

Inviting Organization

evolution is now and open space

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Breathtaking Transformation: A Story of Opening

by Michael Herman

my grandma died last week. she was 82 years old, but didn't know it. she often struggled to recall our names when we appeared in her room. recently, when we asked her if she knew where she was, she looked around her room in the intensive care unit, white sheets, intravenous pumps, electrodes wired to beeping monitors, "i'm in my dining room." she declared, her tone protesting the quiz.

this is the story of my maternal grandmother's last days. but, for me, it's about the amazing transformations that are part of every lifetime. it's about doing the things we must, but finding ways to do them in the peace of who we really are.

i think that her experience and this story are important because they give us all an opportunity to observe our own personal reactions to pain and suffering, fear and uncertainty, growing confusion and loss of control -- AND the possibility for peace, in the midst of it all.

for me, this experience captures the essence and spirit of the work i want to do, with individuals and organizations, in times of swirling change and breathtaking transformation.

since she was diagnosed with alzheimers disease a few years ago, we'd grown accustomed to our own incapacity to really connect, to truly be with her, to help her in any significant way. "how's grandma?" we'd ask, hoping. but "she's pretty confused..." was usually how the report began. then, about a month ago, she forgot that she couldn't walk without her walker. she ventured off without it and fell. she broke two large bones, requiring an ambulance ride and several invasive medical procedures, all of which seemed to propel her on a final crossing, from confused into lost.

and still, the journey downward wasn't without its wonderful moments. one day toward the end, after a difficult attempt at mandatory physical therapy, she laid back and closed her eyes, "oh-boy, i just want to go to sleep" she groaned

to which my mom responded, "that's okay, you can do that, mom"

"no, i mean for good" she reinforced.

"i know. you can do that, mom"

"oh," she said, opening her eyes. "really?" and closing her eyes again, she continued, "could i have a little vanilla ice cream before i do?"

in her lifetime, she'd known desperate odds many times before -- childhood diseases, multiple cancers and surgeries, crippling arthritis, months of unexplained blindness, and intense loneliness after my grandfather died. she always seemed to meet them with willful acceptance and renewed determination to do what she could for others, even as her strength and capabilities left her. doctors who knew her history didn't like to make predictions.

but this last time was, of course, to be different. lost in the complexity of so many of her internal systems complaining at once, her thoughts and communication deteriorated until we could understand almost nothing of what she was saying, except for key phrases like "oh, boy!" "oh my god!" and "please help me." these always came through loud and clear.

she really wanted out of this world, but giving up was something she'd never allowed herself to practice. and so, after three weeks of degeneration, she'd curled herself up in her bed, the muscles of her neck, chest and stomach tightening with fear and tension, an involuntary retreat from overwhelming uncertainty. she just couldn't let go.

her troubles reached a sort of climax on the last monday night of her life. after weeks of downtime, her lungs were filling with fluid, she was falling behind on her breathing, and she was scared. when she opened her eyes, she could barely see us, but reached out for help, instinctively. it's hard to know what to do at those moments when you so want to help but have to admit that some things are beyond our control. small doses of morphine helped calm her a little, but gave no real comfort. we took turns sitting with her all night, following her breathing, reassuring where we could.

at dawn, she was restless and anxious, due for the next morphine shot. i recognized the tension in her body as an extreme form of the tightness i feel in my own chest and gut when i am under stress. i sighed a big sigh for her, "aaaahhhhhh." it gave her pause, a break in the steady stream of quietly desperate murmuring "...oh my god, oh my goodness..." i sighed again, "aaaahhhh," releasing my own tension. soon she was echoing me eagerly on every exhale. mom picked up on it and started "the sleep song," a cadence of "aaahhs" that grandma used, to rock all of the babies she loved to sleep. "ah-ah-ah-ah-AH, ah-ah-ah-ah-AH..." grandma echoed our humming all day long, whenever she'd get anxious or restless, we'd hum with her and she'd breathe easier, straighten out, loosen up.

it was better than morphine -- for all of us. it was real conversation, real connection, the likes of which we hadn't had for years. the truth was finally clear enough, the need strong enough, and the message simple enough for us to connect with her. in that one syllable, "aaahhh," which means peace, we said we saw and heard her pain, remembered her love, and reminded her that it was still deep inside of her, beneath the pain and fear. with that same syllable in response, she seemed to say, "i hear you trying to help, i'm doing as you say, and it's working." it filled the room with a new energy. even the staff took note.

we'd managed to keep them from turning on the bright lights, sticking her with needles and making other customary, but now unnecessary, intrusions into her space. by tuesday evening, however, her bed had to be changed. the process, done as gently as possible, still proved tremendously upsetting for her. after hours of peace, she was now a tightened little knot again, gasping for breath, crying out for help. i called mom back to the hospital, sure the end was near. but, after several hours of rosaries, prayers, singing, crying, releasing and even humming, she remained as knotted as ever.

worn out, mom looked across the bed at me, "she hasn't eaten or stood up for 25 days, where can she be getting the strength to do this?" i paused and then it flashed for me. "maybe she's getting it from us," i smiled, "maybe we should go take a walk." we restated our final goodbyes and left her room. we got a snack, resaid our goodbyes and left her to

finish her work on her own. we'd finally accepted that she could not be coached, sung, prayed or hummed into this transformation. she should have been dead years ago, should have gone this morning, certainly she would finish this up tonight.

given her history, it wasn't a total surprise when she lived through tuesday night -- but nobody could have predicted or even imagined the rest. none of the doctors and nurses had ever seen anything like it, but mom could hear it clearly, from down the hall, before she even reached grandma's room on wednesday morning. "ah-ah-ah-ah-AH, ah-ah-ah-ah-AH...." she walked in the room, sat down at the bed and listened,"ah-ah-ah-ah-AH, ah-ah-ah-ah-AH."

"hi mom, i'm here, mom."

no response, but the humming continued, "...ah-ah-ah-ah-AH, ah-ah-ah-ah-AH..." with every exhale.

in a minute, there came a short pause, which mom filled in with her own prodding hum. grandma wrinkled her eyebrows in a little scowl, eyes still closed. minutes later, another pause, and mom tried again, getting the same grumpy little scowl, that seemed to say "it's my song, my life, my death, and i can do it by myself, thank you very much."

and so, with eyes closed and lungs nearly full to drowning, she hummed her sleep song without accompaniment, without interruption, all day and all night, wednesday, thursday and friday. by friday evening you couldn't hear her down the hall anymore, but the sound continued loud enough to be heard in her room and peacefully enough to be described by some as singing. and as she hummed and sighed, she softened and relaxed the whole of her body, the whole of her being, until she finally let go, just after midnight, on good friday night.

she had reconnected with her own deepest love and caring - her own most important work and calling - beneath the fear, the pain and the uncertainty of the present moment -- and beyond the limits of her physical circumstances.

sometimes the simplest things can lead us in the most amazing directions, the most personal is most universal, and the most obvious is hardest to remember. when seen in this light, the moment of leadership, the moment of caring and the moment of powerful healing becomes a quiet personal quest to remember... who we really are and how we do amazing things with ease.