

Find The One Thing That Makes You Alive, and Chase It

How a dying author published an amazing book



Photo by [John P. Weiss](#)

I used to take my grandmother Mary to the park on summer days when I was home from University. She loved to sit in the sunlight on a warm bench by the expansive lawn, twiddle her thumbs contentedly, and watch the kids laugh and play on the swings and slides. “Isn’t this grand,” she’d say in her soft, Irish lilt. Our family lived in Los Gatos, California, but Mary came from the old country. Her early years were spent along the verdant grasslands, rocky headlands, lakes, faerie circles, and stunning coastline of County Kerry, Ireland.

I suppose the slower rhythms and folklore of the Irish countryside had a lot to do with Mary's angelic personality and serene disposition. I can't recall ever seeing her angry.

Mary lived in a cozy apartment in downtown Los Gatos, and her days were filled with baking, strolls into town, shopping, and Sunday masses at St. Mary's Catholic Church.

Above all, the one thing that made Mary feel alive and happiest was family. Family was where she devoted all her energy and love. Family was what motivated her most to get up every day.

Mary lived well into her nineties. No doubt a big part of her longevity was her love of family. She slipped away in our home, surrounded by my parents and me, as my father held her hand.

"Mary, are you alright?" my father asked in her final moments.

Her last words were, "I'm grand."

The nights are the worst

A few years ago in a bookstore, I discovered the late author Kent Haruf's elegiac yet uplifting novel, *Our Souls at Night.*

The novel is slender, its prose spare like Hemingway (Haruf's idol), and its story about finding love late in life immediately hooked me. I bought the book and read it through that evening.

The story is about an aging widow who visits her longtime neighbor, an aging widower, and presents him with a bold proposition. Would he like to come to her house at night and lie in bed together, not for sex, but for companionship and conversation?

She says to him in the book, “The nights are the worst. Don’t you think?” And he says, “Yes, I think so.”

The characters in the book are loosely based on Haruf and his second wife, Cathy. They met in high school, and became good friends, but never dated. Both went on to marry others and have children.

At university, Haruf discovered the work of Hemingway and Faulkner, and later became an English teacher and budding writer. He taught during the school year and wrote during the summer.

Haruf applied to the Iowa Writer’s School but was rejected. Years later he applied again and was accepted. For eleven years Haruf failed to get published. And then, at age 41, he finally published his first novel (*The Tie That Binds*).

Haruf attended his high school reunion and reconnected with Cathy, and later (after both their first marriages ended in divorce), they got together and married.

A novel Haruf was working on, *Plainsong*, was published and became an instant bestseller and finalist for the National Book Award. After that, Haruf quit teaching and became a full-time writer.

Haruf and Cathy moved to Colorado, not far from their old high school, and built a cabin with a detached writing shack (formerly a tool shed). Theirs was a true love story.

At night they loved to lie in bed, hold hands, and talk to one another.

The one thing that made him feel alive

In 2014 doctors diagnosed Haruf with interstitial lung disease. It sounds as serious as it was.

Haruf was devastated and depressed, but a few months later he physically felt better. Rather than wait for the inevitable, he returned to his writing. Because writing was the one thing that made him feel alive and purposeful.

Haruf huddled over his Royal typewriter beside the space heater in his insulated writing shack. And forty-five days later he completed the first draft of “*Our Souls at Night*.”

Cathy read the draft and instantly recognized the many allusions to their relationship. As she said in a Wall Street Journal [article](#):

“It’s our love story. We would lie there and hold hands and talk. There wasn’t anything we never discussed.”

Cathy typed the first draft onto the computer and they sent it off to Haruf’s utterly surprised editor. The editor and publisher, Knopf, dropped everything to work on the book (knowing that Haruf’s time was short).

Haruf normally took five or six years to write a novel, but when faced with a terminal illness, it’s amazing what one can accomplish.

And most importantly, Haruf knew that the one thing that made him feel alive was his writing.

They held hands, talking quietly

On November 25th Kent Haruf’s publisher, Knopf, express-mailed the copy-edited manuscript of *Our Souls at Night*.

Haruf was extremely weak and asked Cathy to review and give the final approval for the novel.

The Wall Street Journal [article](#) closes with the following:

On the night of Nov. 29, Kent and Cathy Haruf lay in bed — she in their queen bed and he in a hospital bed alongside it. They held hands, talking quietly, then fell asleep.

When she woke in the morning, he was gone.

Haruf's novel, *Our Souls at Night*, went on to become a major motion picture, starring Robert Redford and Jane Fonda. Not bad for a dying novelist's closing act. There will always be challenges in life. Ups and downs. The key is to find the one thing that makes you feel alive, and chase it.

It's how a dying author like Kent Haruf managed to write a novel in just forty-five days. It's how my grandmother, Mary, was able to utter "I'm grand" in the face of death.

Because when we chase the one thing that makes us alive, we find our purpose and our fulfillment and maybe even our destiny.

Before you go

I'm John P. Weiss. I write elegant stories and essays about life. To receive the latest creative work, check out my free *Saturday Letters* [here](#).