

## Celebrations of Love and Life



My mother was a practical and down-to-earth, but also deeply spiritual person.

Formal religion had hurt her deeply and violated her common sense. She is the one who is famous for listening carefully to a long philosophical conversation about the afterlife, that her granddaughter and group of young adults were having, and at the end of it getting up in disgust to go and cook the dinner saying, "Ag, no man, when you are dead, you are dead, just like a daisy!" She stopped the conversation cold! We still all laugh about it -because of the blunt truth of it in one sense and because it summed up her whole way of approaching the world and her impatience with conjecture especially when it bordered on magical thinking instead of being rooted in good solid research, theory and experience!

However, as she lay dying of lung cancer and listening to my father's grandiose pontificating about the need for closure, the importance of funerals for the living, what he did for his parents, and on and on... (he was talking, actually about his own funeral because he also had cancer and clearly, although his arguments were solid, his plans were far more about his need for pomp and circumstance and attention to be lavished on the memory of his life than anything to do with care for those he was leaving) ... my mother listened carefully with her usual, deeply analytical expression, extracting truth and discarding lies. When my father left she said to me, "I suppose I should allow something for the children and grandchildren, so when I die, just make a nice cup of tea and each of you can bring a flower that you think represents who I was and have a conversation about it. I don't want anything lavish or expensive. It is all just a waste of money!" She was emphatic, unsentimental and practical.

In her statement I recognized that she heard the truth of what my father was saying and dismissed all of his self-aggrandizing. Her solution was for us - not her -otherwise, she would not have agreed to even this. Prior to this she had said, "Burn me and throw the ashes away." She had agreed to entertain the idea of where to throw her ashes and had decided on Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in the Cape, where she had lived as a small child.

My mothers' last days were spent in hospice on a beautiful estate and during those months she took it upon herself to teach the superintendent, matron, nurses, doctors, nurses aids, kitchen staff, cook, ministers, cleaners, social workers and any other "helper," that came her way how to care for the dying with more presence and sensitivity, with more attention, more thought, consideration and care, in her direct and no nonsense and sometimes tart way!

She recognized the new interns terror of death and made them sit down next to her and talk to her and told them stories and what it was like to die.

Miraculously what we witnessed was that she was surrounded more and more with people who, rather than being defensive at her suggestions, deferred to her, asked her opinion and learnt from her.

The food became healthier and was presented with little touches like fresh herbs and a small vase of flowers that she taught them made the food a little more tempting for people with no appetites. The dietician came and conferred with her about menus. The rooms which were clean to start with, took on an extra sparkle. Her windows were washed every week so she could look out without spots hindering her view! The nurses started pouring out their own problems to her, the sheets of the beds were once again folded in at a 33 degree angle! The laundry started coming back carefully folded and was put away with care. The hairdressers started giving head massages when they washed the patients' hair.

She told the minister to not read and impose scripture and that if she did she could get out! She said to her, "If you want to do it my way and really listen instead of evangelizing your damn stupid ideas, you can stay!" And the minister started listening instead of ministering!

When my mother died a silent pall fell over the place. Her night nurse, Julia, held my hand until the early hours of the morning telling me stories my mother had told her about her life, in the African way of honoring and respecting both the living and the dead and creating a bridge of love and meaning between them. We both cried - I at the stories I already knew so well, and she, at the loss of a woman who had been present to her as a young, struggling black nurse as she lay dying. They had found a deep inner sisterhood between them that healed a lifetime of suspicion and fear created by apartheid.

The next day everyone, from the gardeners, to the cooks, the nurses and other patients were silent, withdrawn, tearful, and everyone had a story for my sister and I of some way in which

my mother had touched their lives.

I remembered what my mother had wanted - a simple gathering over a cup of tea. And so we sent out a notice to invite everyone to the little chapel on the estate to celebrate her life with tea afterwards. No minister would preside. My sister and I would do the ritual. My sister was nervous as we were breaking with time honored tradition of the stuffy, lifeless liturgy of the Anglican church.

We invited everyone who would like to come to bring a flower that represented my mother in their mind and heart and arranged for the tea afterwards. It was late summer in Africa, the great oak trees on the estate were starting to drop the occasional yellowed leaf - the gardens were a riot of color, the last roses in the rose garden had a profusion of autumn roses reaching for the heavens and the sun streamed in the stained glass windows - and people started arriving, more and more people until there was standing room only, each with a flower in their hands.

My sister and I were astonished that our mother who could be blunt and direct, who called "a spade a spade," and had no truck with what she called "nonsense," and "didn't suffer fools gladly," had commanded the respect and love of so many people. In her dying the attention that was always focused on my father shifted to her, in quiet recognition of the solid demand for respect and presence that she insisted on getting in her last year of life, but more importantly, that she gave her entire life.

I had placed a very large, old brass bomb shell on the altar. It was an heirloom from her grandfather who had been in a British prisoner of war camp in India. My mother had always used this relic of destruction from the First World War as a vase and filled it with long stemmed roses, the symbol of transformation, love, compassion and enlightenment. It took three or four dozen long stemmed roses. I polished it until it shone as she would have wished.

We opened with a reading that I thought captured her beliefs:

When I die, if you need to weep  
Cry for your brother or sister,  
Walking the street beside you  
And when you need me put your arms around anyone  
And give what you need to give me.  
I want to leave you something  
Something better than words or sounds.  
Look for me in the people I've known or loved  
And if you cannot give me away  
At least let me live in your eyes and not on your mind.  
You can love me most by letting hands touch hands  
By letting bodies touch bodies  
And by letting go of children that need to be free.

Love doesn't die, people do  
So when all that's left of me is love  
Give me away.

I had spent my entire adult life in other countries, returning home to South Africa once a year. During these times my mother lavished every ounce of love and attention on me - my room would be ready with fresh cut flowers, freshly starched and ironed white sheets, delicate rose and lavender scented bath salts, soaps and lotions. She cooked all my favorite foods and the fridge was filled with childhood favorites - lemon curd, and liver pate. The cookie tin was filled with jam drops, melting moments and an assortment of the most delicious home baked treats. She always said to me, "When you are not here, I give to others what I want to give to you." I learnt this from her, and imperfectly practice what she did all her life - extend to all that cross our paths the presence and attention of our hearts, whether plants, animals or people.

Then I invited anyone who would like to come up and say a few words about why they had brought the flower they had chosen and then to place it in the vase. The tears started flowing - everyone had a flower and everyone had a special reason for the flower they chose. Sunflowers, proteas, pansies, daisies(!), roses, delphiniums, lilies, strelitzias, irises, forget-me-nots, arum lilies, flame lilies, carnations and orchids.

Everyone represented a story, a quality, a memory. I was happy that one step granddaughter came forwards with yellow Barbeton daisy - for all the lemon curd my mother made - a hallmark of her love - everyone there could taste the scones with lemon curd and clotted cream, and we wept. Another grandson brought a cactus - and we all laughed - we all loved her direct and sometimes caustic ways, even when they had pricked a bit - we learnt from her. Her favorite rose, a beautiful delicate apricot colored tea rose called "Just Joey," graced the church on it's own separate table in a crystal vase.

The bombshell was too small. We fetched more containers and three hours later, everyone had said something about my mother and there was not a dry eye in the chapel. A profusion of flowers covered the altar.

The black nurses spontaneously gathered and broke into acapella singing, hymn after hymn, stirring, haunting, rousing, joyous and honoring. A nurse called Bubbles, who wanted to be an opera singer sang Jennifer Berezan's "She Carries Me," one of the many CD's my mother gave her and told her to practice! We prayed a prayer of compassion I wrote for my mother, recognizing that in her dying she came home to herself and her love and compassion radiated out from her heart in endless waves of service.

Let the light of your infinite Love  
Work within me  
Transform me,  
shine through me

And be translated by me into endless acts of compassion.  
May I learn to humble myself so that I may be penetrated by your Spirit,  
Conceive of the vastness of your Love,  
Become pregnant with a deep longing and desire to  
Be your loving hands in dark and despairing places,  
And give birth to a life of faithful and joyful service to you, my Beloved,  
In the faces of all I encounter.  
May I learn to see deeply into the darkness  
Of my own wounded heart  
So that I may understand the dark deeds of  
Others with compassion, not judgment.  
May I learn to accept and befriend my  
Own pain so that I can be present to the  
Pain of others with unashamed nakedness and humility.  
May I discover the enemy of anger and hatred, bitterness and  
Deceit within myself and forgive myself,  
For acts born of fear and shame,  
So that I may learn mercy, and how to make peace  
With those who are despised and spurned.  
May I learn to be gentle, patient and kind with myself  
So that I may be tender and caring with others,  
Knowing that only then, can they make different choices.  
Help me to help myself and discover the infinite power within,  
So that I can trust others to do the same for themselves  
May I learn to speak up boldly on behalf of myself  
So that I can speak up for all humanity.  
May I learn to be fierce in my desire to be truthful and loving  
so that I may be bold in insisting on the same from others  
Let the light of your radiant Love,  
Work within me,  
Transform me,  
Shine through me and be translated by me  
into endless acts of compassion.  
And, so may all beings come to know joy. Amen

And at the end I explained to those congregated that we would leave with a blessing to one another by anointing each other with rose oil with the words, of "Leave this gathering and go and be of compassionate service to the world, in the name of and in remembrance of Angeline." Again, my sister blanched at the idea of corrupting the liturgy of the church, but I knew in my heart that no matter what, this was the right ending. I announced it and the rigid conformist training of that generation created a momentary pause of uneasiness and then Julia came forward and took the rose oil and anointed the little old white lady next to her with the sign of the cross, the glorious symbol of integration and wholeness, that when attained results in the blossoming of the rose at it's

center, in the heart of humanity. \_\_

There was a palpable silence and then a deep relaxation as she passed the little vial to her to anoint the person next to her. The space reverberated with the quiet murmuring of blessing Black and white, young and old repeated the blessing and the tears flowed for my mother but also for themselves, not perhaps recognizing the presence of compassion that danced like static in the air.

And then we all went and had a “nice cuppa tea,” with cookies

.  
A year later I returned to South Africa and my sister and I took the cardboard box of ashes on a plane to Kirstenbosch National Botanical Gardens. As my mother had requested she had been cremated in a cheap wooden box so as to create a minimum of environmental impact. We walked to Lady Ann Barnard’s bath - a beautiful historical pond built around a natural spring coming out of the side of Table Mountain - a place of immense beauty, surrounded by natural ferns and hardwood forest. We sat on a bench quietly and read one of her granddaughters writings as requested by her. She wrote;

Sunflowers are symbols of the sun god and represent warmth, abundance, and loyalty to the divine.

Granny, I honor your warmth, your radiance, your glow, the sparkle in your eyes like the bright yellow petals of the sunflower which evoke feelings of warmth and happiness.

I honor your strength in reaching out boldly to others with openness and confidence, and your integrity and courage to stand up for your values, for what you know is good and true politically, socially, relationally - like a sunflower that stands tall in a field.

I honor your abundant generosity – the rich nurturance and sustenance (medically, physically, emotionally) you freely give to humans and creatures with openness, acceptance and compassion, like the sunflower feeds humans, birds and livestock and is used medicinally to heal.

I honor your practicality, common sense and wise mind that extracts simple truths from complexity and I honor your complexity like the sunflower is not one flower, but a cluster of more than 2000 tiny flowers growing together.

I honor your loyalty, constancy and commitment to increasing your self awareness– like the sunflower that follows the sun.

I honor your gift of turning the ordinary into sacred beauty through your intentionality, attention, care, consideration and creativity like the pattern of interconnecting [spirals](#) in the sunflower’s florets which follow the Fibonacci principle, consistent with life and sacred geometry.

Granny, for all these things the sunflower reminds me of you – because you are beautiful standing tall with integrity and with an open giving and illuminated heart. And most of all, Granny, I honor your inner strength and courage to face your fears and follow the sun, to gain illumination/awareness to transform your fears into greater compassion for yourself and others. May you go in peace.

We love and honor you,  
Eloise and Ethan (granddaughter and great-grandson)

We wept, Eloise knew her grandmother! We fingered the soft ashes with little fragments of my mothers bones. Like the elephants that return to the bones of their dead, gently touching them with their trunks, sadly mourning the loss and then moving as a herd slowly on, it seemed we needed to return to the place of bones and mourn them one last time before we threw her ashes into the water. The pond turned milky white and cloudy and slowly the ashes settled or floated on down stream - to be absorbed back into the earth and nourish it - as in life, so in death. And the spirit of my mother, the spirit of love permeated the air on that hot African day.

#### Song of the Flower

I am a kind word uttered and repeated  
By the voice of Nature;  
I am a star fallen from the  
blue tent upon the green carpet.  
I am the daughter of the elements  
with whom Winter conceived;  
To whom Spring gave birth; I was  
Reared in the lap of Summer and I  
Slept in the bed of Autumn.  
At Dawn I unite with the breeze  
To announce the coming of light;  
At eventide I join the birds  
In bidding the light farewell.  
The plains are decorated with  
My beautiful colors, and the air  
Is scented with my fragrance.  
As I embrace Slumber the eyes of  
Night watch over me, and as I  
Awaken I stare at the sun, which is  
The only eye of the day.  
I drink dew for wine, and hearken to  
The voices of the birds, and dance  
To the rhythmic swaying of the grass.  
I am the lover's gift; I am the wedding wreath;  
I am the memory of a moment of happiness;

I am the last gift of the living to the dead;  
I am part of joy and a part of sorrow.  
But I look up high and see only the light,  
And never look down to see my shadow.  
this is wisdom which man must learn.  
Kahlil Gibran