

A Gift of Peace

by Laurie Clarke



My eighty-nine year old mother had been battling multiple myeloma for two and a half years. This is a rather rare form of bone marrow cancer that affects the production of blood cells, ultimately deteriorating the bones. She had gone through successive chemo and radiation treatments which had bought her time; time enough to get to know her second great-grandchild, meet her grandson's lovely new bride, and even go on a cruise to Mexico with the support of her family.

In the last six months her frail body was getting tired of the fight and the quality of her life began to deteriorate. The medications, rather than helping, caused side effects worse than the disease. She weakened drastically.

I live in Charleston, South Carolina, and had flown in to LA to visit when I discovered she had fallen. She was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance and delivered to the ICU. Her kidneys were failing and we were told that she had a very short time to live.

Our family had arrived from all over the country to attend my nephew's wedding the next day. Our emotions were on a roller coaster as we prepared for a wedding and a funeral at the same time. Surprisingly, my mother rallied during the next few days and was lucid enough to be able to visit with all the members of her family. Everyone treasured this stolen time.

After a week in the hospital, she was released to hospice care and we were able to bring her home, which was her ardent desire. My sister and I, her only two children, proceeded to sit with her throughout the next days. We had arranged for twenty-four hour home care, and we were blessed with a team of wonderful, loving caregivers.

My mother knew that she had come home to die. We said to her all the things that hospice recommends, thanked her for being such a wonderful mother, and assured her that we were okay. When I said to her, "Mama, it's okay to let go," she responded, "I'm trying, but I can't."

I related her response to my daughter that night, and it prompted her to search the internet for yoga resources that might provide guidance. We are both yoga teachers and so it has always been natural to look for help from that world. Under Meditation and Relaxation Exercises, she found the Living/Dying Project, where the AH Breath was described.

The intention of this meditation is to assist someone in passing on. By matching your inhalation with theirs, and then saying, "AH" on their exhalation, the sound helps to open the heart center. It's through this passage that the dying can finally find peace. The concept made perfect sense to us since yoga teaches us about the energy centers in the body, and we

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both knew the power of the heart chakra, the fourth energy center in the body.

The next morning my sister and I arrived at my mother's home and I immediately prepared to conduct the meditation. I sat next to her bed, without touching her as was advised, and explained what I was going to do. She was sleeping at the time and did not acknowledge my presence. I mentioned the different parts of her body and suggested that she relax them, as I have done thousands of times in my yoga classes. Then I started to match my breath with hers. Her inhalation was very shallow because her lungs had almost filled completely with fluid and it was difficult to breathe. I sat with my eyes closed and continued to say "AH" on her exhalation, which was short as well.

I went into a deep meditative state, only aware of her breath and the sound I was making. After an hour I began to feel like my heart was bursting. The sound of my heartbeat reverberated throughout my whole body, and I had to open my eyes to watch her breathe since I could no longer hear her.

At the same time, my mother opened her eyes and gazed off into the distance. She moved her hands towards her heart and then her exhalations became long and slow. I matched her breath with a long "Ahhhh." We breathed five or six times in this peaceful manner and then she closed her eyes and passed on.

My sister had been sitting in another room but came to our mother's bedside when she heard the marked difference in our breathing. I was so grateful that she did because we were able to be together to marvel at this wondrous event. It was through the opening of our combined hearts that our mother was able to pass on.

The physical effect on me afterwards was extraordinary. I felt a pain in my chest that lingered as I tried to fill my lungs fully once again. I felt like I had just completed a marathon. I was exhausted. Then the overwhelming emotions took hold.

The AH Breath was such a gift because it replaced our feelings of helplessness in the face of death with hope for a peaceful passing. My own heart is now filled with both sorrow at the loss of my mother, and with peace and joy.



*Peace is my parting gift to you,
my own peace, such as the world
cannot give. Set your troubled hearts
at rest and banish your fears.*

— Christ at the Last Supper

A Still Cup

For
God
To make love,
For the divine alchemy to work,
The Pitcher needs a still cup.
Why
Ask me to say
Anything more about
Your most
Vital
Requirement?

— Hafiz



In Blackwater Woods

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

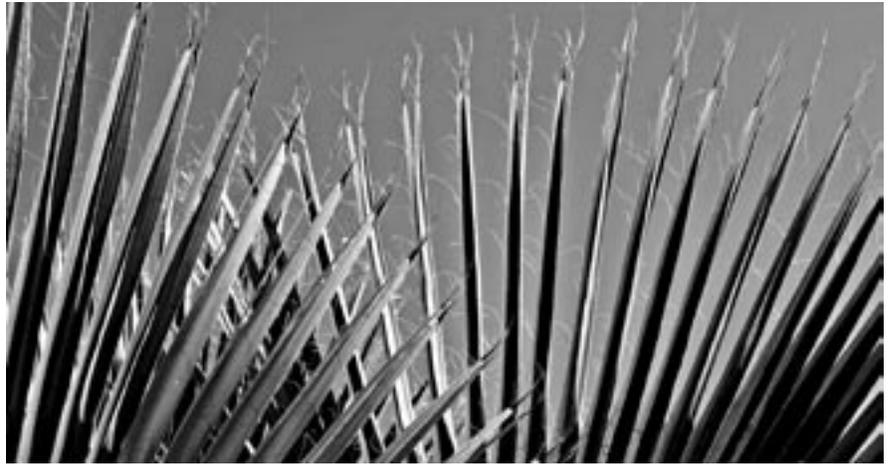
in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

— Mary Oliver



Letter to a Young Activist During Troubled Times

I too have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate. The reason is this: In my uttermost bones I know something, as you do. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here.

The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and the deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But . . . that is not what great ships are built for. . .

This comes with much love and prayer that you remember who you came from, and why you came to this beautiful, needful Earth.

— Clarissa Pinkola Estés



*Our duty is to fall down and
adore where others only bow.*

— Ramakrishna

Balance



*The only thing that matters
is how much you love God,
how deep your love is.*

— Maharaj-ji

This past spring and summer, Phil was my Living/Dying Project client. Phil was 48 years old and lived a mile up the hill from me with his wife Joelle and their son Philip, who had his third birthday during our time together. When I met Phil his oncologist had just told him that the cancer which had begun in his tonsils had spread to such an extent into his head and neck that there was no longer any hope for him to survive much longer.

Usually when I “work” with someone who has a critical illness, this client has definite spiritual issues and questions or definite human emotional issues or, more than likely, both. My job is to see the relative, human dimension and the absolute, spiritual dimension at the same time. It’s not so hard to do one or the other – to be lost in the human drama of the person who might be dying soon while forgetting the spiritual context, forgetting what is real, or, on the other hand, to rest in the vastness of Living Spirit, realizing the perfection of it all, while not being there for the person in that bed who is dying. The challenge is to balance the two, being with the finite humanness and the infinite perfection.

With Phil, this was an easy task. Phil lived in this balance. He had done his spiritual work – I could find no fear in him – but he was also a man, especially a father, and was deeply saddened by the prospect of his young son not having a dad.

By the time Phil died, more than a year had gone by since he had been able to eat or drink or lie down. During the four months that I knew Phil, he lived and died with grace and dignity. When we first met we meditated and explored spiritual things, but there didn’t seem to be anything particularly important that was new to him. So then we started to talk about our beloved Giants. Finally we just sat with nothing to say. No need to be more spiritual or more human – relative and absolute becoming one..

— Dale Borglum



To my dear son Philip,

Philip, I’m writing this letter to you now, while I still can, to say goodbye to you. I hope and pray that God gives me a miracle and that I live through this and heal, but I’m very sick, so that just in case, I write to you now.

You see, son, my doctors say that I’m going to die soon. That means I have to leave my body behind and go on to be with God. This is something that happens to all of us eventually and it is not really a bad thing, but it often makes us really sad and it makes the people we love sad. It means I won’t be here to be with you and mommy and all the other people we love.

It makes me *really, really, really* sad, Philip. I don’t feel ready to die. It feels too soon. There are so many people that I love that I don’t want to leave: you and mommy, Naggie, Paulie and Chris, David and Denise and Ariel, Auntie Evy and Rachael and Michael, Jeff and Chris and Rob, June and Mairrle and Ralph, and so many others...

But Philip, there is one person in the whole world that it makes me the saddest to leave. That person is you, Philip. I love you so, so, so, so much, and I don’t want to leave you. I don’t want to leave you. I love many, many people, Philip, very, very much. But I love you more than anyone else in the world. I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud to be your daddy. You are the most wonderful gift that God ever gave me, and God has given me so many gifts. Just thinking about you makes me feel so happy.

You have a wonderful, bright spirit. You're very, very smart and creative, and you love to laugh and play and have a good time. I hope and pray that these qualities stay with you and grow as you grow. You love people and are good at communicating with them. I know that you will be blessed to have many people in your life who love you.

Loving people (including yourself) is the most important thing in life, Philip. It is something we can learn to do better and better as we grow up; life keeps offering lessons about love. Even though I was already a man when you came to us, and I knew a lot about love, I learned so much more about it from you.

Love comes from the heart, and the more you love, the more your heart grows and opens. Then you can feel more of the love that's around you and your heart grows more.

Since you've been here with us, my heart has grown bigger than it ever was. So my love for you has helped me to love everyone else more too.

I wish I could be beside you as you grow up, to help teach you about life, about the world. There's so much to learn between being a little boy and being a man, and you deserve to have your daddy there for you. Fortunately, your mommy is a very smart and very wise woman and she'll be great at teaching you about life.



*If you want others to be happy,
practice compassion.*

*If you want to be happy,
practice compassion.*

— The Dalai Lama



I'm also going to write more letters to you to help you know what I would have taught you, but there is one thing I want you to know right now, Philip. Even though I'm gone, I'm still your daddy. That means that even though you can't see me, I'm always with you. Every boy and girl is made up half of what their daddy is and half of what their mama is. It's like making a cake—you're half made of me and half of Mama.

Everything I am, Philip, is part of you. You'll have me in your heart all your life. Actually, I'm in your whole body in a way, but whenever you want to talk to me or to feel me with you, you can just tune into your heart. Mommy can help you learn how to do this. That's how I would feel Pop Pop after he died, because he was *my* daddy, he was inside of *me*. (He's inside of you too, because he's half of me and I'm half of you!)

I'll watch over you, Philip, and I believe someday, after you grow up, after you die, we'll be together again in some way. Just know that you have all my blessing, through your whole life.

I love you so, so, much, Philip...

Love,

—DADDY—

*Arms are not enough to keep
the peace. It must be kept by men.*

— John Fitzgerald Kennedy

I think it would be a good idea.

— Gandhi, on being asked for
his views on Western civilization

Mission Statement

Imagine facing death without fear.

Imagine using a life-threatening illness as an opportunity for spiritual awakening.

Imagine approaching the unknown with an open heart.

We often resist change as a natural part of life.

Strength and healing can be found in life's most difficult situations.

The Living/Dying Project offers compassionate support in the spirit of mutual exploration to those facing life-threatening illness.



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Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was one of the initial inspirations for the Living/Dying Project and for many years has been on our Board of Advisors. She died several months ago.

We would like to honor her and express our admiration for the pioneering work she did by bringing death and dying into public awareness in this country and around the world.

Supporting the Living/Dying Project

Dear friends,

Once again we ask for your financial support. Our client services are offered free of charge. We operate with minimal administrative costs. As the stories in this newsletter illustrate, lives are changed by the work we do.

During these politically divisive times, healing our individual and collective relationships with death may be the most immediate and direct means to healing that which divides us from our neighbor. Fear of death is the root of that which separates us from each other and from our own essential selves.

Thank you for your support and prayers.

With love,

Dale Borglum, *Executive Director*



Dear Friends of the Living/Dying Project,

Go Natural Baby, my new company (see below), will launch in February, 2005. I will be donating 100% of its consulting fees for February to the Living/Dying Project, a truly deserving organization nurtured by Dale Borglum.

For 25 years, Dale has been helping people and their families cope with dying. All of his work has been purely from the heart, with no wish for public recognition. He gives all of himself and does so selflessly. Dale and his team of fantastic volunteers offer themselves to many people in need of spiritual support; please offer what you can to the Living/Dying Project in honor of all they do.

Go Natural Baby will offer consulting and an online store featuring natural goods for babies and parents. The sessions will educate families to have a less toxic and healthier home, focusing on children's bedrooms. For February only, I am offering a special, affordable package for friends of the Living/Dying Project that will cover basic household health, so that people with or without children can benefit as well.

In 2005, please visit Go Natural Baby's website: www.gonaturalbaby.com for more information. If my services can help, please schedule a consultation for February. All sessions are conducted via phone.

Many blessings to you and your loved ones,

Justyn Le Drew

Former Associate Director of the Living/Dying Project

The Living/Dying Project

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Credits

The photographs of Phil and of Philip Cardillo were taken by Ralph Menendez. All other photos are by Curtis Grindahl, a Living/Dying Project volunteer. More photos by Curtis can be viewed at treearth.com/

Heartfelt thanks to Steven Englander of Interface Design 415 388-7744 who once again beautifully designed this newsletter.



How alive are you willing to be?