Book Review of *Sky Above Clouds: Finding Our Way through Creativity, Aging, and Illness*

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Gene Cohen, M.D., was one of my heroes. His work and research in geriatric psychiatry, particularly with Alzheimer’s, was ground breaking. To many of us, he was the standard-bearer who built the foundation from which the field developed. Cohen paved the way for medical professionals to recognize the expressive arts therapies as effective in treating patients.

Recently published, *Sky Above Clouds: Finding Our Way Through Creativity, Aging, and Illness* is the final book to bear Dr. Cohen’s name. Written together with his wife and business partner, art therapist Wendy L. Miller, and Teresa H. Barker, the book was released at the end of April. Initially conceived under a different title and concept, *Sky Above Clouds* is a book that almost wasn’t. Cohen and Miller began their work on what was intended to be a very different book while Cohen was fighting a losing battle with cancer. When Cohen died the book nearly died with him. Notes and manuscripts were shelved for years until Miller found inspiration to re-craft their original work into *Sky Above Clouds*.

What readers will find in the published result is a rare experience, a book that is at once both a biography and a guidebook. It is the autobiographical story of a woman’s life, it is an investigation of grief and aging, and it is a treasure trove of resources to help aging people cope with illness through the arts.

The book unfolds as a narrative describing Miller’s personal journey covering her work as an art therapist, her meeting and eventual marriage to Cohen, raising children, dealing with illness and
doctors, caregiving, maintaining an art therapy practice, and ultimately – trying to find normalcy in the face of a life threatening disease.

Throughout her storytelling, Miller deftly weaves in Cohen’s thoughts and notes to complement each chapter’s themes. From his perspective a reader gains a thoughtful glimpse into how the American medical models operate, and areas in which we can do better, such as patient care. Cohen’s contributions demonstrate the importance of art and creativity to the human psyche and how they complement the mind-body connection. His writings also showcase the humanity in what a husband, father, brother and son feel and yearn for.

*Sky Above Clouds* is a powerful book. Despite Cohen having cancer, the book should just as easily resonate with caregivers caring for loved ones with other ailments. It is widely relatable. As Miller eloquently writes in the preface:

> The chapters of this book map a journey through life themes common to all of us yet unique to each of us: a philosophical and at the same time practical contemplation of the body, the psyche, the soul, and the family. You will move through different rhythms of time and space, perhaps bringing your own fears, hopes, and dreams into this space with us. Some of our writing is autobiographical, some scientific or psychological; there are other parts that are pure philosophy of living, mixed with the practicality of what this involves. Amidst it, metaphorical reflection. (p. xvi)

Grief is a subject not usually covered outside the context of disease or end of life situations, rather, grief is abundant and a part of life existence. How we cope with grief, be it from a minute to a larger degree, is a worthy subject for reflection as we explore ways in which to overcome, especially, creatively.

For an art therapist working in illness, aging and managing loss and change, *Sky Above Clouds* offers insightful art therapy directives for both the person with the diagnosis and the caregiver. It also offers important reflections in an art therapist’s practice on both a personal and professional encounter, and provides an essential reminder of engaging in our own art forms. Miller’s *The Phase Diagram*, found in chapter 6: Portrait of Healing, provides an interesting detailed directive for the art therapist in addressing client stressors and personality reactions.

The reader may espouse a different view of the generalized statements offered about the grieving and denial process. Not everyone will share the same thoughts and emotions in response to grief, nor may all experience the same reactions. Grief is unique to each person, but the importance of reflecting on grief as a part of the human psyche is worth noting.
Cohen dedicated his life’s work to the aging population. He was a champion advocate for older adult health and wellbeing and American healthcare is changed as a result of his tireless efforts to ensure dignity for the aged. Physicians like Cohen are unfortunately rare. We have lost a vital force in the rapidly dwindling specialty of geriatric care.

Miller has taken her memoir of personal and professional experiences and has crafted a well written book that beautifully conveys her and Cohen’s story. Regardless as to whether a reader is interested in older adult populations, whether or not one is or has faced grief and illness, Sky Above Clouds offers a realistic portrait for any art therapist, physician, or caregiver to reflect on in grief, communication, ageism, and creativity.