

## Beyond Words

*The Presence is silent  
and conveys a sense of peace.  
It's infinitely gentle  
and yet like a rock.  
With it, all fear disappears  
and spiritual joy occurs on a  
quiet level of inexplicable ecstasy.*

*-David Hawkins, MD*

### Meredith Jordan, RN, MA, LCPC



For the first time in more than a year, I set out to visit two dear friends at their cottage in a retirement community too distant for me to drop in as often as I would like. The cottage was utterly charming: illuminated with light from south-facing windows, turned toward the magnificent perennial gardens their daughters planted when they moved to the cottage in thoughtful preparation for their inevitable aging. It was filled with furniture I recognized from one previous house or another. Some was new, designed specifically for the needs of their move from a small house to an even smaller one. Barbie's once-office was now wholly contained in a narrow, upright kitchen cupboard. I fell in love with a home so well designed and perfectly appointed. I was not there, though, to delight in the cottage, but in the two women I have held dear to my heart for more than twenty years.

We had been so long without deep, meaningful conversation---the kind of conversation an occasional email can't possibly replace---that I drove there despite forecasts that the late afternoon rain would quickly become sleet. That can warn of precarious driving in our parts, where there is always the danger of black ice and uncontrollable skidding as temperatures drop a mere two degrees from just-above-freezing to just-below. I kept an eye on the car thermostat as I drove, and mentally calculated to leave before afternoon grew too long in the tooth, and the chances of dangerous driving conditions increased from prediction to reality.

I pulled into the drive, where Barbie was outside waiting, her head tossed back, laughing in joyous anticipation of the afternoon ahead, like my favorite image of a laughing Jesus. "Friend," she said in her predictable fashion, "it's so good to see you. Come in! With the exception of a nap somewhere later, you're the big event of our day." At 77, Barbie still plays a mean game of tennis and, when she hugged me, her arms held

me in a strong embrace, despite the bothersome detail---kindly overlooked by her---that my tall, softly rounded body dwarfs her small, thin figure.

Mary stood just inside the door, pleased to see me again, somewhat more tentative now, and a little shy. She, too, embraced me warmly. I was just past the doorway, and already thoroughly loved, just for being with them on a raw and rainy afternoon in early winter. They are the friends we create only over years lived and trials endured together. As I age and lose some of my cherished friends along the path of late life, I value more than ever the women and men who are my spiritual cohorts, laughing and laboring on despite the obstacles that present themselves, courageous enough to look into the sometimes austere face of truth and nevertheless welcome it as a guest in their homes. These are the daunting challenges of becoming wise elders and guides to the members of the human family following in our steps, met by some of us (though not by all) with what Ram Dass has termed, following his own severe stroke event, “a fierce grace.”

Barbie and Mary are spiritual elders: made bold in the face of adversity despite stunning losses. Once, they were both active in the Episcopal Church; one was a priest, ordained late in life after a long quest to find the right home for her spirit. In time, she learned that the rites and rituals of the institutional church did not offer her comforting refuge after all. She turned in her ordination and together the two became Quaker-activists, seekers of justice in a world short-changed of people molding their lives and spirits into instruments of peace. For years, they stayed busy with one social justice activity after another. When Mary was unexpectedly diagnosed with Primary Progressive Aphasia several years ago, they chose to re-examine and re-align their priorities. They concluded the time was upon them to turn inward and learn to live with stillness.

*Primary Progressive Aphasia.* Mary is slowly losing her ability to retrieve words. The first indication was an inability to “find” the right word when she was speaking. Common to all who cross that uncertain threshold ultimately leading us toward the end of life, this nearly imperceptible brain glitch appeared and disappeared on its own schedule; at first, no one much noticed. If it was referenced at all, it was as one of those “senior moments” people over fifty brush off with a dismissive wave and a laugh at our own expense. Most of us approaching what mythologist Joseph Campbell humorously called the “encroachment of our decrepitude” don’t know anyone who doesn’t *occasionally* experience such blips on the radar screen of memory.

Gradually, though, this annoying phenomenon happened more often, until more words slipped from parts of Mary’s brain, and were unrecoverable. Now, Mary finds it difficult to understand the words of others; she absorbs them and tries to place them in a context that once came so effortlessly, but it takes a certain focus for her to accomplish this and even concentration doesn’t always work. She tires as Barbie reads to her, or when they watch television; it takes too much effort to make sense of the endless stream of words.

She’s lost her ability to read. Words on the page are foreign objects. When she wants to communicate something in writing to her adult children and growing

grandchildren, she'll tell Barbie exactly what she wants to say. Barbie writes it down, and Mary copies words she no longer recognizes on her own so her children can read them in her handwriting.

In spite of the lightness with which they tell their story, it's clear that the journey has led them, without warning, onto an arduous path. Equally clear is that they have opened the door to their unexpected guest and made a room for it in their spiritual lives. Telling the story more candidly than when they first received the diagnosis, Barbie shrugged and smiled as if to say: *What is there to do when the Mystery thumps at the door with such insistence that we can't ignore it? There's nothing to do but invite it inside and make a place for it at the hearth of our home.* They are Quakers to the core.

Over lunch---a deliciously comforting bowl of butternut cream soup, salad and flatbread from a favorite store just down the road---Mary described what it is like for her to retain every bit of her intelligence while simultaneously surrendering her capacity to say what churns in her active, alert mind. "The time is coming when I won't even be able to copy Barbie's words," she explained, enunciating every word as though it was precious, and too soon gone. She tasted the words, rolled them around in her mouth, formed them in careful intention, spoke them thoughtfully. "There's grief, of course, every time another function slips away." She looked across the table at Barbie, her beloved companion of twenty-five years, "I cry for a few minutes, and when that passes, I move on to the next moment."

Barbie glanced cautiously at me, her spoon hovering in mid-air while she measured my reaction. *Would I somehow love Mary less for this acknowledgment of her limitations? Would I treat her differently? Would I assume she was losing more than words but her intelligence as well?*

Ah, the grief registered on the faces of these two beautiful women could have collapsed me to my knees, if I allowed it. But if they didn't allow it to crumble them, I promised that I would follow their lead. "More and more, I learn to accept *what is*," Mary went on, "and I find it's quite okay, in the end. I'm much more present to each moment if I'm not thinking ahead to what I might say next. When the likelihood is that I can't say what I want to say anyway, what becomes important is simply how well I am *present*." I thought of all those years as a Quaker, melting her words away, molding her spirit toward silence, preparing her for this inexplicable turn of events. The preacher and teacher, now being stilled and made ready to traverse an unknown, interior terrain.

I have always known Mary as a feisty, do-it-myself kind of woman. She helped to build a house, once had a fully equipped tool room, and was the first on the scene when something needed to be fixed. Now she is---by necessity---*softening* into a slowed-down, listening-more way of life. Everything about Mary is *softening*, not that she would ever have been called *hard*, but once there were angles and edges to her where now there are none. As I watched, I noticed that Barbie is softening too, witness to this protracted slipping away of Mary's voice in place of the mutual, meaningful dialogue they have shared for so long.

The Mystery is playing out something quite profound through their lives as they age and move toward the end of life. Each of them peered at me through the lens of wise women to test me: *Would I understand this new manner of things that was changing them?*

I think I did. I tried. I made connections to the lives of other people I know who have lost the ability to speak, and they seemed appreciative, as if the dots I connected were ones that made sense of their experience too.

Mostly, I listened and loved. When I spoke, it was with the conviction that each of them was fully engaged in what I had to say. I wondered if Mary would tire, but the afternoon flew past, ended too soon, and we were still eager for more. “Come again soon,” Mary urged as I pulled on my gloves and slipped out into the raw weather that didn’t ever, as warned, turn to sleet or make the roads hazardous. I drove home happy, safe, and full of the certainty that we learn more about life together than we could ever learn alone.

Later that evening I received an email from a newly made friend in New York. A retired librarian, she’s the friend of a friend who placed us in touch through my first book, and allowed us to discover for ourselves how much we liked what we found in the other. A poet always but perhaps more in her retirement, Inge was excited to say she would be hosting an open mike for poets at the New York City library the next day. Pleasure like hers—and Barbie’s joyful laughter—is contagious. Full of the delights of time with good friends, I was easily swept into and along with it. I quickly wrote back to wish her well and tell her of my poignant visit earlier that day.

The paradox struck me in the form of a sentence floating in the recesses of my mind. I noticed it on the third or fourth pass. *Using and losing words*, the phrase repeated in a continuous feedback loop. Inge is using words to bring forth the brilliance of her inner light; Mary’s spirit is shining ever more brightly as she loses words. No right, no wrong, just *paradox*.

God, the Great Mystery infusing and illuminating everything, is most often found in the “both/and” of a paradox. I know there are people, faithful people, who would argue this with me. *There’s no inconsistency to God*, they would emphatically declare, and have. *God is the changeless one, the one certainty we cleave to in an uncertain world at an uncertain moment in what-we-call-time. God doesn’t create such contradictions.*

*Oh, no?* I would answer, nowhere near as sure of who or what God is, but unwavering in my certitude that the Mystery we call God is no less present in Mary’s deficit of language than in Inge’s exhilarating discovery of words as a creative, artistic means of expression. The Mystery is in both places simultaneously, expanding our awareness, and its own, in both the silence and the ability to speak at last. It’s in balancing the paradox of God-in-absolutely-everything that we’re challenged to grow a new *largesse* of spirit, to become bigger than we can imagine, to hold and trust and embody more of God’s mystery than ever through the living of our everyday lives.

*You want to be certain? I might say. Then stay small. Certainty keeps us small. It keeps out the strange circumstance that raps at the door and requests a seat at our hearth. I'd say, knowing I may be wrong but daring to test the possibility anyway: The only thing we know for sure is that no one knows for sure.*

So I continue to look for the paradoxes and holy surprises that present themselves in my life, or the lives of people around me. There, I believe, is where the Mystery is still being revealed, perhaps still waking up to its own divinity and brilliance, even as it attempts to awaken us to ours. I sit with Mary and feel enormous love for her as she struggles to recall the word “seminary,” when it once was so central a place in her spiritual formation. I see Barbie’s face soften and glisten with love as Mary tries to find the word eluding her.

We sit together, knowing this will soon progress to the point where Mary will one day be silent because words are no longer there to be retrieved. We hear Mary speak tenderly of building new forms of expression; through use of music and movement, she hopes to create new neural pathways for expression in anticipation of this day-to-come. She will not allow her intelligence to be lost in a silent world.

At the same time, she values the silence creeping into her life on little cat’s feet. In that silence, she learns surrender. She learns more about the quality of *devout listening*, and *being* rather than *doing*. Mary knows, and wants me to know too, that this disease is not born of her essence but merely a circumstance that is visiting at this stage of her life so she, Barbie, and any of the rest of us willing to sit in The Presence, will get a glimpse of how—in the end—words are less the means of our communication than what resides in the deep corners of our hearts. No longer adept at reading words, Mary is becoming adept at reading the far corners of one’s soul. She’s moving beyond words to a place of pure Mystery. She knows little of what she’ll encounter; she knows that she has chosen to embrace the circumstances of her decrepitude, come to teach her something words have not.

Inge, in her world of words, is learning that language often excites, opens and awakens the heart to places we would not otherwise allow to be broken open. She is daring and risking and stepping forward with words that form around each other in gentle ways to cause us pause. Words to, perhaps, help us to remember who we are: daughters and sons born of Mystery, moving through Mystery throughout our years on this good earth, dying back into Mystery when these bodies have completed what we came here to do.

Inge and Mary will never meet, though—through me as a common thread—they might learn something about one another, yet Inge uses language to describe with precision what Mary is experiencing. In a poem called “Projection,” she writes:

*Silence is  
the language of God*

*is the deep tone  
of the soul*

*we sit  
in its velvet air  
our words resting  
in our eyes  
our hearts opening  
like leaves  
under April sun*

*we are held  
in each other's  
stillness*

*nothing is left  
unsaid*

We are inextricably part of each other, sharing in the great experiment of being human, where we are all minor-yet-significant players in a great drama leading to a conclusion we can't know. Perhaps there is no God at work behind the scenes, staging this drama. Perhaps it's just life playing at all manner of things, and in all manner of ways exploring what's possible, awakening to more and more of those possibilities in the exploration.

To suggest this is not intended to suggest there is no "God." It's to suggest that what we call *God* is not the producer of this great drama but the *process* of staging, exploring and awakening that unfolds as we live with full abandon whatever part the drama hands us to play out. More paradox to stretch or expand us. More "both/and" to hold, until we are just en-spirited with *everything*, and no person or experience is left out of our understanding.

"We walk into the mystery," writes Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, "and wonder of a God none of us can describe." Eloquent words. Simple words. Struggling to find words. Words trapped in the heart for a refusal to speak. No words at all. Beyond words. There is a place beyond words...where there is only stillness.

One day, we must find our way there. It is only in the still point where words have slipped away that we create an emptiness, a no-thing-ness where we might finally hear the deep and true tone that is sounding throughout the Universe. To get there, we have to release all images, all thoughts, all beliefs that limit our understanding of God, and just stand out in the open—naked and willing—for the Mystery that is God to be revealed and sound its tone through us.

It's that "stand in the open, naked and willing" part that frightens us most, that causes us to reach for certitudes even when we suspect they are only illusion born of the

desire to feel secure in a world that holds little guarantee of security. Not entirely by choice but by her acceptance of circumstances outside her control, Mary gently moves ahead of us, a lantern held high for us to see that, although the footing is unsure, the spirit grows strong as we allow what we hold dear to fall away and the place of emptiness-in-us to be made ready to receive the Mystery that knocks at the door.

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- What would you have to surrender in order to stand in the open, naked and willing for the Mystery of God to be revealed more deeply to you?

**Meredith Jordan, MA, LCPC** is a nurse-psychotherapist, interfaith spiritual director and co-founder of Rogers McKay, a multi-faith non-profit educational organization. She has a counseling and spiritual direction practice in southern coastal Maine and West Coast of Florida. Meredith creates and conducts workshops and educational seminars and programs.

*Ms. Jordan's first book, Embracing the Mystery: The Sacred Unfolding in Ordinary People and Everyday Lives (2004) was well received both critically and in terms of national sales (the book is still selling steadily two years after its release). Interviews with Ms. Jordan have appeared on public radio, Beliefnet.com (the internet's largest interfaith/spiritual website), GoodNewsBroadcast.com (a multi-cultural educational media company) as well as numerous print and radio media outlets nationwide. Her books have been reviewed in numerous magazines, and her stories and articles have been sought after by print media and online magazines. Meredith's new book, Standing Still: Hearing the Call for a Spirit-Centered Life, just released the first of this month.*

*In addition to her two books and short stories, Meredith also created a meditation CD titled **Be at Perfect Peace**. The CD is a series of five meditations developed for use by people confronted by major life events such as illness, depression, loss, significant life transitions, and unexpected life challenges or upheavals. The CD is appropriate for both patients, family members of patients, and caregivers.*

You may reach Ms. Jordan through her web site at [www.rogersmckay.org](http://www.rogersmckay.org) or via email at [meredith@rogersmckay.org](mailto:meredith@rogersmckay.org)