

Spiritual Connections

A Summer's Journey

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Quoique les relations avec sa mère furent plutôt précaires, et encore plus depuis six ans qu'elles sont séparées, mais voyant sa mère à l'article de la mort, la fille a amorcé une réconciliation. Maintenant, pendant une réflexion sur le dernier été de sa mère, l'auteure nous raconte comment sa spiritualité s'est développée et l'a aidée dans son cheminement vers la guérison.

As I travel along the life-path I have embraced as my own, I recognize the interconnectedness of every universal being. The label I apply to both the insight and the responsibility it demands is “spirituality,” although I understand that others could identify it in myriad ways. I now understand that this kind of spirituality surrounds me: guiding me, leading me, shaping me, and coaxing me just a little further along each time I hesitate. I was not surprised, then, to find that my spirituality gently carried me through one sharply defined and poignant summer, when I was able to spend the last eight weeks of my mother's life with her, and with my family and friends in my prairie hometown.

Where do I begin my story? In calendar time, I returned home on June 21, 2000. However, the story begins much farther back, in a time before I knew this world and this reality, and the story will continue long after my less-than-perfect body

draws its last breath. My mother and I shared this current level of reality since 1957, when I was born too early, and too small, but fighting to survive. She was young, only 27, and I was her fifth “live-birth”—and there were five more after me. She was married to, and lived with, my alcoholic father (although in those days we only said he drank too much). Money was scarce, and many times we experienced hunger and the physical illnesses associated with abject poverty. Through the rough times, Mom cared for us, although I caused extra worry and hardship because I suffered from chronic childhood illnesses. I remember turning 16 years old. My mother, rarely sentimental, was relieved. I remember saying that I was not the first child to turn 16. No, she replied, but it had seemed to be a longer 16 years with me, and often uncertain. She was glad I had made it. I was embarrassed by her emotion, but secretly pleased at the attention.

Through a series of life-events, my mother and I shared joy in our lives, but we also experienced the hardships of anger, fear, and betrayal that finally rent the fabric of our relationship. For almost six years of my adult life, we barely spoke to each other. I was angry because she would not support me when I disclosed that I had survived incest. She was angry

because she felt I was trying to “tear the family apart.” Then, just before I moved to Toronto to begin graduate studies, my mother became very ill and almost died. At that time, my personal spiritual journey slowly, inextricably, began again to interweave with the journey taken by my mother. Suddenly, I moved beyond the need to hear her say she believed I had been abused. I knew my reality; it no longer mattered whether she supported me in this revelation. I helped both of us maintain integrity as I expressed regret for the time we had lost, but not for the reasons behind the rift. I said goodbye certain that I would not have another opportunity to see my mother while she was still alive.

Miraculously, my mother survived a seemingly endless round of knocking at death's door. Our journey back together took almost two years, and somehow, my mother clung to life long enough for us to reconcile. Looking back, I see our brief and cautious visits as a time in which the healing power of love took hold, and began to close the jagged wounds we had both worked so hard to carve over the years. Neither of us grew up in a home where love was expressed verbally, and both of us bore the marks of disapproval etched upon our souls by our parents. Now, as adults, and with a sense of the limited time we might

share, we could somehow move to a new level of understanding.

The wonder of being on a spiritual journey, and recognizing it, is that it frees you to enjoy each “moment” along the way, and to be thankful for everyone who clears the path and who catches you when you stumble. And, as I continue to move forward, I openly acknowledge the debt I owe to each family member

place for two stubborn, scarred, and scared women.

Over the next several days, I spent many hours with Mom. I went to the intensive care ward where I would brush her hair, wash her face, and help her drink water. Slowly, through my hands, I became familiar with the physicality of this woman who had so often cared for my own bodily needs. I worried that

relax, even though the time was interspersed with visits to the hospital and the special care home. It was the last summer of my mother’s life yet, for me, it was a spiritually invigorating and rejuvenating experience. So how does a woman from the prairies practice spirituality? She begins by loving the sky, the clouds, the wind, and the raw, elemental forces of an ever-present and all-encompassing

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and friend who has so graciously accompanied me on my travels. In particular, I thank those people who made my advancement into the uncharted territory of reconciliation a journey far less frightening than it would otherwise have been.

I returned home in the summer of 2000 when I understood that my mother was losing the life-battle she had waged for two years. I immediately went to see her in the intensive care ward. Her kidneys were not functioning; her stomach was distended; her arms, legs, hands, and feet were badly swollen. She was covered with large blisters that had formed because she was not able to pass fluids. I felt helpless, but offered her some Reiki energy, which she accepted. I found this to be both frightening and empowering as I had to be physically and emotionally close in the process. I kept my hands on her belly for over four hours that night. Perhaps it was this duality of care that foreshadowed some of the events that would unfold over the next eight weeks. There is a visceral connection—a spiritual joining—in the sharing of pain and energy. Somehow, the universe came together in a very positive manner that night to provide a safe meeting

I might cringe when I smoothed lotion over her feet—the feet that years of pregnancy and hard work had roughened and bent. I silently asked for the strength to help her in a dignified manner, so that she could maintain her own dignity. I found that the act of physically caring for a person places the caregiver in a different relationship with the person who requires the care. As time passed, Mom more readily accepted my ministrations, and the nearly-severed bond between us continued to mend. It seemed only right that I could now offer my services to the woman who had selflessly nursed me through myriad childhood illnesses. At first I wondered whether a woman who had cared for a husband and ten children could allow her children to physically care for her. I soon realized that Mom loved the attention. After many years of hard work, she could *easily* allow others to care for her. Each of us had to find our own way into the role of caregiving, and she would accept the attention. In this way, the circle continues—the cared-for become the caregivers, and life goes on.

I now see that much of my spirituality comes from my place of birth. This was the first time in over 30 years that I had so much time to

Nature. The prairies tie me to my family and, generationally, to my parents. My father was born in a small town in Saskatchewan, and my mother was born and raised in a village in Manitoba. Mom grew up close to the earth, and remained in touch with the cycles of the seasons throughout her life. I come honestly to my appreciation for the outdoors, and for my fascination with the cycles of germination, growth, and harvest. Perhaps this explains why I can so easily accept the cycles of life as inevitable and necessary. After reaping the rewards of a bountiful harvest we clear the land and till the soil to prepare for new growth. So, too, it seems that the spent body that has yielded its knowledge and gifts returns to a place of rest, making room for a new entity, full of vitality and bearing its own precious offerings. How fitting, then, that my mother should pass away on August 29th, the day of the new moon, and the time of harvest on the prairies. Equally fitting is the fact that her first great-grandson should be born on September 24th, only a few days before the end of that same lunar cycle.

How does a grown woman who has never felt especially close to her mother learn to express herself emo-

tionally, when she knows the time for such expressions draws inevitably to a close? She learns in fits and starts, by trying again and again to somehow overlook or understand the ways in which her mother makes her “pay” for her previous absence. It was, I believe, my spiritual growth that enabled me to look beyond the childhood hurts and the adult abrasions. I found the strength to stay, and to return, despite Mom’s moments of seeming indifference or agitation. Like an early morning jogger at the water’s edge, I remained wary of my mother’s forays into vindictiveness and manipulation, lest I be overcome by the tide of unhappiness that had often swept over me during childhood, and that had continued to lap at the edge of my adult consciousness. Thankfully, the moments of unease were enfolded within larger and much more meaningful moments of giving, living, and learning.

As I write this paper, the tears freely flow. Until now, I had carefully avoided pieces of the story, as I embraced only the moments of joy from the summer. Now I realize that change does not always occur without pain, and I must clearly admit that I endured moments of seemingly unspeakable sadness during my summer of reconciliation.

During the summer there were several occasions when Mom seemed physically and emotionally spent. However, I later heard that she believed she was given extra time to heal some of the relationships in her life. I know this would have been a difficult admission, and I marvel at her candor. One day, as I sat with Mom, I felt a shift in my own perspective. She was asleep, bordering on unconsciousness, and I took the opportunity to write in my journal. I wrote about the way she looked; how her skin felt so moist and thin and fragile; and how she lay in the bed, unable to physically care for herself. I looked at her hands, and began to write a story about my mother, through an examination of

her hands. Suddenly, I saw the other lives lived by those hands. I saw them cuddling babies; I pictured them caring for my father; I imagined them caressing her lovers’ backs. In a flash, I knew that my mother was, and had been, a real, live woman. I recognized her as someone other than “my mother.” In that instant, I knew my mother as a person. She could have been me. It was a moment of transcendence, and I no longer saw her as one-dimensional. For me, the act of writing and separating myself from my mother in a respectful, yet intuitive manner allowed me to see her as others might have seen her. In this way, my writing, so tied up in my spirituality, allowed me access to the whole person that is, and was, my mother. The moment was both enlightening and painful, as I shed a few tears for the woman I would never have the opportunity to truly know.

As I gently unwrap my precious and fragile memories and transform them into one of many possible narrative incarnations, I see that my spirituality is the thread that weaves in and out of the passages, securely binding them into a story worth sharing. Without the spiritual growth I have known over the past few years, I would not have been ready for my self-assigned task of embracing a newfound understanding of my mother’s actions. Neither would I have understood that this could produce such powerful and positive repercussions.

On my last weekend at home, my mother had a deeply disturbing and highly significant hallucination, especially in light of our personal history. Someone was trying to harm two little girls who had run into her room to hide. She thought one of the girls was me because, although she could not see the girl’s face, she recognized the girl’s long hair. She knew the girls were in trouble, and she told them where to hide. Still, she could see the first girl’s hair, and was afraid for their safety. In her altered state, my mother actually

reached over her bedrail and up to her desk, where she picked up her cordless phone and dialed 911. She “knew” her daughter was in trouble and she was calling for help. I later heard from the nurses that Mom had actually called 911. How could this be? Since early spring, my mother had been physically unable to use her hands or her arms. Then, in one remarkable instant, the veil of time and dis/ease lifted from her physical body, and she found the strength and willpower to use the telephone. Perhaps, so many years before, she had known I was in danger but could not summon the emotional strength to call for help. Now, possibly in an effort to right old wrongs—or more simply because she had access to the necessary resources—she could metaphorically and physically move mountains to protect her daughter. Or, perhaps she was reliving a horror from her own childhood. Who knows? I merely speculate on the meanings of her hallucination and her physical reaction, yet with each possibility I find myself sketching a more sympathetic portrait of my mother, and of her ability and courage to bring the past to light. I also speculate when I suggest that transmitting this hallucination of danger and protection was her way of finally acknowledging what she would never be able to freely admit—that my childhood home had been fraught with danger. Through her revelation, my mother helped facilitate my healing journey.

I cannot begin to express my gratitude for that summer. Somehow, at the end of my time at home, I gathered the strength to say goodbye to my mother. Because I thought this could be the last time I would see her, I said so many of the things that I might otherwise have left unspoken. I told her I was honoured to have taken care of her during the summer. I thanked her for all the times she cared for me. I told her I loved her. I heard, and accepted, her reply. Later that day, I returned to Toronto.

I was able to return home less than a week later to be at my mother's bedside when she passed away. Along with some of my siblings, I was able to watch over her throughout her final night. I shared in a very humbling and beautiful experience, although tinged with the sorrow of my mother's passing. I now understand that death need not be frightening or gruesome; it is a process that begins long before the final breath escapes a person's lips and continues far beyond that moment. I comfort myself with the knowledge that only the diseased and distressed body of my mother has died; her soul and her spirit live on.

I have thought many times about that summer—the knowledge I gained, and the growth I experienced. I recognize so many blessings. I had the opportunity to reconnect in a mature and respectful manner with my mother; to understand her in a new light; and to care for her in ways I had never before experienced.

I took many opportunities—some of them successful—to practice the spirituality I had been nurturing. I was blessed to have been able to say good-bye to my mother; to tie up some of the loose ends of our relationship; and to openly express my feelings and my gratitude. As I carefully spread some of the summer's life lessons before me, I more clearly understand the fragility of life and I fully recognize the importance of constantly nurturing all of my relationships. At the same time, I openly acknowledge the importance of honouring my own needs and my own integrity in this process of loving and living.

As I write this, I wonder how it might be accepted by those who know me, and who knew my mother. I hope they understand that I write from a place of respect and love. Many details remain obscured in this particular narration. This transmission—potentially one of many—is, quite simply, a personal

revelation of the profound spiritual path upon which I traveled during my mother's final summer.

In October 2003 I presented a conference paper at the Association for Research on Mothering "Mothering, Religion and Spirituality" Conference (Toronto), entitled "Mothers and Daughters: Spiritually Inter/Connected." This personal narrative was adapted, in part, from that conference paper, and from a larger term paper I wrote in March 2001 entitled "Self-Defining Spirituality" for York University Professor Saroj Chawla's graduate class on "Women, Religion and Spirituality."

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