

Continuing Education

As a Chinese medicine practitioner, opportunities to deepen my understanding of the healing arts appear in a number of formats. Seminars and workshops are valuable ways to connect with teachers and peers. New book titles often expand on previously learned material. Sometimes clients or students arrive with an unusual situation that stimulates a learning process. Whether about bodywork, herbs, meditation, chi kung, or tai chi, there is an abundance of potential openings for a curious mind

Then, there is continuing education provided by life itself, which naturally includes death. Of course, there are classes and books, DVDs and CDs on death and the dying process, but these are only *about* death. Deeper learning happens with direct experience, awareness and full presence with grief and the dying process. It's not the kind of thing that is easy to schedule or includes online registration or streaming video podcasts. It naturally occurs in life on a very regular basis: the seasons, plants in the garden, our family and friends.

The last few years feel like an intensive immersion in this living/dying continuing education program. It began with my father, *Jim*, and his gradual deterioration into a deep and complete dementia. In the last few months of his life, *Mary Jo* faced a rapid decline by an especially aggressive form of ALS. In the middle of this, *Melinda* discovered a brain tumor followed by four very invasive brain surgeries. And, to make this quite thorough, *Patricia* had a massive stroke followed by major brain surgery and four long weeks in hospice. It's been an interesting few years. It'll take many more years to process and integrate everything learned during this time.

And...I'm not complaining. This is somewhat surprising because there seems justifiable reason to complain, possibly loudly and bitterly, if not for myself, at least for the suffering of these people. Even while inundated by the overlapping timelines of these four people's living and dying, complaints barely surfaced. A decade or more ago, there would have been much righteous complaining. Hmm. Something has shifted.

I'm not sure I can pinpoint a specific time when this different approach occurred, somewhere between Jim's dementia and Mary Jo's memorial. I can recognize very clearly the rich and clear insights that occurred all along the way that easily shown a light more bright and compelling than anything a grumbling complaint could muster. *Acceptance.*



Jim's dying process was slow and drawn out, providing lots of time and space to feel every aspect. This is exactly the opposite experience of my mother's sudden death 40 years previously with absolutely no processing of anything. Carrying around the energetic weight of those unfelt experiences did not fully release, despite much 'work' on my part, until Jim's funeral. Three sons and three grandsons carried the very real weight of his casket while walking over our mother's and grandmother's grave. Full circle.

Completion. Closure. These words, these concepts instantly became real.

Jim also brilliantly demonstrated how the physical body can function almost totally on automatic without any sense of spirit or mind as guidance. And, even in this seemingly bleak and unknowing state, on the way out the door, the last time I saw him alive, came a message that touched my heart and transformed a lifetime of other long-held, carried weights. From some deep who-knows-where place, these simple words: **Keep up the good work.** It's become a mantra you may have heard around my place. This is where it came from.

Mary Jo's dying was much faster and brutal. I've never personally seen how something like ALS can deconstruct/dissolve the nervous system, shutting off vital coordinating signals to every body function. I struggled greatly with this because a large part of our 20-year friendship was my role as healer/teacher. I could not prescribe herbs, massage, chi kung, tai chi, say or **do** anything about it.



The only thing to 'do' was to **be**, as in be present, fully present for each and every moment. That provided the deepest healing. Mary Jo taught me this in such a fundamental and real way that everything about 'me' changed, especially who 'I' thought 'I' was. She was so full of grace throughout, showing in very real terms how the spirit shines even as the body physically unravels. Jim gradually lost his mind, yet his body was fine. Mary Jo quickly lost her body, but her mind was crystal clear. Curious.



Patricia's death was quite sudden, essentially in one moment, although the unconscious body held on for another month in hospice. In the year before her stroke, she offloaded a lifetime of wounds, hurts, held-grudges and self-images as wrong, bad, a failure. I've never seen such a complete dismantling of the accumulated assumed qualities of self in such a short time. Part of this process included a barely believable series of events allowing her to escape a suffocating and detrimental welfare/disability/Social Security existence to buy a house in Central Oregon. It was her deepest dream. The stroke occurred while returning to Portland after the last house inspection and all financial papers were finalized and closed. Patricia demonstrated with great flair how it doesn't matter the deep wounds of a childhood, or a lifetime, of physical and emotional abuse, as courage and self acceptance can heal it all when the time is ripe.

Melinda is a Taoist-mystic kindred spirit. We share a deep curiosity and passion for exploring this natural way of being, learning about it and ourselves together.



Her cancer and drastic brain surgeries became just another part of our exploration: in hospitals, ICUs, rehab and home. When she couldn't come to class, some chi kung friends met at her house to meditate each Thursday afternoon for almost a year. Her spirit continued to shine, teach and guide even as the tumor slowly began encroaching on vital brain functions. One of her deep messages was: don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of her tumor or any cancer; of a possible slow, lingering death or death itself. In fact, there is no need to bring fear to **any** experience as it only interferes with being fully present and aware of whatever is happening in the moment, that is, reality. Most of our fears are about the past or future, not what is right before us. Our litany of fears seem so insignificant compared to the spirit Melinda brought to each person, day and moment.

Each person in the Thursday meditation group went to help Melinda, support and bring her energy. Each of us remarked about receiving so much more than we gave. Not just from

Melinda, but also from being fully involved, present and intimate with her dying process. There are times I greatly miss those weekly meditations at her house. But it doesn't take much to remember and reconnect with the spirit that Melinda maintained throughout a lingering ordeal. When listening, present, aware, I feel it in every moment, see it in every face.

These are such brief summaries of four people, their living and dying. Whole books could be written about each, along with the lessons and insights gained by being with them. It gives a whole new meaning to 'professional continuing education.' I'm a much better practitioner and person as a result.

I feel blessed by each and their families for allowing me these opportunities to learn and grow. I share these blessings with you.

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