

GREEN MOUNTAIN BOOKS

**INTERVIEW WITH OLIVIA HOBLITZELLE**

**Author of “The Majesty of Your Loving; A Couple’s Journey Through Alzheimer’s”**

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**Q: What prompted you to write your book, and wasn’t it difficult to write about such heart-breaking, intimate experiences?**

**OH:** That’s a thought-provoking question because it’s human nature to pull away from what’s difficult in life, but I felt strongly called to write this book. When my husband’s losses became increasingly apparent, I realized that our background with meditation and the wisdom traditions gave us really valuable perspectives which could be helpful to others. I simply hadn’t seen any books about the spiritual dimensions of Alzheimer’s, and that’s what helped us more than anything to deal with the heartbreaks of loss. All of us, sooner or later -- whatever the life-threatening illness -- will have to face loss, dying, and death. How do we do that? The themes of the book can be helpful to anyone with serious illness and from any from any spiritual tradition.

**Q: You write about the enormity of receiving your husband’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s. How did you ever come to terms with the worries and fears about what lay ahead?**

**O:** Well, acceptance of a life-threatening diagnosis is hard enough, but watching your beloved lose his mind is excruciating. Hob and I made several agreements about how to approach the illness. First, we were determined to greet whatever happened consciously and lovingly. Those two words were really powerful for me, like a mantra or an aspiration we shared. Then we tried to see the spiritual dimensions of this illness—it could teach us about letting go, trusting, and loving more deeply. Those are big life lessons, not just words. And finally, the realization that this is our last chapter together helped us to really live in the present, to appreciate the preciousness of life. That’s a great teaching all by itself!

**Q: Can you talk a little about the various perspectives that helped you both deal with the challenges of disease and how they helped?**

**O:** Yes, I love talking about that because those perspectives made such a difference. I’d talk with Hob about the “meta level” of our lives, how we can look at it from a larger, more spacious perspective. Just shifting the

perspective helped make things easier. For example, I had this deep feeling that at the soul level, we'd made an agreement to go through this together. That's a pretty far out idea, but that's how it felt to me, and it helped.

I also came to see that the final chapter of anyone's life is unquestionably the most heroic. Although our culture doesn't tend to look at it this way, facing into death is when we are truly called to become the heroes and heroines of our lives. When you think about the huge challenges, our dealing with Alzheimer's was like an initiation for both of us. That insight was a total revelation to me! Hopefully along with it, we'd cultivate the qualities we needed to survive the challenges: patience, tenderness, kindness, compassion, loving, and so on. Buddhist practice, or any spiritual practice, invites us to develop these kinds of qualities. They're the foundation to living a conscious life. I found that very inspiring when I remembered it.

**Q: You said earlier how much you and your husband's training in psychology and meditation helped. How can people without your background benefit from your experience?**

**O:** I really wanted the book to be practical, because I was forever searching for creative ways to handle everything. All I've done is share what worked for us, especially for me as the primary caregiver. You know, often the simplest things are the most powerful. For example, remembering that the *quality* of your presence is tremendously important -- being calm, patient, and accepting of whatever arises. Those are qualities cultivated in meditation but anyone can practice them anytime. Also remembering that with awareness comes choice. For example you can choose to override your feelings of frustration at some moment and instead move toward the patient with love, instead of away with anger. Those may seem like small examples, and the self-help sections provide many practical suggestions, some of which come from spiritual practice. I really cared about making the book accessible to anyone. So oftentimes you might not even be aware that some simple step is also a spiritual practice.

**Q: You write a lot about your attitudes toward death and dying. What if readers aren't comfortable with the subject?**

**O:** Even with our culture's phobic attitudes toward death, the media is beginning to focus attention on the need for change in this field. My husband and I were really fortunate that meditation training exposed us to many enlightened perspectives on death and dying. And we also were both involved with hospice work. When readers see how naturally we talked

about all this, that's a kind of teaching in itself. Maybe even a comfort to readers. Wait until you see how Hob handled several near-death experiences and then what he says about them. These are among the most inspiring parts of the book, I think. At least he sure inspired me! When some really difficult episode happened, I would remind myself that this was "in the natural order of things." That expression just came to me one day and kept returning, a reminder about that *meta* level I talked about earlier. I kept reassuring myself that at some level, everything was OK, even the hardest stuff, even death.

**Q: Is there somewhere you'd recommend that people go for more information about taking a conscious approach to death and dying?**

O: Of course there's this book *The Majesty of Your Loving: A Couple's Journey Through Alzheimer's*. I trust that the book conveys in very accessible ways how we dealt with the issue of death, because Hob was so open and thoughtful about it. You'll also find a lot of helpful resources and a free email newsletter on our website [www.MajestyofYourLoving.com](http://www.MajestyofYourLoving.com).

**Q: What would say are the two or three of the most significant things that happened to you through this whole experience?**

O: The first one that jumps to mind is how often his suffering blew my heart open. I would feel these huge waves of compassion for him. Somehow the pain and loss were redeemed by this, and by knowing that we were deepening in love. You know, death and love are intimately connected, and I came to trust that love could hold anything, even death. Also, it's beautiful how the caring of family and friends came into this; that's what the title of the book refers to – everyone's loving. Altogether, the experience was about growing in compassion and love, and mysteriously, a kind of quiet wisdom comes along as well. These were among the greatest blessings of our journey together.