

Meditating with My Stepdaughter

Category: Hands

written by Avis Begoun | June 23, 2016

It was a Friday afternoon in May, a week before my stepdaughter died. I was holding a solo vigil on the couch next to her bed, while she slept peacefully.

Her hair had started growing back, soft and thick and gray. I loved to rub my hand across her head.

As I watched her breathing in, breathing out, a surge of sadness filled the spaces between my own breaths. It pressed against my chest, rose against the levee of my composure, crowded behind my eyes. I felt tears. *We're all just water and air, fluid and breath*, I thought.

Light filtered in from the window behind her bed. It was late afternoon—that time when birds sing their way toward evening, dogs bark as their people return home, voices rise from the street below. So normal, so everyday. *There's dying in here*, I wanted to shout out the window.

She lay on her back, covered by well-worn lilac sheets, her head cushioned in a deep pile of wrinkled pillows. I watched her with the fascination with which one watches the ocean. I imagined the fury and forces beneath the surface—be it her skin or the surf.

Her skin had a translucent glow and her arms rested at her sides. Lately, she'd taken to holding her arms up in the air as she slept, moving them like a graceful hula dancer. Other times, she'd fall asleep with her hands close to her mouth.

I watched her breathe as she slept. I watched her face. I'd seen the dying in her face start last Sunday.

In that moment, dying was all there was. Dying was logging pages of medications and bodily functions. Dying was hugging hospice nurses I'd never met before as if they were childhood friends I hadn't seen in decades. Dying was cleaning her body. Dying was handing her ice chips as if they were gold.

Dying is hard work. But in that moment of peace, she and I just breathed together.

Then she awoke. "Why are there so many flowers?" she asked, her brain struggling up from the quicksand of morphine and sleep. "Is there an event?"

"Of course," I said. She smiled.

We breathed in, we breathed out. I raised my hand to brush away a tear. *Everything is water and air*. And soon only air.

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