



*The Majesty of Your Loving:
A Couple's Journey through Alzheimer's*

foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn

by Olivia Ames Hoblitzelle

Cambridge, MA: Green Mountain Books, 2008

314 pages, US\$16.95

Reviewed by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

How do you accompany someone whose mind is unraveling? How do you live into chaos while keeping an open heart? What spiritual practices can help you guide another person as he or she moves toward diminishment and death?

These are some of the questions that inform this moving memoir of a couple's emotional and spiritual journey through Alzheimer's. The story begins with Olivia Ames Hoblitzelle's husband getting lost—he was tentatively diagnosed with Alzheimer's the year before—while driving to Vermont on a route that he has traveled countless times. Of course, in a sense we know how the story will end:

Alzheimer's is a progressive and ultimately fatal disease. However, what we could never have expected—and what makes this book so extraordinary—is the way in which Hoblitzelle and her increasingly confused husband navigate uncharted terrain and apply what each has learned from a lifetime of Buddhist spiritual practice.

Reading *The Majesty of Your Loving: A Couple's Journey through Alzheimer's* is like listening in on a spiritual direction session between two gifted people. Hob, an accomplished teacher of Buddhist meditation, has maintained a lifelong interest in words and the mind. Even as Alzheimer's increasingly assaults his cognitive function, he has an uncanny ability to describe what is going on.

“The words get stuck,” he says. “I’ve got this galloping brain drain. I know what I want to say, but the word horde is locked up. It’s like a corral filled with horses, all pushing against each other to get out, but they can’t find the gate” (p. 188).

Hoblitzelle, meanwhile, herself a respected teacher of psychology and contemplative practice, describes in candid, sometimes lyrical detail her effort to keep company with her husband as his mind deteriorates. She describes the spiritual practices that inspire her—for instance, remembrance of the *paramitas*, six qualities that Buddhists cultivate as “a blueprint for how to live life” (p. 204) generosity, discipline, diligence, contemplation, wisdom, and patience. She also mentions some of the practices she invented to keep herself steady—the *doorway practice*, for example, which strengthens her readiness to enter a room to find that her husband has died.

Practical suggestions for caregivers follow each chapter. The book concludes with a bibliography and three appendices: a guided meditation for the dying; a short essay on how to reclaim all aspects of what happens at death; and a collection of discussion questions on such topics as aging, living in the present moment, and handling fear.

The journey toward aging and death is ultimately about letting go. Therein is the paradox of grace: as we surrender in trust, we grow in love. The book's title echoes a poignant verse by Sufi poet, Rumi: “Your loving doesn't know its majesty until it knows its helplessness” (p. 157).

Hob and Olivia were helpless in the face of death, but the honesty and compassion with which they faced the inevitable deepened their understanding of what Teilhard de Chardin called “the grace of diminishment” (p. 231). Hob considered Alzheimer's “the best ... education I've ever had” (p. 276), and one of the last things he said before he died was fitting for a man convinced that happiness could only be found in the present moment: “Be happy only” (p. 277).

—Margaret Bullitt-Jonas is an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, and author of *Holy Hunger* and *Christ's Passion, Our Passions*. She can be reached at mbj@gracechurchamerst.org.

