



The Forum

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The Art of Dying: A Mind-Body Transformation

By *Danielle Schroeder*

From personal tragedies to personal triumphs, this is the story of two unique individuals' journeys into death. One, a mother, the other, a friend. Both battling cancer. Both forced to succumb to its authority in the end. What were their experiences like? Where did their journeys take them? These are both questions that we all wonder about and yet, never talk about. I am here to share in these wonders.

As I accompanied both my mother and Jono through their illnesses, watching as cancer proliferated through their bodies, I was most struck by what appeared to be an almost simultaneous mind-body transformation that seemed to be taking place within each of their beings. On the one hand, their once autonomous, energetic physical bodies were slowly disintegrating and regressing back into infantile states—helpless, vulnerable, and incapable. On the other hand, both their minds and inner spirits were expanding into realms of understanding far beyond mortal capacity, reaching places of profound meaning and purpose.

It is this dichotomy experienced during the dying process that I want to explore in this paper. Thanks to my own personal experiences, I now realize that those, like myself, who have had the opportunity to accompany the dying, know just how much of a gift we receive by simply engaging with that person on his/her ultimate journey. This simple sharing of someone else's suffering means being with them as they gradually undergo the collapse of one body, the physical, while making way for the rebirth of their inner body, the mind and spirit. This, to me, is truly the art of dying. I remember how torturous it was for my mother and Jono to watch their once vibrant, powerful physical bodies slowly deteriorate without their having any choice in the matter. My mother was relentless in exercising during the first few months of rigorous chemotherapy treatments. In spite of baldness, nausea, and extreme exhaustion, my mother was adamant that we go to the gym where she would vigorously work out on the Stair Master until I had to physically pull her off it! However, for both my mother and Jono, their initial responses of ignoring the severity of their illnesses ceased once the cancer had contaminated most of their bodies. They knew deep inside themselves what their bodies were telling them, that their sicknesses were spreading and there was no means to stop it. It was at this point that they were able to totally release themselves fearlessly into the arms of their loved ones to care for their fragile, dying bodies.

I remember sitting with Jono and his younger brother a couple of months before he died and telling him how excited I was for the snowboarding season to start. Considering that Jono had grown up going to Whistler every weekend and was an incredible snowboarder and skier himself, his younger brother turned to him and lightheartedly said, “Hey Jono, how about you and I summit one of the peaks at Whistler this winter?” I remember my heart clenching at this moment. As I looked down at my own healthy, youthful body that I so easily took for granted, next to Jono’s tired and fragile frame, I tried to imagine just how frustrated and powerless Jono must have felt at that very moment, hearing those words and knowing that in reality this activity that had once come so easily to him could now never happen. To my amazement, however, Jono turned to us and serenely said, “Who needs to summit a mountain! I would be happy this winter if I could just strap on my ski boots, get myself onto the chairlift, get to the top and then come straight back down the chairlift.” Tears came to my eyes. At that moment I realized just how far Jono had come in terms of accepting the severity and limitations of his illness. I was overcome with admiration.

In my own experience of caring for my mother, I will always look back on the months before she died feeling both privileged and touched by the way she was able to release herself into the care of her children with such ease and appreciation. Instead of giving way to the all-too-classic response of barricading herself in wounded pride, she was able to beautifully and serenely detach from her previous role as “the mother” and open herself up to her children with the affection and trust of any helpless individual in need of care. This new relationship that my mother and I established during those months, in which I was entrusted with bathing her, feeding her and helping cradle her to sleep, not only gave us the opportunity to grow together in such a way that all pretensions ceased to exist, but also allowed us to share in some of our most intimate moments.

During this period when the world of the dying is shrinking and the body is about to disappear, there is a corresponding gain in emotional and psychological capacity. It is as though something awakens in the registers of their deepest selves, and inner life, both intimate and spiritual that allows the heart and soul of the dying to continue growing and expanding. In essence, it is a kind of spiritual freedom that allows a terminally ill patient to be worthy of his or her suffering. It helps them move away from feelings of injustice and needing to ask “Why?” toward a place in themselves where they can pose the question, “For what? Into which paths will my illness lead me?”

I had the opportunity to observe this kind of spiritual transformation taking place in both my mother and Jono, as they turned their unwanted predicaments into meaningful human achievements. For one thing, cancer forced my mother to stop working, which devastated her in the beginning. Considering that she had always been known as “Barbara Bluman, the self-sufficient, hard working lawyer,” without this identity, who was she? It took only a few months into her “cancer routine” of days spent at the Cancer Agency, resting in bed with a book, and long hours spent chatting and laughing with friends and family, that my mother turned to me one day and said, “I never knew life could be so wonderful, so full of love. When I was working I never had the time to stop and think about the simple pleasures, and now that I can, I am the happiest I have ever been.” This was a significant

moment of realization for my mother. For the first time she was allowing herself the privilege of embracing the simple pleasures in life. By simply sharing in all the love that was around her, she was discovering the secrets in life that truly made her the happiest.

As for Jono, I vividly remember sitting with him four months before he died. He told me that he had decided to go on a ten-day solo camping trip to the Spruce Lake area of British Columbia. My initial reaction was, “Are you crazy? You are sure to give your parents a heart attack!” We laughed and he then explained just how necessary this trip was for him. He yearned for the solitude, the tranquility that he always found in the mountains. After six months of treatments, appointments, doctors, and negative news, he needed to be with nature and nature alone. I now realize that at the time I did not grasp the significance of the trip. I was more concerned with the practical implications. What would happen if Jono got really sick or weak while he was there? Not until I was writing this paper was I able to reflect on how important this experience was for Jono and how courageous he was for going through with it despite the apprehensions of the rest of us.

Five days before Jono died, he sat at the dinner table and told of his experience at Spruce Lake. Barely able to speak, he explained how he spent each day lying naked in the moss, meditating. By enclosing himself in this natural healing energy he began to feel stronger. He started to believe that he really was getting better, that just maybe his body was healing itself. At this point in the story everybody at the table held their breath. Jono then continued, “With a few days left in my trip it suddenly came to me with such clarity that all the strength and vitality I was gaining in Spruce Lake was not intended to heal my physical body but was in fact healing my mind and inner spirit.” His words silenced everyone at the table. It was true. His body was not getting better and everybody knew it. But what could be more inspiring than to remember this story, about a young man on the verge of death, who had gone into the wilderness in search of a cure, and came out healed in the most meaningful way there is, having been enlightened in both mind and spirit? Having tried my very best, as both daughter and friend, to accompany these two amazing individuals toward their deaths, I took this opportunity to reflect on their experiences going through the dying process not only for my own sense of comfort, but also to share with others the incomparable beauty and joy that I discovered in the midst of such suffering. Both my mother and Jono taught me about the kind of strength it takes to allow oneself to die with dignity, to realize that “...the dignity we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives” (Nuland, 1995, p. 268). Thanks to them I have come to realize that the art of dying is truly the art of living.

Reference

Nuland, S. B. (1995). *How we die: Reflections on life's final chapter*. New York: Vintage.

Recommended Readings

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About the Author

Danielle Schroeder, while at the University of British Columbia, won ADEC's 2003 Undergraduate Student Paper Award (established in memory of Mary E. Brown) for a slightly longer version of this article. Danielle wrote this paper as a visiting student at McGill University in Montreal while taking Dawn Cruchet's course, "Demystifying Death and Dying."

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