

Mom Journeys to the Other Side

Category: Stories

written by William Bryan | August 26, 2011

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Mom was not fully conscious when she crossed over, but I'm quite certain she was aware of both sides of the veil as she departed the realm of the living. This is a brief story of her dying.

After my dad died, more than twenty years ago, my mom moved from our family home to live with my brother, Jim, and his wife, Barb.

In retrospect, it was an act of supreme foresight, ensuring that she'd be able to stay in a family setting even if she became unable to care for herself at some point. She enjoyed many quality years with her four grandchildren and traveled with her family to Greece, Maui and Croatia, among other exotic places.

Mom's travels came to an end in late 2009 when illness struck—a progressive blood disorder, congestive heart failure, a bleeding ulcer, shingles and a mini-stroke. Barb, a PhD chemist turned in-house care provider, made it possible through her unselfish service for Mom to remain at home for all but the last week of her life.

Over the course of 2010, Mom was in and out of the hospital many times, her blood disorder growing worse.

Then, on Monday evening of Christmas week, while shuffling through the hallway of Jim's home, Mom broke her hip. Jim, a highly capable emergency medicine physician, sent her by ambulance to the emergency department where he works.

Once stabilized, Mom was moved to the cardiac intensive care unit because her congestive heart failure made immediate hip surgery impossible. Then Jim, in collaboration with a cardiac specialist and the rest of Mom's medical team, deployed an array of drugs and procedures in an attempt to stabilize her for surgery.

After two days of this, Jim asked me, "Do you think we're flogging her?"

"Yes," I said.

"You could have told me," he said. "That wasn't our intention."

"I understand that," I answered. "I also respect your need to do everything you can to save her."

From my perspective, things had gone on long enough. Although Mom hadn't been intubated, she was fighting the ventilation mask; she was only being kept alive through the use of vasopressors, drugs used to increase blood pressure.

It seemed to me that she was suffering—mentally, physically and spiritually.

That evening, Jim asked me if he and Mom's team could try one more time to stabilize her. But the very next morning, he called to say that their efforts had been entirely unsuccessful: She had now developed a fever.

Then my brother surprised me.

"I need your help here," he said. "I don't do this part very well. This is our mom."

His request caught me off guard. Jim is the confident pragmatist in the family—the one who saves lives and is, as a result, a hero to many, including me. And though he and I have always been close, our world views are different. His is a life of concrete cause and effect; mine is a never-ending reflection on the ethereal.

Although I have worked as an environmental scientist for most of my professional life, it is my graduate degree in applied theology and my certificate in pastoral care that guide my choices. I don't believe in one God, or even many gods, but as a result of my study of contemporary physics and theology, I am confident that there exists a creative essence—a heart of being, perhaps—out of which we emerge when we're born and to which we return when we die. Having been blessed by people in my life who have asked me to sit with them as they die, I unconditionally believe that, when our time comes, we "pass through the veil," as it were, and return to this heart of being in a final journey to peace at the last.

At this point it seemed clear that Mom was going to make this crossing. I suggested that we begin removing all medical support except a morphine drip.

When Jim called me, I was at home. Winter road conditions prevailed, and the drive to the medical facility, even in summer, takes eighty minutes or more.

"Do you want us to keep Mom alive until you get here?" Jim asked.

I took a deep breath. "Maybe you could at least quiet down the room."

"We will," he said, and I made my way to town.

By the time I arrived, Jim and the nurse had removed everything except the vasopressors and the morphine drip. The frenetic sound of the ventilation mask, with its insistence on life, was gone.

They asked me what I thought, as if I know anything.

I went over to Mom, brushed her thin white hair with my hand, and paraphrased a line from *The House of God*: "I think she looks like a dandelion seed ready to blow away."

I suggested we shut off the vasopressors, quiet the room even more, dim the lights and play some of Mom's favorite classical music.

Things got very quiet then—very, very quiet.

The nurse, a wonderfully compassionate young man named Benjamin, brought tea for my brother and me. Morphine was available, but Mom was so peaceful that we never gave her more than a tiny amount. We sat beside her. She seemed already at peace.

Speaking softly, I leaned over to her and read some of her favorite poems: Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"; a piece from the Sanskrit. Tiny tears appeared in the corners of Mom's eyes. When she seemed to pause on her journey, I paraphrased some words from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, hoping it might help her move beyond the fearful things she encountered along her path: "You and the heart of creation are one; if you see something a little bit scary, it is illusion; keep moving; you are safe here; you are very safe."

We were in a building on a hilltop overlooking the city, with a spectacular view of the hills, mountains and rivers that had been so much a part of Mom's life. After about four hours, she drifted from her earthly body and moved to the other side. Her heart stopped beating. She took two final breaths. Then she was gone. She moved into the world at large.

So that's the story. I am grateful to the nurses, physicians (including my brother Jim) and the staff for their wonderful presence. We were in a highly technical setting that could have easily subsumed my mom's last journey. Instead, these fine medical professionals served in a manner befitting the most caring hospice. They willingly stripped away the machines, bells, buzzers, pumps and drugs. They created a sacred space for us to be fully present to Mom as she crossed the bar.

She is dead, but the joy of her life is with us still, and modern medicine helped to facilitate this end.

About the author:

Informed by studies in the earth sciences, feminist liberation poetry and applied theology, William has coordinated water and power conservation projects for the past twenty-five years. He believes that writing in general, and poetry in particular, renew and empower people to do great things. "I've had a lifelong connection to poetry and writing. My mom read poems to me when I was still in the womb, and she was my first writing teacher. Years later, as Mom journeyed to the other side, I read her one of the same poems that she'd read to me when I was a wee child."

Story editor:

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