

The Heroic Journey

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*To leave the world a little better,
whether by a healthy child,
a garden patch, or
redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has
breathed easier because you lived—
that is to have succeeded.*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Mary, a very dear Quaker friend of many years, is slowly entering the last stage of her heroine's journey home. Now in her mid-seventies, Mary was diagnosed several years ago with Primary Progressive Aphasia; the first signal that her brain was changing its course was that she could not retrieve some common words she had always used with ease. Working with healers in various traditions, including indigenous healers, she was able to stand her ground against these progressive losses for a considerable time, but more recently, the changes are coming quickly, and she has lost balance, words, and memory with advancing speed.

I think of Mary as a beacon of warmth and light on this earth, one of the "way showers" for me and others. Ordained in her fifties as an Episcopal priest, Mary finally released those vows and settled in as a Quaker. No high ceremony for her, just a quiet place to be in the presence of the Sacred and reflect among her sisters and brothers of the human family. Mary has always spoken with great deliberation. She would first consider her thoughts carefully, then allow the words to form, and finally, would speak with such meticulous intention that she held the respectful and loving attention of all who knew her. Mary embodies the archetype of the Wise Woman, or the Oracle, who waits first to be approached, and only after careful thought, dispenses her wisdom.

It is with both sorrow and joy in my heart that I go next week to visit with her for what might be the last time she will remember me and our long history together as seeker-friends. When I was last with her, and her beloved partner, Barbie, some months ago, she tried to explain to me how she has intentionally developed music and movement as new avenues of communication with others. Words failing, she looked to other means to express what she could no longer count on herself to articulate verbally. Even those forms of expression are fading from her now. At some near point in the future, all that will be left of Mary's presence among us is pure *essence*. There will be nothing to think, to say, to remember, and absolutely nothing to do but...be Mary.

Some, I know, perceive people who endure Mary's means of passage from this life as becoming a "shell" of their former selves. If that's the case, then let me become a shell: emptied of everything I once thought was important, hollowed of all that once filled me, nothing but the original light emerging from me at the time of my birth, pouring from me again as I approach the end of life. Contrary to our current understanding of dementias, perhaps it would be a high purpose to fulfill, that of holding the essence of oneself while others scramble to find a sense of worth from their activities, possessions, relationships. Nothing left but to be one's essence, which is, of course, what results from a lifetime of developing an inner life. If we neglect to develop ourselves spiritually, much that remains as *essence* is vapid, and of not much use. But the essence of one who has developed a deep inner well like Mary, what is left when everything else falls away, I expect might be pure gold. Love radiating in all directions: no conditions attached, no limits on giving, and only the light of her dear spirit pouring forth.

Several years ago, at an Omega Conference I attended in New York, Ram Dass was a presenter at one of his first public appearances in the three years since a massive stroke left him unable to speak with his usual clarity. He needed assistance with everything he did, and this was clearly both an experience for him, and a great frustration. Listening in on one of his presentations, I felt anguish at his struggle to retrieve words and use them appropriately. I was also happy to note that his humor remained undiminished. However, the moment I most cherished in being near him again was a simple, fleeting encounter that provided me a brief glimpse into his inner world. As he was being wheeled out of the hotel by his personal assistant, he passed by me, enough for his wheelchair to brush my clothing and push me slightly aside. In that moment, I looked into his face and he looked into mine; he smiled warmly and said, "Hello!" I smiled back and answered with another "hello!" But as his assistant continued to move the wheelchair rapidly through the hotel lobby and out to a waiting car, I just stood watching, marveling at the light still radiating from his presence. Robbed of articulate speech and spontaneous movement, he was pouring out *translucence* or *essence*, far brighter than anything I had known from him prior to the stroke. He was a lamp, lit from within.

Mary would be the first to remind me and others that she's simply another seeker on the arduous journey home. She would hardly call herself the hero or her path a heroic one. Yet she is, exactly as Joseph Campbell repeatedly warned us would happen, entering the dark wood at a point where no one else has entered, and she must find a way from this point of entry back to her original nature. There will be a time, perhaps under other circumstances, when I too will be guided to the dark wood, and so will you. If I watch Mary lead the way, and hold the light for me to follow, I hope to learn something about how one drops the many layers of small self--roles, masks, myths, responsibilities--- for the higher Self to emerge at last, and simply shine.

And because it is Mary's Quaker nature to practice discernment in all matters, including her own departure from this earth, I will tell you that her story doesn't end with my soon-to-be last visit with her. Mary remains uncommonly aware, despite broad changes in her brain's ability to string words together into whole sentences, of the

bittersweet truth that this cruel disease is stealing from her loved ones the very person she herself is ready to leave behind when she drops the body and moves on to whatever waits beyond this life.

Alone in their cottage one recent winter day, Mary happened upon a television broadcast of a program on various forms of dementia called "The Forgetting." She watched, deep in solemn thought, and when the program was over, she sat down to discern her course of action. When Barbie arrived home that evening, Mary, hesitating over her words while clear and strong in her resolution, presented her plan. She decided she'd gather, one at a time, each of her four children, her three grandchildren, and finally, many of her close friends. She wanted to explain to each of us, personally, that she had made the decision, after completing her goodbyes with each of us, to consciously step out to meet death on her own terms rather than let death steal her ability to live consciously. She was willing to concede the disease everything but that. Dear-hearted, clear-thinking Mary believed she would know when the time was right, but when that "knowing" became evident; she would begin a fast to hasten her death. I, and others who love her, will be notified when the fast has begun, so we might pray for a gentle and kind departure for a woman who has always been gentle and kind with the use of her life.

So it is that I will go to Mary this week, wrap my arms around her in a last embrace, be with her in her gardens for what is likely to be the final time she can name the plants---or even my name---and will bow in gracious acknowledgment of this lovely woman who has been my friend for so long...and is now slipping into the beyond to find her way home. In participating so consciously in her own death, Mary continues to teach us, and show us the way.

Brave journey, my good and true friend, I will sing for your spirit as you travel from this world to whatever lies beyond. May you be companioned on your way by the hosts of angels.

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