

Putting Things in Perspective

Stories from a Hospice Volunteer: Mia and Joe

- By Tim Tosta

One evening, upon entering the ward, I noticed a slight, attractive Chinese woman attending her father, who occupied the quiet room on the left just beyond the common room. The father, Joe, had not been in the ward the week before. The awkward position of Joe's body, his poor coloring and his erratic breathing all signaled to me that he was in his final hours of life. When I asked his daughter, Mia, if I could be of any help, she looked at me with a profound sadness and shook her head, "No."

Following our shift meeting, I made my way back to visit Alejandro, who at the time occupied the first bed on the right upon entering the men's ward. An enthusiastic student of life, reading and storytelling were Alejandro's passions. He and I would talk for hours about his philosophy, his world travels, and the many women who frequented his life. On this particular evening, as I pulled up one of the dark brown metal chairs to his bedside, I was cognizant of the fact that I was no more than 20 feet from the room where Mia sat vigil for her father. I had trouble focusing my full attention on Alejandro. My ear remained cocked toward Joe's room, listening for that call for help I anticipated any moment.

If you have not had the experience, it is never easy to watch someone die. Detaching the spirit from the body takes a lot of effort. You hear talk of "good deaths" and "bad deaths" in a hospice ward. These references have more to do with the mental, emotional and spiritual states of the resident at the time of death than they do to the physical. No matter how you cut it, there is work in dying.

Even though the state mandated death certificate form requires a physician to choose the "cause of death," which he/she dutifully supplies, most of those dying of a protracted illness die in a very similar manner. The death certificate may list the "cause" as cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, AIDS or hepatitis C. But, it is usually pneumonia that brings life to an end.

Pneumonia generally is caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites or lung injury. When we are well, our body's resistance keeps pneumonia at bay. With the advance of a primary disease in a hospital setting, the resident's immune system reaches a point where it can no longer resist the advance of secondary lung infection. And so pneumonia begins. It starts with a hacking cough. The resident then experiences fever and chest pain. As the infection increases in virulence, the lungs become congested and the resident experiences greater difficulty in metabolizing ambient oxygen. As breathing becomes difficult, the resident



dies. The cycle of breathing becomes more and more irregular - choppy shallow breath following long gasping breaths. With decreased oxygen, the body begins to protect its core - conserving available oxygen, sending it only to the heart, lungs and brain. Circulation is curtailed to the body's extremities. The hands and feet grow cold, with the coolness eventually spreading to the arm and the legs, leaving warmth only in the body's trunk and head. Eventually the lungs' congestion reaches a point where so little oxygen is being absorbed that the heart fails and death ensues. This process of slowly drowning in the lungs' fluids may take days to transpire. But, somewhere in the last 18 hours of life, the process accelerates. And, it is this acceleration that we call "active dying."

This is how I found Joe when I first saw him that evening. His head was tilted back over his pillows, and his jaw was thrust widely open, in an attempt to suck more oxygen from the air. His breathing was already quite irregular and shallow. I knew nothing of Mia's experience with death, but I suspected that she knew either from her father's appearance or, on the advice of hospital staff, that Joe was near his end.

A few moments after I had joined Alejandro, a wail arose from Joe's room. Mia's expression of pure anguish, was a sound not often heard in our Western culture. It is something that we are taught to suppress. I excused myself from Alejandro to check on Joe. Upon entering the room, I found that he had died, with his brilliant green eyes open and his mouth agape, as if by its further expansion, some life extending oxygen might find its way to his tattered lungs.

I shifted my attention to Mia. She had lost control, not only of her sounds, but of her body. She was leaning forward, her head and shoulders devolving into heavy quakes and shudders. I moved quietly behind her, to catch her should she fall. When she turned abruptly to face me, I intuitively held my arms open to her. In response, she collapsed into me, enfolding me into her arms and fiercely clutching my back. She grasped me as if I were a rock on the sea's edge to which she clung to avoid being swept away by the tide. With her arms around me, her face buried in my chest, she continued to wail and shutter. This embrace was intimacy, in the sense of immediate and unfiltered communication. As soon as she touched me, I was connected to Mia and Joe. It was spontaneous. She held me in a way that said she trusted me and she needed me. Her physical closeness and complete emotional vulnerability made her grief mine.

One summer, at music camp, we had a vocal instructor who gave us an interesting exercise to demonstrate to us how we could feel someone else's voice transmitted through our bodies. In singing, you have three principal resonators for sound--the head (the nasal and mouth cavities), the throat and the chest. The exercise consisted of having one singer place a tissue on the back of another singer's neck. The first would then sing directly into the other's throat resonator. When my partner tried it on me, the sound emanating from me was not my sound. That is, I didn't originate it. But it was "my" sound in that it was conveyed through my body. It was as if the other singer and I were one in co-creating a new voice.

A few months later, my friend, Reverend Townsend, invited me to participate in a week long gospel workshop at San Francisco's Third Baptist Church in the Western Addition. The choir, which consisted of some 100 people from all over the Bay Area, was entirely African-American, but for me. Gospel, as I was to learn, isn't about singing - it's about singing prayer. Gospel vocal power doesn't come forth from your body. It emanates from your spirit and the spirits of others in the choir. I had never previously sung in a true gospel choir. I had only sung gospel tunes with friends, mostly white, in secular settings. We had not prayed before singing, nor had we been invigorated by a sermon, as occurred at the Third Baptist Church before each evening's practice.

As I stood in its midst, the choir's sound was conducted through me, as if we all were joined into a unified "singing being." I felt the profound emotion of 100 other humans expressed through me.

So that evening at Laguna Honda hospice, enfolded in Mia's arms, I found myself embraced in a stranger's grief. Like the vocal exercise, like the choir experience, her sorrow was so bare and so profound that it enveloped me and became mine. I not only felt Mia's sorrow. I was Mia's sorrow.

I don't know how long we stood together, joined as one in grief, but it was awhile. Then, she slowly released me. I imagined that

she feared if she released me too quickly, she might shatter into a thousand pieces. But strangely, as I was her rock, she also was mine. Through her, I too felt a profound loss of Joe, even though I hardly knew him. Mia's connection to me in those moments communicated that loss, not through sound and mind, but from heart to heart. It was if we had become one person and I was feeling everything she felt. It was a profound experience. I didn't want it to stop. Two strangers becoming a single caring being. That was Mia's gift to me. I too was protected by that slow release.

After some time, without speaking, Mia signaled her wish to be alone. I retired to the corridor, grabbed a chair and positioned myself immediately outside the quiet room door. I had brought with me my ukulele, which I had deposited outside Joe's door before entering. While Mia stood alone with her father, I opened the case and quietly played a spiritual tune, "Amazing Grace." A few moments later Mia reappeared at the door and handed me a piece of paper. In the first words I had heard her speak, she asked "Can you play this?" I looked at the sheet and saw Chinese characters and some sort of notation, presumably musical, which I did not recognize. I said, "I'm sorry, I can't. But if you sing it, maybe I can follow along with you."

Mia returned to her father's bedside. I sat behind her at the foot of Joe's bed. In a beautiful alto, she began singing, in Cantonese, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." She sang the song in a well tuned pitch, in the key of "D," with me accompanying her on the ukulele. After the first verse or so, I joined her in song, in English. Just the two of us, no doctors, no nurses, no witnesses. Just Mia and I alone in a small, dimly lit room with her father. We still were singing together when her husband, Walter, and other family members arrived.

I again excused myself from the room, but I watched through the door in amazement as Walter, a nurse at San Francisco's General Hospital, applied moisture to Joe's eyes, allowing his lids to close. He then wrapped a cloth under Joe's chin and over his head, massaging the jaw muscles, teasing Joe's mouth to close and his face to soften. Once Walter had finished, the family gathered together around Joe's bed, chanting prayers and holding one another closely.

Mia then whispered something to Walter, who asked me to join the family in a final song to Joe. We sang another familiar hymn, the family in Cantonese and me in English. Then they left as one, profusely thanking me, hugging me and handing me a small red envelope, a Chinese tradition which signifies through a gift of coins, a thanks for service rendered. But the true gift is the red envelope itself, which conveys good luck to the recipient. But, I felt that in this particular evening, my luck had been "prepaid." I was permitted to share Mia's love for Joe through her embrace of me. It was rare and precious gift for which I will remain eternally grateful.