

How to Live

Winter 2012-2013

JUDY: OVERWHELMED

As I prepare to begin this EAFI expressive arts training, and contemplate adding that to my already full to overflowing plate and the myriad of details entwined in my day-to-day life, I feel overwhelmed to the point of exhaustion.

Why am I doing this? What does it all mean? How will it connect? How can I continue to nurture my own soul while leading others to do the same?

With each step deeper into my spiritual direction, training, and exploration, the more I realize how much there is to do, to know, and to think about. Questions that continually plague me: How will I get it all to work? How will I create a spiritual direction practice that is life giving for others? How will I continue this work at its deepest levels in a way that is also life giving for me?

Feeling agitated and overwhelmed, I need cerulean blue breath to enter and move through me. I need to slow and soften. I need to allow the swirling movement to quiet.

A PORTAL OPENING

Today finds me in a sudden and unexpected place of awareness that there is some sort of new portal opening for my work, and my task is to recognize all that surrounds it.

Meeting with my own spiritual director today—nearly a week since this insight, I was able to work more deeply with my earlier feelings and created image of “overwhelmed.”

To be consistently overwhelmed with joy vs. hardship is a new thing for me. I don’t know how to be in that space. My body wants to stay in that uncomfortable, burdened place.

So many ideas and possibilities are coming at me. There have been four interactions in recent months where others have said the same phrase to me: “Write a book.”

Two of them were this week. That is like some very obscure, floating-on-the-horizon idea that I can’t wrap my arms around.

How to Die

Fall 2015

“The symptoms you’ve been having are inconsistent with what we found on your MRI,” the young doctor said, pausing as if to search for just the right way to say what he needed to say next.

“There’s a large mass in your right temporal lobe.”

At the words “large mass,” I looked up at Roy, my eyes filled with fear.

“Aunt Ginny,” I whispered.

“Maybe not,” he said. His eyes, too, were full of fear that he was trying to wrestle into confidence.

Somewhere deep within me I knew. And as it turned out, I was right.

A TICKING CLOCK

Glioblastoma, also known as glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), is the most aggressive type of brain cancer there is. Our kind-eyed young doctor explained this gently, trying not to react, I suppose, to our stricken faces at this dreaded diagnosis.

I know this all too well. My mother’s younger sister, Aunt Ginny, died of this deadly, most often genetic monster way too young. The doctors told Aunt Ginny it was pretty uncommon for women to get it, and only something like three people per 100,000 develop this disease each year. Not odds anyone would think to worry about, unless you become one of those three.

We listened as he described the initial symptoms—nodding and looking at one another as he mentioned some of the random struggles I had been having on and off since last summer.

Sneaky bastard, this cancer. A chickenshit disease, if you ask me—and pretty much anyone who sits in a conference room such as this. I had shrugged these “symptoms” off, taking Tylenol for the headaches, self-diagnosing my occasional bouts of nausea as a stomach bug, food poisoning, or stress. At one point, when a sort of malaise, a persistent low-grade

anxiety, and depression set in, I had even considered taking an antidepressant. Sometimes as we age, our brain chemistry changes, and these drugs can be so helpful in restoring normal brain chemistry.

As it turns out, I was on the right track. Sort of. My problem was with my brain—just not its chemistry. It wasn't until I lost consciousness in the shower that it was clear there was something going on in my brain that connected all those random complaints into a big steaming pile of bad news.

As we sat and tried to hear and absorb all this young doctor was trying to convey, it was hard to stop myself from leaping ahead. There is no question that I am facing a battle for my life. And chances are very close to zero that I will win.

“So how long do I have?” I managed to squeak out the question I knew was pounding through both of our brains. Roy's face remained stoic. We had faced serious health challenges together before—but always with him on the other side of these cold hospital sheets, not me. I was the healthy one.

“This type of tumor can be pretty much asymptomatic until it reaches an enormous size,” he remarked, gesturing toward the MRI scans on the screen. “Like yours.”

Mine. Of all the things I had ever wanted to call my own, this was not one of them. *I have things to do! I wanted to wail. I have worked so hard to get to this place in my life. I've just discovered real, true joy and a new sense of purpose. THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING right now!*

How to Survive

2016: An Unwanted Journey

The first three months after Judy died were a complete blur of quiet sobs, outright knee-buckling breakdowns, and trudging through the tasks of daily living. I got up. Got dressed. Exercised. Ran errands. Tried to get out among people.

Memories of Judy and of our lives together were everywhere. Being in her studio, reading her writings, looking at her art with new eyes, seeing photos of our life together—all both comforting and pouring salt in my gaping wound.

I dreaded going to bed alone, dining alone, and being “odd man out” at parties and gatherings. I especially abhorred going home to that empty cottage on Friday nights. I soon made a habit on Friday nights of going to a movie, then to a restaurant or bar. I also picked up Judy’s habit of journaling.

How do I do this? How do I go on? What am I to do now?

What I did find, more surely as time went on, was the immense help it was to journal, to pour my heart out onto the page each day. I also found help in the wisdom of spiritual directors and others trained and experienced in the grief process. I sought out opportunities for reflection and contemplation.

To live. Whatever that means. These next chapters of our story will tell you how I learned some answers to these questions—and so much more—in my journey through grief.
