

**Author's Note 2025:** *I had written "Walking Kirby to Class" well before I wrote Embracing Fear (Harper Collins, 2002) and was very glad to discover that Kirby's story had found a home in that book. As a self-help writer, many of the stories told are edited to make a point and/or created from composites of multiple clients. Hell, a few are straight-out fiction. Kirby's story is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And I remain grateful to her children for giving me permission to use her real name so that even that is exactly as it should be. Kirby Lawson was a wonderful teacher, and I consider it my responsibility to make sure that she remains so. Please share this with anyone who might have an interest. Thank you,*

-Thom Rutledge / 15 August 2025

## Walking Kirby to Class

### A TRUE STORY

Out here, in the so-called real world, to the untrained eye, I was a psychotherapist and Kirby was my client. I was the shop owner, and she was the customer. And in all the official, appropriate ways, it remained so -- from beginning to end.

In the real real world, the grayer territory located much closer to the truth, our roles were not so easily defined. Sometimes Kirby was the therapist and I was the client. Sometimes I was the student, sometimes she was. But most of the time Kirby and I were classmates, lab partners. Her cancer was the real teacher.

There were times when it felt like I was the one facing death, and in a way, I was -- admittedly from a much safer distance than Kirby. She was trying to make up her mind, a "to be or not to be" kind of thing. I guess that was one of the many trades we made along the way: I helped her to have an open and honest debate with herself, and she taught me how to die. More specifically, she taught me that when my time comes, I just might pull it off with a little dignity.

Several months after the initial cancer diagnosis, Kirby and I discovered that she was quite literally of two minds on the subject of her life. We investigated with a simple gestalt therapy technique, Kirby moving from one chair to the other, playing out both parts of the conversation that had -- again, literally -- become a matter of life and death for her.

One part wanted Kirby to live. This part took her to the doctor, drove her to one kind of therapy and another. This part meditated, prayed, and became a walking encyclopedia of information about cancer and cancer treatments. This part spoke about a deep desire to break free from the old, outdated beliefs she had absorbed from her family as she grew up. Kirby had already made undeniable progress separating from the rigid and negative thinking of her parents. She lived an enlightened life really. She taught meditation classes. She had explored many interesting avenues of alternative spiritual and metaphysical practice. She was certainly an informed and open-minded woman, in this way 180 degrees from her mother. This part, the one that wanted Kirby to live, was more confused than discouraged by the persistent cancer: why would such an enormous obstacle show up just as she felt ready to live like she had never lived before?

The other part, in the other chair, wanted Kirby to die. Or that was what we thought at first. This part did not ascribe to the misguided beliefs of her family either. This part was just tired, and wanted Kirby to give up -- to rest. This part could acknowledge the progress, but it wasn't enough. This part was a persistent pain in the butt (the cancer had originally shown up as intense pain in

Kirby's lower back), constantly pointed out how far there was yet to go, and that in spite of all the progress, life was still very difficult -- Kirby had struggled for years with depression, and almost total dissatisfaction when it came to her desire for a primary relationship. This part was like a brilliant attorney, an endless supply of evidence to support the argument -- in this case, the death sentence. In short, this part could really bring a party to a screeching halt. (Every party has a pooper, and ours certainly has one too . . .)

Then, one day -- I don't even remember who caught on first -- we got it. The light bulb switched on above both of our heads. BOTH PARTS OF KIRBY WANTED TO LIVE! YES, ESSENTIALLY THEY WANTED THE EXACT SAME THING. The problem was not one of life or death as far as Kirby was concerned. The problem was that there existed in her consciousness two completely different definitions of life. That was a very productive day in class.

Kirby felt a new hope with our discovery. After all, accurately defining the problem is 3/4's of the solution. Somebody said that once, we were sure. If not, we had said it now. And we believed it.

You see, the part of Kirby that so effectively represented death as the only good option, was actually very spiritually oriented. This part not only did not fear death, but literally did not believe in death. Ironically, this part had developed from Kirby's years of meditation training and spiritual exploration. This part KNEW that what we called death, was a mere transition of experience. And this part, exhausted by the human experience, was ready to get on with LIFE.

Kirby and I celebrated our brilliance. We were certain now that we could beat the cancer. I am no stranger to studies and testimonies of mind over matter, but Kirby was a die-hard (no pun intended) believer. Her depth of belief was contagious, and it felt great. We were the winning team, the underdogs, destined to come from behind to win the ball game. My tendency for sports analogies was not as contagious; Kirby maintained a less competitive view of our work -- most of the time. To be completely honest, we both struggled off and on with the question of whether to love the cancer into remission (we were both, after all, children of the sixties), or to stand firm and beat it senseless. One of my favorite and lasting memories is of a guided visualization session in which Kirby introduced the character she called Terminator Mama, who protected her with a vengeance. Anyone or anything that threatened the more vulnerable Kirby would have to answer to Terminator Mama.

We both laughed hard at the image of Terminator Mama, but by that time I was praying that she was half as tough as she sounded. Kirby was weakening. She didn't want to talk about it yet, maybe she was still trying to deny it, but it was becoming more and more obvious.

At the time I thought of what was happening as failure. I wasn't making the grade, and as a result, my lab partner was going to die. With benefit of hindsight, I think Kirby and I had (for God knows what reason) been bumped up to a more advanced class, to learn a lesson that neither of us had the slightest interest in learning.

There was always the pain -- Kirby described it as an intense burning from deep inside of her -- but she didn't talk about it much. I'm pretty sure the discouragement hurt her worse.

It had become impractical, and often impossible, for Kirby to get to my office. Sometime, shortly before the advent of Terminator Mama, we began meeting at Kirby's apartment. I remember one session (we usually met for an hour to an hour and a half depending on how she was feeling) in

which it took Kirby ten or fifteen minutes to make it from her bedroom to the living room (45 feet at most) where we had our meetings. The Hospice nurse was there; she and I tried to talk Kirby into having the meeting in her bedroom. Kirby would have no part of it. Straining with every step, leaning as heavily as she could with her weakening arms, she finally made it to the living room, where she literally collapsed onto the sofa, gasping for breath like she had just run a marathon. Beyond making sure that she landed on the sofa and not the floor, there was nothing I could do. Nothing except watch Kirby's pain, and the courage that came with it.

From the sofa, she smiled just slightly, and said she needed to rest a minute or so. I touched her face and hair and talked to her that afternoon, while she closed her eyes and rested.

Throughout our visualization sessions, Kirby would make every effort to see herself as a vibrant, healthy adult attending to the beautiful child within her. Inevitably, the strong adult would slip away, or not appear at all, and Kirby would be only the child, vulnerable and in desperate need of parental protection and love. We never left the child alone, of course. Kirby had selected very specific images of "Spirit Parents," with whom we would always leave Little Kirby at the end of a visualization session. We both came to believe in those "Spirit Parents," and we believed that no matter what happened, Kirby would survive. Remember, she and I had already learned that there is more than one way to define LIFE.

We exchanged gifts. We had each given the other books to read all along the way, but this was different, very important to us both. I found myself challenged by the awareness that any material gift for Kirby would be no gift at all. I was just completing work on an audio tape project about self-compassion; I brought the script to her (I didn't have the actual tape yet) and told her that I was dedicating the project to her. She smiled and thanked me, but I doubt that she ever had the strength to read the script. That same day, Kirby directed me to her dresser (we had our meetings in her bedroom now), and to the bottom left drawer, to two beautiful, perfectly round crystal balls -- one about the size of a pool ball, the other a bit smaller. Kirby told me that she had given this a lot of thought, and decided that she wanted me to have these two crystals, objects that she associated with not only life, but with life on earth.

School was coming to a close, and I was going to miss my classmate, my lab partner, my teacher, and my student.

Two days after we exchanged our gifts, I got a call from one of Kirby's friends, saying that she had taken a turn for the worse, that her doctor had been to the apartment and had brought plenty of morphine to help Kirby with the pain. The friend told me that Kirby was asleep a lot of the time now, but was still awake and talking for short periods. I made arrangements to visit the next day.

Kirby was awake when I arrived. It was early evening, 6:30 or 7:00 pm. I remember that it was just getting dark outside. She was in a hospital bed. A Hospice nurse was at the apartment, as were two or three of Kirby's friends. We had our final session that night.

I sat close, where I could touch her face and hair. That had become our way of connecting when she didn't feel like talking. I asked how she was feeling, and she said "bad," and smiled a little, as much as she could I think. I suggested that she close her eyes and relax as much as was possible. I asked if she could see herself as a completely healthy adult, fully physically restored . . . and without hesitation, she said, "yes." I asked if she could see her child-self, the one we had worked

so hard to care for over the past months, and she said, "yes." I suggested that the healthy, very alive adult go to the child, and she did.

The physically healthy, fully restored Kirby took the child into her arms, held her very close, and smiled. A great big smile. The little girl snuggled her face into Kirby's neck and breathed a giant sigh of relief. The Kirby on the hospital bed smiled too, just slightly more than before -- again, as much as she could.

Kirby's breathing eased a little, she seemed to be asleep. I kissed her on the cheek and said good bye.

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Before Kirby and I had our little adventure, I was certain that I would embarrass myself whenever it was my turn to show up at death's door. "What a wimp," one of the Spirit Guide Evaluation Committee (S.G.E.C.) would say, shaking her head slowly in disgust.

"A complete crybaby," my designated spirit guide adds in agreement, more than a little embarrassed himself.

Several months before Kirby died, that changed. I couldn't identify the exact time, but I could take you to the exact place -- in her living room -- where I was sitting when I knew: *I can do this*. That's all there was to it. A simple, concise realization: *I can do this*. You might say for such a significant, even life-changing, revelation, it was rather understated, anticlimactic really. But it didn't matter. The job was done. That particular lesson learned. I knew that when my time comes, when I do show up to death's door, I will have what it takes to ring the bell and stand there with my self-respect intact. Kirby showed me how it's done. Namaste, Kirby.

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Thom Rutledge is a psychotherapist and author of several books. *Walking Kirby to Class* is an excerpt from *Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift*. For more information about Thom and his work, visit [thomrutledge.com](http://thomrutledge.com).