

Ascension
By Piper Dunlap, LAc
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Several years ago I volunteered for a wonderful non-profit organization called *Compassionate Care for Caregivers*. The premise was this: Practitioners and students of Chinese medicine and massage would go into the homes of people with life-threatening illnesses and would offer therapies to both the “primary patients” and to the folks who were taking care of them. So often in these situations the focus is on the one who is or might be dying, while a spouse, child, parent, loved one, or even a professional caregiver is in equal or even greater need of support. The practitioners have an opportunity to do service, the students are offered a potent learning experience and the families benefit from their weekly visits by a team of angels. Five or six of us would arrive at a home with our giant bag of equipment and split up into pairs or solo and with little ceremony and few words we’d spread out through the home to treat the whole household. We’d use bedrooms, living room couches, even the floor or countertops at times.

We would often get to know the families quite well over a few months of weekly visits, but we grew to expect each “contract” to come to a close with the passing of the primary patient. During the year that I was with CCC, I watched a lot of people go. There was one glorious case of what the oncologist called “spontaneous remission,” but for the most part we were there to help the caregivers deal with their stress and fatigue and to help make the dying more comfortable.

My first day on the job was a memorable one. The team leader was Darren – a smiley, laid back veteran with velvet bedside manner and a disarming Arizona drawl whom I knew from school. That day he seemed a little on edge for some reason. We had three new, wide-eyed students, and their eyes got even wider when Darren briefed us outside the first home on the day’s rounds. “This is where Larry lives. He’s in the final stages of metastatic cancer. He’s on morphine and edema meds. We’ll be treating his wife, daughter and son-in-law, too.” Then Darren went around and assigned us to our caregivers. When he finally came to me and hesitated, I knew what was coming. I was to treat Larry.

I entered the house with a lump in my throat and a strange mixture of apprehension, humility and honor. The home was full of books and their smell. The walls were covered with big abstract paintings that seemed vaguely familiar to me. Larry’s wife, Sara, explained to me, apologetically, that Larry was extremely weak and not very coherent and then led me around the corner and into his room. I looked up at the far wall to see the giant original of a photocopy that hung on my corkboard in front of my desk at home. I realized in that moment that I knew Larry, and our meeting six months previously came flooding back to me.

I was at a summer art show in a neighboring town. There was the usual stuff – ceramics, jewelry, big glossy photos, some metal sculptures. Then there were Larry’s paintings. They were like nothing I had ever seen before. Dramatic, vibrant, psychedelic, shamanic, indescribable. I remembered standing in front of the painting that was before me now and asking an intense looking man with searing blue eyes and a scruffy beard where it came from. He looked me straight in the eye and said, very simply, “Death’s door.” I just nodded with dim understanding. Then he went on to tell me his story: His fight with cancer, the accompanying financial woes, his radical diet changes, his dark night of the soul – the journey to the “door,” his remission, the doctors’ amazement, and his art. I had asked the pointed question, and he had given me a long, honest, and fascinating answer, during which several people were waiting for his attention. Finally, his wife interjected, we shook hands, and I stood for some time before the painting, called *Ascension*. Eventually he tapped me on the shoulder and handed me the color copy of it which I had looked at every day since.

I entered the room. It took me a moment to find Larry. He was no longer the man I had met in the park half a year ago. Except for his eyes. They were the same. His face was the most cachectic I have ever seen. The finest features of his skull and facial bones shone clearly through his paper-thin skin. His breathing was labored and his lower legs and feet were turgid with edema. This time I did the talking. I introduced myself, and recounted briefly our previous meeting. I told him about the photocopy and expressed my awe at seeing the original again. He told me he was very tired and how the morphine helped with the pain, but clouded his mind. I asked him if he wanted acupuncture, and he shook his head, no. I sat with him for a half an hour, during most of which we said very little. Maybe I'm projecting, but my sense is that I was not the only one marveling at the great mystery. Here we were – two souls both living, both dying, under a painting that captured a glimpse of that mystery.

Darren came into the room and was puzzled and a little irritated that I hadn't given Larry his treatment. "We need to leave in five," he whispered to me holding up a hand of fingers. As soon as Darren had left the room, Larry reached over and took my hand, squeezing it with implausible strength. He looked out of his skeleton through his limpid blue eyes. A bit uncomfortable, I said, "I'll see you in a week, Larry."

He shook his head, took a breath, and with a faint smile said, "No. I'll see you ... later."

Larry died that night in his sleep. I still have his painting over my desk.

Piper Dunlap, LAc practices Traditional Chinese Medicine at 607A Tyler Street in Port Townsend. You can reach him at 360 385-3882 or piper@PiperDunlap.com

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