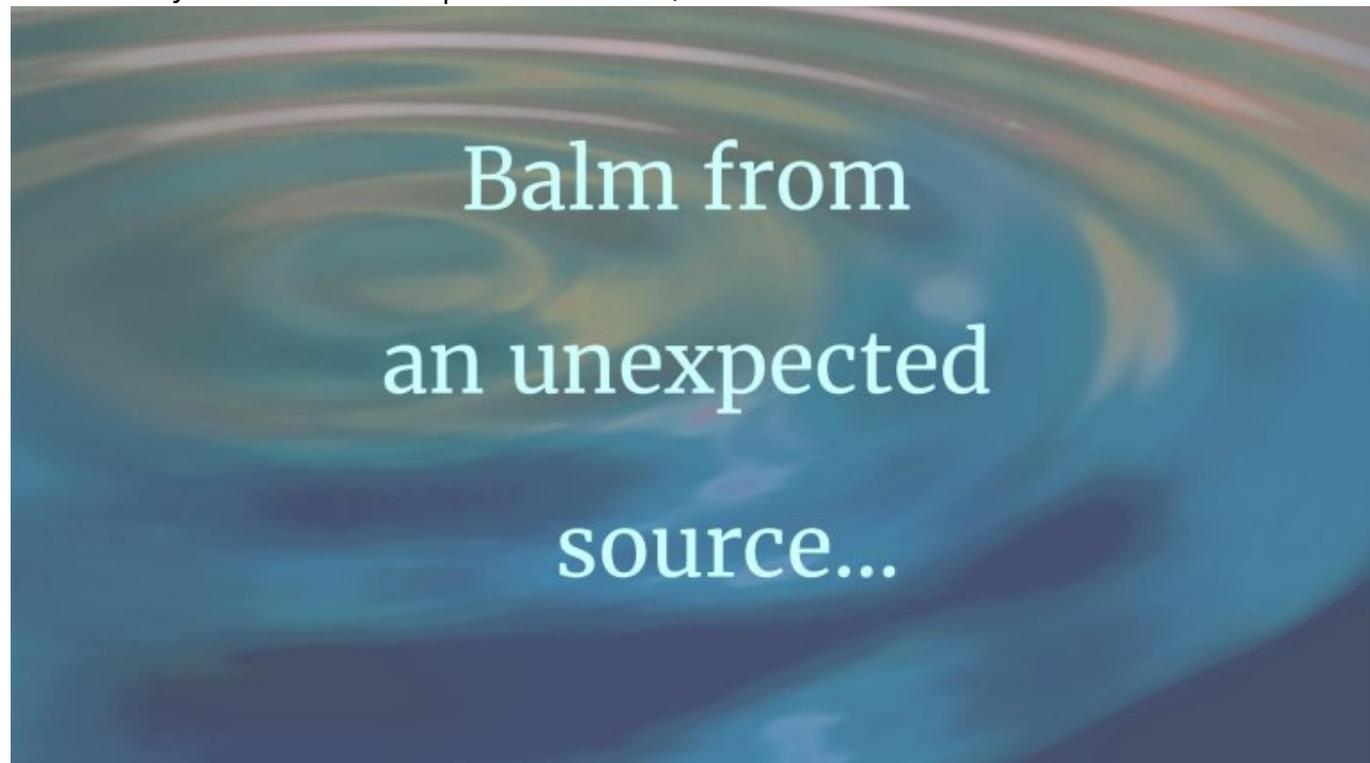


A Beginner's Touch

Category: Stories

written by Karen Curran | November 26, 2021



My husband George got to know Ruthie while he was sitting with his mom during her final days in an assisted-living facility. Ruthie, a hospice worker, was a middle-aged woman who had reentered the workforce after raising her kids. As a nursing-assistant trainee, she was learning on the job, with George's mom, unconscious and steadily declining, as one of her first patients.

Soon after meeting Ruthie, George was struck by her lack of self-confidence.

Placing a thermometer under Mom's armpit, Ruthie found that her temperature registered only 91°F. George didn't know what the normal temperature would be for a person dying of congestive heart failure, but Ruthie seemed to think that anyone with such a low temperature couldn't actually be alive. She took Mom's temperature three more times within the next ten minutes; then, still unconvinced, borrowed a thermometer from the staff nurse. This time she got a reading of 94°, but still she fretted that it might be wrong.

George, being a caring person, tried to reassure her; it was the first of many such attempts over the following week.

"I'm sure that your thermometer is working just fine, Ruthie," he'd say, and she would settle back into her chair, eyes still radiating doubt.

Despite working twelve-hour shifts, Ruthie managed to continue her studies, taking classes online as she sat with George's mother. Whenever something in her coursework confirmed a phenomenon that she'd observed firsthand on the job, she could scarcely contain her excitement.

"Her legs are getting more swollen, just like my class said they would!" she told George, obviously pleased.

"It's good you can see that," he said, nodding encouragingly. Weary and sad from being on deathwatch with his mom, he felt almost glad for the diversion.

Not only was Ruthie hard-working and enthusiastic, George noticed; she was also very observant. Whenever Mom's breathing changed, Ruthie noted it. And during Mom's final minutes of life, whenever Ruthie thought Mom might have taken her last breath, she would start to count—holding up the fingers of one outthrust hand as she did, like the referee in a boxing match.

In spite of the gravity of the situation, George couldn't help smiling.

"I can use my cell-phone stopwatch to do the counting, if you like," he suggested, and Ruthie was more than happy to take him up on his offer.

Five minutes later, when it seemed that Mom had in fact taken her final breath, Ruthie got out her stethoscope to check for a heartbeat.

After listening intently for several minutes, she looked up at George.

"She's gone."

George heaved a deep sigh. It was over; his mom had passed on to a better place.

Then a look of concern crossed Ruthie's face; it was her old fear of malfunctioning equipment rearing its head once more

"Wait," said Ruthie.

She approached my husband slowly, stethoscope in hand, uncertainty written all over her face, and placed the stethoscope against his chest.

George didn't know exactly how long Ruthie stood there silently listening; but it was long enough that he grew concerned.

Is she not hearing my heartbeat either? he wondered.

Finally she stepped away from him.

"It's working," she said.

Both of them felt relieved—Ruthie because she'd made the right call concerning Mom's passing, and George because, after the long ordeal, he was glad for the confirmation that he himself was apparently still among the living.