

Gifts from the Portal

by Laura Weaver

Death and life are companions—tango partners strutting across the dance floor of existence. And yet so often in Western culture, death is banished to the shadows, hidden behind closed doors, talked about in hushed voices—as if death were a terrible secret, as if death were something we could hide from if only we knew where to hide. Over a two-year period, I had the heart-wrenching, earth-shattering, and soul-cracking experience of walking with three dear women friends through their deaths from cancer. Each woman danced her own tango with death with tremendous beauty, honesty, and courage. And each woman allowed for the wholeness of her own experience to be witnessed—the terror and peace, the hope and despair, the dismantling of her body, and the luminosity of her spirit.

During those two years, I became well acquainted with blood transfusions and morphine drips; oxygen machines and medical marijuana; the wisdom of hospice nurses and the tender complexity of grief. Death pulled me so close to that portal between here and there that I could hear strange and beautiful music filtering through and smell the scent of the other side on my own skin. Death pulled me so close that I began to see that my avoidance of it had cut me off from some of the juicy bounty of life.

I began to wonder what would happen to us as individuals and a people if we met our lives with a full understanding of how integral dying is to life. How would our world change if we were not constantly running from death's presence? What if we stopped characterizing dying from an illness as a battle lost? What if we allowed ourselves to see beyond the surreal and desensitizing media images of death into the intimate realities of dying? What if we experienced death as a compassionate presence that is with us in every moment—in our own cells and souls, in each other, in our world? What if the angel of death was our guide and mentor instead of our nemesis? It is in the spirit of sharing our truths about death, of opening the door to this forbidden room, that I offer these stories of three women

whose lives and deaths transformed my own experience of living.

Sonia

It is late summer, and the foothills are filled with waving grasses gone to seed, the landscape tawny and honeyed. We sit in Sonia's living room, the afternoon sun lighting up her face and the scar on the back of her head.

"It's a snake," I say, startled by the raw beauty of the sinuous jeweled track stitched into her skull.

She laughs, then asks, "What do you think that means?"

"I don't know," I say, shrugging. "Transformation? Shedding your skin?"

She laughs heartily. "Well, I'm certainly doing that."

Sonia is two weeks out from a brain surgery to remove a cancerous tumor. A month ago she had a radical mastectomy to remove her left breast and multiple lymph nodes—the surgery has left her with constant edema and limited range of motion. Her recovery is going smoothly, and yet she knows a long road stretches ahead—chemotherapy, horrendous odds, the unknown—again and again, the unknown. She is a single mother of four children. I watch her two daughters and two sons move through the rooms, a certain look in each of their eyes. They shudder each time the oxygen tank kicks on again.

After they are gone she takes me by the shoulders and asks me, "What if I'm dying? What if I don't make it?" A long pause stretches between us. There is nothing I can say to fill the void of the unknown. She continues. "I just have to take the next step and then the next one. I have no other choice." I take her hand and kiss her fingers, and we sit quietly watching the sun trace squares of light across the walls.

Months pass. Winter comes. Sonia is sitting on her bed, tears streaming down her face.

"I've gotten behind on my surrendering," she says. In the last weeks, her lung has collapsed again and again. The sound of the oxygen tank in her home has become ubiquitous. Chemotherapy has thinned her hair, changed her complexion, stolen her appetite. Some days it is only a bowl of Lucky Charms that she can get down. Over the last few days, a milkshake here and there, a bowl of cereal, a few peanut M&Ms.

I look for authentic words. "Illness brings so much chaos," I say. "You wouldn't be human if you didn't resist, if you weren't afraid. Who is asking you to hold this perfectly? What is perfectly? You read these damn cancer books and they tell you on the one hand not to repress your emotions, especially anger and sadness, but on the other hand maintain a good attitude and positive outlook. What's a woman to do?"

She shrugs and we laugh at the impossibility of it all, the cosmic joke of the whole situation. Laughter is medicine and comes as frequently as the tears these days. Looking into her eyes, I feel the impossible paradoxes death brings. Our organism is programmed to survive—it is the most primary impulse in the body. Its instinct is to hold on. I think of birth—and how contraction and expansion are both essential aspects of labor. What if our resistance is just part of the natural way we move through transitions? What if the resistance is just as essential as our surrender?

It is springtime. Sonia's last. Forsythia. Apple blossoms. Lilacs. Iris. In the last weeks, something has shifted. Knowing she is dying, Sonia is having intimate conversations with each of her children and loved ones to say goodbye.

One day she says to me, "You know, I'm sorry about what happened between us." A year before, we had gone through a period of distance in our friendship. "I don't want to revisit it—because it doesn't matter now, but I just want to acknowledge it. You're here now. I'm here now. That's what matters." I squeeze her hand and thank her, moved by

her courage to say the unsayable—to forgive, to seek forgiveness, to reach beyond the boundaries the ego so often imposes in our everyday lives. There are no more old resentments, nothing to hold back.

More and more she is in between. Morphine. Medical marijuana. The pull of that other world. Sitting with her, we swing from deep grief and despair to hysterical laughter and giddiness. The combination of the drugs and the dying process make for wild conversations. She tells me what she sees. In the last weeks, spirits of the dead have begun to visit her. I watch her sense a presence, react to things I cannot see. At one point, she speaks of the healing she is doing for her lineage. It's as if she can feel the bigger web she is part of, the arc of a vast story.

More and more, the rational world crumbles and linear forms of communication fail. Silence, breath, and touch become our potent territory of communion. One morning as I am sitting with her, she grabs my hand hard and whispers urgently to me.

“Where am I going? Who will I become?”

I don't know what to say. How do I answer this with any certainty? “What are you afraid of?” I ask her.

“Annihilation. Total annihilation.” I watch her free fall. I watch her sense of self unravel. I can't pull her back from the lip of that precipice. Then her face shifts, and she smiles.

“But it's all love, isn't it? It's all love.”

I nod. “Yes,” I say. “Yes, it is.”



It is the last day of school. Sonia is a schoolteacher, and she earlier told a friend that she would wait to die until school was over so as not to disrupt her children's lives. This was just like her to think of others in this way, even into her death. Through the sheer force of her indomitable will, she would find a way to hold out.

For days now, we have felt Sonia slipping into the other world. Tonight she is breathing heavily, mechanically. Something has happened in the last 24 hours, and her body seems almost vacant. Her sister suspects she has had a stroke. Reluctantly I prepare to go, kissing her on the forehead, feeling this might be the last time.

At seven the next morning, Sonia's sister-in-law comes knocking on my door. “Sonia just passed—please come over and help us.” I get up immediately and go to her house—the eastern light flooding her bedroom. There is Sonia—still, no breath, her skin tone and color changing

already, her spirit no longer occupying her body. The family is planning a three-day, in-house vigil. They do not want to use a funeral home. Beautifully and tenderly, a small group of women lay Sonia out on a blanket. Then each woman in the circle speaks a line of a poem, dips her cloth in the bowl of water, and bathes this precious body. “I bless this hair that the wind has played with,” one woman says, then passes the bowl. “I bless your eyes that have looked on us with love.” We pass the washcloth, stroke her hair and face, weep. “I bless these hands that have shaped wonders.” When we are complete, we wrap her body in a sheet and lay her in a cardboard coffin with flowers. She will remain here for three days, her body preserved with dry ice. In this particular death rite, it is believed that the body and spirit need three days to fully part ways before the spirit can move freely on the otherworld—unencumbered, complete.

We feel Sonia's spirit hovering nearby as people came to say their goodbyes.

Throughout the vigil, people move in and out of Sonia's room with songs, prayers, readings, photographs. Children run in and out laughing and playing. Many meet death for the first time here in this room. On the third day, a small group of us gather, cry, celebrate, sing, and send her off with a friend who takes her to the crematorium in a cardboard coffin adorned with flowers and offerings in the back of his Subaru. Later, her ashes will be spread in the nearby mountains. Her memorial will be full of sunflowers, children, and a wild chorus of Abba's "Dancing Queen."



Sarah

Sarah knew she was dying. Somewhere deep inside her she knew. She would look at us in those last months, her gaze drawn from some other place, as if she already held the vast cosmos within her. Through her eyes beamed a sense of galactic time—nebulae, black holes, just-birthing stars.

When Sarah was first diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer in July, she immediately started chemotherapy. At first the chemo worked splendidly—she had a 50 percent reduction in her tumors in two months. But soon after

that, something shifted. Perhaps the onslaught of chemotherapy became too much for her immune system or perhaps her body knew it was simply her time to die. The cancer load began to gain momentum and, instead of disappearing, the lesions on her liver multiplied at breakneck speed. She continued to try new treatments, and each week she would simply work to gather enough strength and resilience in her system to go back for the next round.

Today I visit Sarah in the hospital—she has checked herself in for a second time

this month for fluids and rehydration. "I need rest," she tells me, her voice hoarse and distant. We eat our soup together, the winter light filtering through the curtains. "It's quiet here," she says, "and nobody is begging me to live, nobody is telling me about the next chemotherapy plan." An hour later a hospice doctor visits us. Kind and tender, she sits with Sarah and tells her what she sees. The treatments aren't working. Perhaps it's time to consider going off the chemotherapy, to focus on your quality of life. My heart is breaking listening to this. No one has been this straight with her. And though we wish it wasn't so, someone is naming what is true, and that is a relief. There is no going back. There is no return.

Sarah weeps with terror and relief—no more chemo.

But a day later, she changes her mind. There have been many other conversations. Think about your kids. You have to fight. There's always the hope, the chance—this next treatment. And the next. You can't just give up. And so she starts up again. More chemo. A last try. Maybe, just maybe, it will work.

There is a dark lie in our medical paradigm—a message that if we decide to stop treatment, we are giving up. It is a complex paradox to both hold out for possibilities and miracles without

conspiring with the denial of the dying process so that our end-of-life experience becomes a jungle of crises, emergency treatments, tubes and treatments. And yet, watching Sarah, I am struck again and again with a sense of deep humility—how can I know, how can any of us know, what we would choose in those moments? There is no "right" path here. And perhaps the chemo will make a difference. We are in the realm of the unknown. I bow to this. And though my heart aches, I understand that she has to give this one more shot.

A few weeks before Sarah's death, I ask her what she wants of life. She writes back: "I want nothing more than to know that I am one of God's brilliant ideas and that there is nothing I have to do to earn my keep." She is filled with these luminous moments. She is a woman stripped away of all of her outer layers, so that her inner bark shines. And from this place, she can access naked wisdom from some newly accessible reservoir of her soul.

The last round of chemotherapy is overwhelming. Nasty white blisters appear across her face. Her body struggles under the toxic load. Three days before Sarah dies, I go to her house to check in on her before leaving for work. I find her half in, half out of her body with the drugs and disease. She cannot function, and I do my best to help her get to the bathroom, bathe her, brush her hair, dress her, and settle her onto the couch. Then I phone the hospice nurse and describe what is happening. She calls an impromptu home visit meeting with the hospice doctor and social worker. They arrive at the same time as two other friends, and we all sit around Sarah in a circle in her living room trying to take in the reality of what the doctor is saying—she is dying. She has to choose: chemo or hospice. She cannot have hospice care while she is under treatment. "No chemo," Sarah says vehemently, exhausted. "No more chemo." Tears are streaming down all of our faces. No more tubes and procedures and treatments and interventions and tests.

The next day Sarah moves to a hospice center. Here she can get rest and the round-the-clock care she needs. When she arrives at the center, she tells the doctor, "I still want to come home." She is grieving her sons—eight and twelve. "I can't leave my babies."

The next morning, I come to sit with her and immediately feel that something has

shifted. Overnight an angel must have visited, for some alchemical grace has transformed her fear. Her face is peaceful, her eyes distant.

“I can’t tough it out anymore,” she says plainly, clearly.

“I know you can’t, honey. You don’t have to fight anymore. You can let go. It’s okay to let go.” Holding her hand, I wash her hot face with a cool cloth and sing to her. Two friends arrive, and we join together and sing wordless melodies. She is no longer eating or drinking. She is being drawn by the pull of the tides of that other world.

Over the next hours, friends and family come and go. The night wears on. A friend and I decide to stay through the night, as we sense that Sarah will pass in the next few hours. About 10:00pm, we approach a hospice nurse to ask her what her assessment is of Sarah’s condition.

“A few hours at most,” she says. “But you never know—sometimes there are surprises. I’ve seen patients hold on for days if they are waiting to see someone. Don’t be fooled. She isn’t simply asleep. She is doing very important work now,” she says, explaining that many people experience a kind of life review at this stage in their dying.

And then she tells us, “There’s another man on the floor who is very close to death. It sounds strange, but we’ve seen it time and time again—people die in waves. It’s as if one person opens the door and a number of souls go through together. My bet is that’s what will happen.” How beautiful to think that in our dying we shepherd each other across some threshold, that even in this passage we are not alone.

By midnight, my friend and I are exhausted and curl up on the couch in the waiting room to get some rest. At 1:30am we hear the rush of nurses in the hallway, the announcement that the man down the hall has passed on. We sit up, wide-eyed and awake. We know this man has opened the portal wide, and we wonder if he is waiting for Sarah to join him.

Twenty minutes later, Sarah’s sister calls us in to the room. Sarah is in the last stages of her dying—her breathing has changed again and now it comes quickly, erratically. Then again, she shifts, her face softens. She opens her eyes and looks at us, through us, up and to the left, off to some place we cannot follow. Her wide-eyed gaze is penetrating and fierce and

full of grace—of this view that is only hers to see. And then minutes later, her breath comes in gasps. We tell her we love her; that it is okay for her to go. And then she simply stops breathing.

Within minutes, we can see that Sarah is no longer present in her body. Her body is like a vacant house with all of its original form but no occupant. And yet watching her, we can also feel that her body is continuing to undergo a process of its own—something is releasing and unwinding. Sarah is here and not here.

As we sit with her body, we feel that door to that other world closing. People come and go and say goodbye. Finally it is just one other friend and I with Sarah. It is strange to be with her like this. Alone. Silent. We keep expecting her to start breathing again. We stay with her over an hour—talk to her and tell her jokes. We feel her presence so strongly it makes the hair on the back of our necks stand on end. And then we sense that it is time for us to go. It is time for us to let her go.

Michelle

She wears a short, blonde wig as she greets me on her front porch—her smile as wide and full of light as ever. Her hair is almost gone from the series of chemotherapy treatments she is undergoing. We take a walk along her country road, past the cottonwood trees turning autumn gold, the brook gurgling with just spilled rain, the horses switching their tails in the afternoon light. She shares the news—the doctors have told her that this last round of chemotherapy is no longer working—the cancer has mutated and the old approach is no longer effective—they want to try another concoction. She tells me how in the appointment her husband had pushed back—what if this next treatment doesn’t work? Then we’d try another, says the doctor. And after that, if that doesn’t work? The doctor pauses and sighs—then it’s palliative and hospice care.

Despite the months of chemotherapy she has undergone, Michelle doesn’t look or feel sick. Somehow she has retained a vibrancy, a brilliance from the inside out. She does not have the tell-tale ashy gray skin tone that indicates the presence of chemo in the system. As I walk with her, I think—if she is dying, then she’s doing it New Orleans style—with pizzazz and vigor, horns blasting and flags flying. If she is getting ready for this next phase of transformation, then she is a caterpillar preparing to build its own jade chrysalis threaded through with this gold that is her soul.



She tells me she cannot even let this latest news into her system—she just can’t let it in. She’s not sure what she’ll do—another round of a different chemo, or take a two month break, see what the tumors do and then make a decision. She is not sure how to make these decisions and yet, somehow, she is walking with such lightness, somehow her smile is absolutely radiant. Perhaps she knows somewhere that illness and dying is not a tragedy—but a part of our agreement with life. Perhaps she has a sense of the bigger story that this cancer journey is part of.

Two weeks ago, she said to me, “Perhaps I am being called to help from the other side—to assist with this rite of passage the planet is in the midst of.” Her words struck home. They felt true. Just as we are called to unknown places in life, perhaps we are called for a particular reasons to the other side. But what is the other side? How strange that we can sense this place or state where we arrive from and return to but have so little understanding of it. Walking with Michelle along the road, listening to her news, the words of the hospice nurses echo in my mind: “We couldn’t do this job if we didn’t know with every fiber of our being that death is not the end.”

It is Thanksgiving and Michelle is in constant, chronic hip pain. The pain has etched something different in her face and body—something more uncertain. She wonders if she will ever be the same after this, if her spirits will be restored, or whether her condition will continue to degenerate. First there’s the pain, then the pain drugs to manage the pain, then the nausea from the pain drugs, then the anti-nausea medicine that simply knocks her out for hours at a time. She says, within the cauldron of this pain, she is only able to survive moment to moment to moment. Breath to breath. The pain is everything, her world shrinking around it. “When I feel like this, all I want to do is be held,” she says, tears welling up in her eyes. She says she can no longer trust her own intuition because there is so much fear. She doesn’t know what to do. Doesn’t know what’s happening. We talk about the force of disintegration—the blasting, overwhelming, undeniable force of disintegration.

A few weeks later, I sit on the edge of Michelle’s hospital bed as she receives the second blood transfusion in two weeks. Her eyes are closed and she is so deeply peaceful—the sensory world is becoming too much now. She is listening and speaking from a deep well within. She says the hospice doctor told her she was dying—that she only has a month or two left. She says she doesn’t feel like she is dying. If only she can get on top of this pain, things could turn around. She’s angry with him, this doctor—she feels he’s given her a death sentence. How is she supposed to maintain hope in the face of that prognosis? This is the tension between the possibility of a turnaround and the acceptance of the dying process. How to hold both sides?

Michelle tells me that even though she’s angry with this hospice doctor, he has

her thinking about closure. She asks me, “What does closure mean? How do I do it well? Do I need to tell people everything I’ve ever thought about them? Do I need to share my untold secrets?” As she talks about one friend who she recently had conflict with, she says, “It’s funny—I have nothing left to process with him, because now all that is left is love. All the rest has fallen away.” The stories that have bound her to this world begin to unravel, to release their hold. I watch her unhook. It is like a sailcloth tearing free.



Michelle knows I have walked with two other friends through death. At one point, she says to me, “I’d like to know what you have learned about death from watching your friends die.” I have no idea what I can say about these mysteries. I can only share what I have felt, sensed. How, when the door between worlds swings wide in birth or death, the pulsing, awake, essence-of-being pours through. How, when this portal is open, there is simply this undeniable presence. This knowing is always available to us, and yet, in the threshold moments, it becomes ever more palpable. Finally I speak, try to say something true. “We are held,” I finally say. “No matter what, we are always held.” But the words feel too small for their meaning. They are mere shadows, pointers.

I wake up knowing this is her day—I simply feel it in my bones. A few hours later I get a call asking me to join another woman at the hospice center to sit vigil. I arrive and immediately see what is

happening—Michelle has entered an active dying stage—her breath labored and rattling. My friend and I have to move against our own impulses to keep her alive. Every time her breath becomes ragged, we want to run to the hospice nurse and say, “Fix this, stop the rattling, this isn’t right.” But this is what death is, this is how it happens—her organs must shut down, and she must stop breathing—this is the way through the portal.

Michelle’s eyes are closed and she is deeply inside herself. For days I have felt her engaging in this process of internal alchemy, in which all of her energies are drawn inward to stoke the inner fires. She is transmuting her pain and suffering, she is letting go of this life, this version of herself. She is preparing herself to cross this great threshold. I know she hears and feels us as we sit and stroke her feverish brow, sing to her, whisper to it—it’s okay, this is normal, this is just the body letting go.

A friend has called a prayer vigil for 2 o’clock that afternoon, feeling that Michelle might need the support of a circle of loved ones to help her make this final passage. We will gather in the meeting room down the hall from Michelle’s room. In the meantime, we simply witness and support her process—it is like labor and we her doulas. She is moving closer and closer to transition, to the point when the contractions come one on top of the other without any pause

between. Sometime in the early afternoon something shifts in her, and we both feel a tidal wave of heat and electricity coming off of her body. It nearly bowls us over. It is the fierce light of fission as body and soul separate. Tremendous waves of energy release, pouring over us in a waterfall of invisible light.

Thirty of us gather in a circle. We start off with prayers—then move to singing. A young woman leads us in a simple rendition of a hallelujah song—just a

portal that has been thrown open before us. I find myself carried down the hall by some force I do not understand. I find myself in the hospital room where Michelle lays in her bed, her sons beside her. I put my hands on her body and again feel the waves of electricity pouring off her, that sense of fission, of splitting apart, of separation. Her spirit is gone, and yet something is here—all of her memories, all this intelligence that lives in the cells, this deep imprint of consciousness that is embedded in this

thread in a tapestry. And though I cannot pick up the phone to call them, they are each available in some very different way. In the wake of their deaths, I do not feel absence—but a deep and wide presence.

The gifts from the portal keep coming. Sometimes it is a flash of a smile, and I think—ah, yes, that's Michelle—and she is encouraging me to leap where I am most afraid. Or I hear a guttural, wild laugh in a crowded room, and I think, oh, yes, thank you, Sonia—it is good to laugh—life can be way too serious. Or I am walking along a trail and feel Sarah's presence and think—oh, to be one of God's brilliant ideas for a time on this earth. To know I do not have to earn my keep. To be this, here, now. Let me always remember. Let me never forget. 🌐



few chords. We begin gently, slowly. Then the song gains strength and speed and volume. It builds and harmonies interweave, the chorus swelling to a pitch. We can all feel it coming, this crescendo. Michelle's crowning is close. Standing in that circle, I do not even know where my hand ends and another's begins. I am shaking and singing from somewhere I have never sung before. The portal is opening. We are opening it for Michelle and she for us. The view is vast and breathtaking—and what flows through is ecstatic, pure presence. I feel like we all might drop to the floor and begin speaking in tongues. A most primal language is here in the room, and we are all part of its utterance.

Just as the hallelujah song reaches its peak, the hospice nurse comes in, announcing that Michelle has passed, confirming what we have felt. We are all weeping and sweating and trembling—full of this bliss and grief, overwhelmed and bewildered by the blast from the

form. We sit in silence with her. Now she is everywhere, and every corner of the cosmos is singing her name.

I recently heard a story of a woman in a hospice center. She met her dying with full awareness and consciousness of her own dying process—engaging in meditation practice on a daily basis, talking directly about her death with others, and meeting every single day she had left with an open heart. She knew she only had a few months left of life. And yet when she finally entered the hospice center in the heat of summer, she brought a winter coat with her, *just in case*. Just in case. In the late fall before my friend Sarah died, she bought a bright pair of spring sandals—*just in case*. Perhaps, just perhaps, she would have the chance to walk through her flower garden one last time, to see the poppies bursting open.

I miss the in-the-flesh presence of these women every day and feel their essence informing my life like radiant strands of

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