

# Edward Said: My friend

**Edward Said, who died yesterday, was not just a formidable thinker and writer - he was a loyal and thoughtful friend**

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It was 12 years ago that Edward called me, early on a summer evening, to tell me he had just been diagnosed with leukemia. There was no hushed tone, no sadness, no fear in his voice. There was surprise and anger. It was "Guess what? I've got fucking leukemia. Apparently I'm dying." I said: "You can't be dying."

It was an impossibility as far as I was concerned, and continued to be an impossibility - until today. Our loss cannot be measured. For 22 years Edward has been my friend. And the friendship started in a way typical of him. He heard I was in New York. He had read my first published story. He phoned up and invited me and my husband to dinner at his house. We met Maryam, his wife, Wadi and Najla, his kids, and a few others. At the end of the evening he walked Ian and me out. At the door of the lift we all shook hands then he opened his arms and gave me a huge hug. We had become old friends.

Now I say to myself: he was 68, he had a wonderful family, he saw his children grown up and had huge happiness and pride in them, he leaves us his work, he has touched and influenced millions of people across the world and, in the end, death comes for each and every one of us. But it brings no comfort.

The loss to his family I cannot speak of. For us, his friends, we are orphaned. What shall we do without him? He brought love and concern and loyalty and charm to his friendships, and he kept them in good repair. He was ready with help before you even knew you needed it. Many times, alone in a strange city, my hotel phone would ring and it would be a friend of Edward's: "He said I had to look after you so I'm coming round to take you out."

When I told him last Christmas that I was going to Rome, he gave me a phone number: "Get in touch with her. She's a wonderful woman. You'll love her." It was his music teacher, from Cairo, from half a century ago. She still adored him. She said he had never lost touch and that she and her husband prayed for him every night. "Edward and his 3,000 close friends" is how one of us puts it.

Yet when you were with him, you always felt unique. He noticed if you wore your hair differently, he commented on your clothes, on what you chose to eat. In my car, recently: "Would you mind switching off this dreadful racket?" of a currently popular Egyptian singer. And then, turning to me: "But if you like this stuff, how

can you bear not to live in Cairo?"

It is a measure of his no-holds-barred friendship that, when I was alone one night some two years ago, with the diagnosis of my husband's lung cancer just off the fax, it was to Edward in New York that I turned. He talked me through that first hour and gave me phone numbers of doctors, medical centres and friends who had been through it. When I made contact I found he had already called them and told them, again, to "look after" me.

At the last two of his public events that I attended with him - one in Brighton, the other in Hay - people were coming up afterwards just to touch him. It was as though he was a talisman. He laughed it off: "You know me, I'm just an old demagogue," he said.

But he wasn't. He was a guide and an example. In the most private conversation, as well as in public, he was always human, always fair, always inclusive. "What is the matter with these people?" he asked after a recent debate. "Why does no one mention truth or justice any more?" He believed that ordinary people, all over the world, still cared about truth and justice. My life and many others' are desolate without him.