

# Putting Things in Perspective

*Stories from a Hospice Volunteer: Suzie and Anita*

- By Tim Tosta

The Laguna Honda hospice conducts a memorial service each quarter for families, friends, physicians and staff to remember the lives of those residents who have recently passed. The memorials occur on late Monday afternoons, about the time I arrive for my shift.

They are held in the Common Room and last about an hour. The afternoon volunteers arrange the furniture, organize the food and beverages, and ready the hospice residents who wish to join the service. The table that serves as an altar contains framed lists of the names, in gold calligraphy, of those residents being remembered. Many had become dear friends. Some I knew only briefly. Others I never knew, either because they arrived and departed between my Monday shifts or, to my regret, I did not take the opportunity to spend time with them in the few short days they resided at the hospice.

Each memorial seems to have a life of its own. The ingredients that would seem to shape the service are many. There is the setting, the time of day, the music, the ethnic or spiritual tradition of the individual remembered. But, as a friend said to me only the other day, "Our lives define our memorials." How one lives, and how one dies, shape the service's attendance and the intentions of those present. Did she live in peace, or was her life filled with turmoil? Did life's issues find resolution? Did those present come to say one final "goodbye?" Or to ask forgiveness? Or to help the person remembered along her new path through prayer or contemplation? Is the memorial a moment of "community" bound by common relationships and memories?

In my mind, dying isn't about going away. It is about giving up this fleshy container which we inhabited on this planet. Every act, every omission, every feeling, every emotion that we experience while embodied is shared with the universe and shapes the world in ways that we cannot imagine.

There is a wonderful image in the Buddhist tradition that explains the universe and our interconnectedness with one another. The universe is seen as a giant spider's web. At the joiner of each of the web's filaments there is a diamond. Each diamond is absolutely pure. Yet each diamond reflects every other diamond in the universal web. In the end, each of us is connected to and reflects all others.

I have been contemplating that image and considering its ramifications for some time now. It is not something that you read about, say to yourself "I get that" and move on. I don't



know that I will ever adequately understand all that the image conveys, but I have begun to see deeper into its power. And, it has come to shape my view of death. We all have been shaped by those who have come before us. During our time on this earth we likewise shape those around us. Even after we leave our bodies we still will shape the future of the universe, through those we have affected during our lifetimes. If dying means leaving your body, then people die. If dying means the cessation of your soul, your spirit, or your energy, then we don't die - we are eternal. While alive we are all connected. Upon "death" we remain so.

As I sat through January's hospice memorial, I found my heart completely open. Only 20 minutes earlier, I was on the 30<sup>th</sup> floor of Embarcadero One shutting down my computer, bundling unread material into my briefcase, withdrawing from the turmoil created by the myriad of egos, including mine, trying to gain the approval of others, trying to control their environments or trying to find peace in an inherently chaotic world. The memorial service was soft; there were no hard edges. It was calm. I heard only the soothing sounds created by the musicians or the sweet extemporaneous expressions of those in attendance. It was filled with love, first focused on, perhaps, one individual whose name appeared in the golden frame. But then as the quiet, the calm, the softness of the moment became our world, the love spread to all whose names listed on the altar, then to everyone in the room and finally to the world at large.

As the ceremony closed, a candle was lit and, like a Native American talking stick, it was passed from one of us to another, giving us permission to speak, or not. Some said a prayer, others gave thanks, said goodbye or sat quietly. As my eyes scanned the room I saw two of Suzie's three daughters - her eldest and one of the younger twins. Suzie had come to us only a few months before. When she arrived, she was angry. She didn't want to be at Laguna

Honda. She didn't like the message that "hospice" conveyed. She didn't like the open ward, its lack of privacy, the intrusive sounds and smells of adjacent residents, the perceived interference of the physicians, nursing staff and volunteers.

In my hospice work, I find being in the face of anger is personally destabilizing. Anger is palpable, almost material. It flies, like wind-blown dust, around the angry person. It sometimes fills the entire room and it affects negatively everyone within its range.

Often when I cannot approach someone who is angry, I sit at a distance and try to engage in giving peace to the same environment. Mind you, it is not a competition. Rather, I know that the anger springs from fear, and I know that I don't want Suzie or any other angry person to remain in that state of being. So I just sit, first checking myself out to see that I am not contributing to the situation. Then, I begin a meditation in which I breathe in the anger and the underlying fear, taking it from the atmosphere. Then I exhale peace directed first to the person who is suffering, then to the entire room. Sometimes I sit like this a half hour or more, just breathing. By the end of that period, I am usually calm and can move into any remaining anger, without being rocked by the other's emotion. More often than not, the anger subsides. Then, I may do nothing more than physically approach the person and do the entire exercise over again. As appropriate, I may ask "Would you like to hear some music?" Or, "I have some beautiful stories and poems, would you like to hear one?"

Suzie was tougher than most. Even as I got close, she treated me as if I were invisible. She would not respond to my queries and, frankly, I dared do nothing without her approval. A few weeks after Suzie's arrival her daughter Anita appeared. Anita had come from Hawaii. There, she had scraped the dollars together to make the trip home. Anita, like her mother, was petite, well under 5' 6". She had a very slight build and didn't appear particularly healthy.

In the course of the next few weeks I learned from Anita that, until recently, she had lived on the streets of Hawaii, spending most of her days stoned or drunk. Despite her apparent young age of 17 or so, she was in her late twenties. She had been estranged from her mother and family for years. In fact, upon arriving, rather than stay with her sisters, Anita located a hostel facility for family members, without means, to stay while visiting Laguna Honda. There she remained for her two-month visit. At the outset, she had to borrow money from one or the other sister simply to feed herself. Whatever the original source of the estrangement, the borrowing did not improve relations. One of her sisters suggested that Anita just go home. She said they too were having trouble making ends meet. There was nothing good Anita could do by remaining with their mother.

Anita told me that, in the early days, she hated her mother. She knew that feeling was wrong. But according to Anita, Suzie had never been there for her. Her father disappeared early in her life. Suzie had taken up with different men who were not kind to Suzie or her daughters. Anita saw her entire life founded on rejection and conflict. But she had returned from Hawaii for her mother's sake, as well as her own. She knew that she had to try to rebuild the relationship. And try she did. Every Monday for the ensuing weeks, I watched Anita care for her mother. And with that care, I watched Suzie soften and open like a flower in the sun's warmth.

At first there was little conversation, just the physical tasks of caring for someone ill. But I could see that as time passed, their conversations grew in warmth and duration. The voice tones softened. The physical contact became more intimate.

Often, when Anita took a break, we would talk about family and death. I remained open to whatever Anita wanted to discuss. It appeared to me that the experience of being with her mother was forcing Anita to examine old wounds to see how they might be healed. Anita plunged headlong into her own fears in search of that healing potion.

"Do you believe in life after death?" "Why do my sisters hate me so much?" "How did I get my life so screwed up?" "Will I ever have a 'normal' life?"

None of these was for me to answer. I simply offered a safe place where Anita felt she could examine these matters herself. In these listening sessions, an intimacy occurred that was profound. I didn't see it coming. I sat with a troubled young woman baring her soul and I began to love her - - not in a traditional romantic sense, but in a manner that acknowledged the honor given me by someone expressing her most intimate fears and asking my help. And, so I did what I could to be a deep, trusting listener.

A couple of weeks before her mother's death, I walked through the women's ward and found Anita in bed with her mother. Little Anita totally embraced Suzie, whose head rested on her right shoulder. That image said more than anything about the distance that Anita had traveled on her journey. I had the honor and pleasure of sitting with Anita as she cradled her mother that evening. I recognized that the roles of mother and daughter had been reversed. Whatever Suzie had failed to provide, Anita had forgiven. And what Anita had sought from the relationship with her mother she found by giving her mother unconditional love.

The following week all three sisters were gathered around Suzie's bed. Suzie was coming into and going out of consciousness. But the girls were all smiling and engaged in the type of caring conversation that you would expect from siblings who were finding their way together. As usual, I carried my ukulele.

The girls asked if I would play some songs for their Suzie. I asked what kind of music she liked and they told me in one voice “Country. Do you know any Patsy Cline?”

Well, as it happened, I did. So I played and sang my limited country repertoire – “I Fall to Pieces,” “Any Time,” “Tennessee Waltz,” “Crying Time,” “Hey, Good Lookin.,” “Walkin’ After Midnight.” On some songs, the girls would join in. Suzie’s eyes would open occasionally and she would smile. After an hour, I had pretty much run out of tunes, and others needed my help, so I packed to leave. The love I felt from the sisters for playing a few simple melodies was overwhelming. The following Monday was the memorial service. Seeing two of Suzie’s daughters there, I knew that Suzie had passed. While I would miss Suzie and her daughters, I also knew that I had received a great gift. I had witnessed Suzie’s family come together, caring for her and one another. When the “talking stick” was passed to Anita’s twin, she took a moment to gather her thoughts, and said:

*“My mother had a very hard life. Our family wasn’t like most families. We never had any money. Money was always an issue for us growing up. My mother told us the world was a tough place and we had to learn how to live in it. She told us that the families we saw on TV exist, but we would never be them. But I guess throughout all our troubles, I knew somewhere that she loved us and wanted the best for us. Maybe she didn’t say it, but somehow I knew it. The world is tough, but my mom made it possible for me to live and survive. So I will take her courage and her strength and her love and do the best that I can in this world.”*

She passed the candle on to her older sister who smiled, said nothing more and passed it on. After the service, the sisters told me that Anita had returned to Hawaii. Anita had done what she had come to do in being with their mother. My hope and belief is that she also accomplished a great deal with her sisters. With them, she may still have more time. Yet, time can be an extraordinary illusion. But, in my heart of hearts, I believe that the girls will be fine.