

Story of Self Worth: *You Can't Kill The Spirit...*

I met Jill Miller when I was 14, when she would have been in her late 30s. She was colourful, vibrant, loud and funny. Not really like any of the grown up people I knew. It was perplexing to me and also amazing, that she addressed me like a real person and seemed genuinely interested in me, in who I was. Her two daughters were around my age and we were in the same group of friends in the Somerset market town of Frome, where I grew up (Frome has become very chi-chi and artisan now, but when I was there, we loved how crap it was and spent most of the time in the pubs or making parties in the fields) Jill was a bold and brilliant working class woman from Wales. She had been brought up by her mum and her early years were spent homeless and hungry.

Jill was a writer. Her first novel *'Happy as a Dead Cat'* was published in 1983. Jill had sent it to the Women's Press saying *'If you really want to support working class women writers, put your money where your mouth is and publish this'*.

Jill introduced me to co-counselling which we would do together; each taking the same amount of time to speak, while the other simply listened and paid attention. The practice of being seen, heard, encouraged and not interrupted probably changed my life, and the information I received about self worth, equality and the power of natural emotional discharge has stayed with me. In the beginning I felt so ashamed and afraid to share my feelings and inner life, worried that my childish concerns would not be interesting or important, particularly to an adult. Jill fully received me and not as a surrogate mum, but as an equal and proper friend.

Jill died in November 2019. I was waking up in Mexico and read the post on her daughter Kym's Facebook page. The night before had been the final performance of the tour of *The Deathbed* ritual at Querétaro city museum. The usual feelings of reflection, satisfaction and sense of completion were shocked into submission. Hearing that my dearest ally, collaborator and wise brilliant friend was gone felt impossible. I felt numb and empty and responded to that by just getting on with the practical tasks of the day and sharing my news with my Mexican collaborators.

I remember the last time I spoke to Jill on Facetime, she was in Frome and I was in London. She said very strongly and lovingly; *'Remember how valuable you are Marina, don't ever forget your worth.'* This was typical Jill; so loving and nurturing and saying what I needed to hear. I still need to hear these words, all the time. We were deeply connected and worked together on many artistic projects over the years: We were writers in residence at Eastwood Park women's prison together, collaborated on 'Time Bomb' a play about her breast cancer experience which toured internationally. Jill even helped me out with a job at the Cancer Counselling charity she founded. (when I was on the brink of going back to shift work at the cheese factory)

Jill would never call herself my mentor, and always reminded me how much she had gained from me. Her skilful actions as a human being were what I most learned from: She always acknowledged and spoke to everyone without judgement and was neither phased by authority, social standing or the lack of these things. She was a brilliant communicator and connector and never hid her humble beginnings or her lack of education. She was generous beyond her means and gave so much of her time and attention to people and causes and was always ready to march, protest and advocate for others. She was unafraid and took action even when she had no idea what she was doing. Jill was hilarious, childish, irreverent and quite naughty and I want to be more and more like her.

Jill Miller 1944-2019

Happy As a Dead Cat: Women's Press 1993

You Can't Kill the Spirit: Women in a Welsh Mining Valley. Women's Press 1986