife anxieties of her own. What should she do next?

Mindfulness appeared to hold possibility.

"You should teach it, Carey," she remembers Marilyn saying. "Go for it."

Carey was one of a small group of friends and family at Marilyn's house on the day she died just over a year ago. The electricity went off briefly. And in those moments, Marilyn passed away.

"The power had to go out to take this woman out," her friends said.

The former president of the local Physicians for Social Responsibility, a former Planned Parenthood board member, an international medical volunteer, she seemed that strong.

Her husband held a vigil at the house, where friends came to sit with Marilyn one last time. She looked regal in fair trade clothing in rich purples and golds. Her husband added a sign that said, "I'm meditating."

"I miss her so much," Carey says now.

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That fall Carey took a class on mindfulness from another local teacher. She learned to focus on her breathing and to meditate.

In January, she took Marilyn's advice and traveled to California to take mindfulness training from Kabat-Zinn himself.

And this fall, she attended a mind-body conference at Harvard Medical School with her husband.

She came back inspired. The work she did during these trainings helped her to bring to the surface old anxieties she'd been trying to escape.

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When she was 26 and single, she had worked as a nurse in Denver. She woke up one night to find a man in a ski mask, holding a huge knife, in her bedroom. She was not raped, but beaten. For years she felt too frightened to sleep alone.

As she meditated, she began to feel calmer, comforted, more focused. The mental fog of menopause seemed to subside. She slept better. She even felt smarter.

Marilyn Ream was such a force that aspects of her life continue to live on in her family, friends and patients.

John Charyk now asks some of his patients to take a few moments for a short relaxation exercise beginning of his exams.

"I came to see the light, so to speak, as I was spending time with her in her final days," he says.

Last week, Carey Charyk welcomed a group of women into her home and began teaching them the practice of mindfulness meditation that had so fascinated Marilyn.

She rang a deep bell. She urged the women to breathe fully. She told them to think of their bodies as the depths of the ocean, their breath the waves riding on top.

She repeated Kabat-Zinn's words: "There is more right with you than wrong."

Her class began.

And Marilyn lived on.