

Drifting Along the River's Current

Category: Letting Go

written by Ashten Duncan | March 27, 2020

"What can I do to help you all right now?"

After pausing for a few seconds, the palliative care nurse turned toward me.

"Our guest in Room 5 is *active*, and I haven't been able to get in touch with his children."

She dolefully stared at the wall opposite us momentarily before returning my eye contact.

"I was afraid this would happen when they left this afternoon. I don't want you to feel like you absolutely have to, but would you sit with him until the end so that he doesn't go alone?"

"Definitely," I answered.

I strode over to Room 5 and gently knocked on the door before entering. Our guest—let's call him "Paul"—lay in his bed beneath a mauve sheet, blankly facing toward the loveseat in one corner. I grabbed a chair and carefully placed it at his bedside. I folded my hands in my lap as I watched the slow undulations of his chest. Didactics cannot prepare a student for the solemnity of nature's terminal ritual; it is an unparalleled experience that pries you from your tightly held locus of control.

As his respirations gradually lost their vigor, I lowered my head to focus on my own breathing. I retreated into my mind not to escape from Paul, but to imagine what he was experiencing in this tranquil time. Calming music flowed from the television speakers, and while not visible to me in my meditation, images of a river's undisturbed flow filled the screen. It was simple but beautiful.

Was he scared? Was he in pain? Was he filled with anxiety? I snapped my eyes open when I heard Paul emit a loud gasping noise and then nervously stared at him, unsure of what I should be doing. Then, it hit me: just what I am doing, being present, keeping Paul company. There was no need to direct nature now.

As his weak breathing resumed, I felt myself drift back into contemplation. I realized how many times I had anguished over infinitesimal matters in my life, especially in my academic career. With one mighty breath, the final lesson Paul taught someone was that our unremitting intentions to control our environments can thwart us. Perhaps, we should just drift along the river's current.

Hearing the door creak open, I turned.

"Has he passed yet?" the nurse inquired gently.

I nodded.

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