



"Don't let her go to bed on her thoughts." – Sage advice from my neighbor Diane

June could have behaved a bit better in her introduction to the summer of 2016. I'd rather blame the month than blame cancer, the medical community, or God. June will come and go and she will not linger in any need for forgiveness. A good thing as I am not in a forgiving mood.

I continue to move forward on the caregiving path I undertook eleven or so years ago and with me, I drag or am accompanied by family and friends, my husband and two dogs. Irene, my mother, is on her own journey, giving up and giving up and giving up but never quitting. Of course, through it all, the surrounding tide continues to rise and fall with every new and full moon, a constant in lowcountry life and a most welcome phenomenon, reminding me that the world keeps turning and I need to keep my metaphorical seatbelt fastened if the next corner is too sharp or another descent into illness is steeper than I anticipated.

Metaphors are one of the great gifts from a writer's creative muse and they seem to be more available as a caregiver when sometimes the closest adventure is in my head. I see fallen, rotting trees in the woods on a walk with the dogs and I think of what we give away as we grow older. Even in decay, new life emerges and insects, birds and mushrooms find nourishment or a place to cling as a once mighty oak splinters into pulp, her bark coat peeling off like a wet bathing suit. After a recent rain, small frogs jumped into the path of my headlights as I returned home from a pharmacy run and I thought about the choice of death by suicide. Instead I learn that rain is the perfect environment for frogs to cool off, eat earthworms stranded by water, or mate. In the low water ponds and puddles surrounding my house, there is a cacophony of croaking in the evening, breeding music for the amphibians. Suddenly the idea of frogs having sex in the summer darkness makes me smile and the thought of their suicides vanishes in my never ending belief in new life.

I am struggling to convey in this garble of words a few thoughts on sickness, how it changes things, how it shatters perceptions and makes us meet our bodies in very fundamental ways. I

have been talking about “my core” a lot over this passing month. I suspect I am trying to understand who I am at my core, how I react in a crisis, and how I meet the demands of other human beings. I am learning that no one really loses their “neediness.” Our needs are constant and it becomes easy to understand how unmet needs can pile up in a person, in a family and in a community to the point of breaking. Needs, left alone, unnoticed, unfulfilled, and unloved are at the core of many ailments and it seems our greatest calling is to recognize the needs of another human being and as we can, extend a hand, cook a meal or give a hug.

When my mother was in MUSC this past month with a right arm broken by cancer, there was a man named Bob who walked the halls – a tall man, slim, bearded. He smiled at my sister, and later, he smiled at me. But mostly, he smiled at a therapy dog, a chocolate lab who sauntered the tiled hallways just like Bob. Bob did not speak and I don’t know the nature of his illness or injury but there was light behind his eyes and his smile was infectious. His smile, and that’s all it was, made my heart swell with a bit of joy that was not there seconds earlier. Recently, I spoke to a neighbor walking his dogs and asked about a little terrier who was no longer part of his entourage. Bill told me Sherlock passed away in February and a new rescue from North Carolina named Oscar now walks beside his ever-faithful golden retriever Millie. Bill told me that Oscar is on a long path to learning how to behave and I answered, “As we all are.”

After days and weeks of one health hurdle to the next, my sister and her husband made dinner for my Mom while my husband and I went to the beach. On our swim, the ocean pushed us around in the swells and recessions. We took a walk, the sun hot on our backs, the sand the only support the earth could offer. It is always, always amazing to me how the ocean heals. It does not even know it. Saltwater on mosquito bites, the feel of water passing through hair, the unending push and pull of green-brown waves capped in white, the sounds – a symphony of birds while the sand crackles like a bowl of Rice Krispies as it slurps the receding tide like a thirsty kid on his last long sip of a liquidy Slurpee.

Sometimes, there is no recovery from sickness, the long silent days of time passing, life passing, the recognition of “and so it goes” when one did not realize it was really going until those last moments. Fortunately, my Mom and my family aren’t quite there yet. Surgery and radiation pave our journey as we learn and maneuver the side effects of medication, get refresher courses from occupational therapists and set schedules for pills and creams and liquids and injections. I never wanted to be a nurse and caregiving has the intimate element of meeting a person in a new way. It is a way I buried with my father but is finding resurrection. Caregiving tests you. I am not sure if it makes a person stronger but I do know it makes one step back, reassess everything, and demands a level of selflessness rarely aspired to in our fast-moving, high tech world.

As We All Are

Written by Vivian Bikulege

No matter what confronts us, it – whatever “it” is – is in front of us and either we embrace our reality or we become embittered, fearful or just plain numb. And it’s still one day at a time, one minute, one moment. It’s simple really. It’s really simple. But it isn’t easy.