

A Portal Between This World and the Next

Katherine K. Rogers

"Om Namah Shivaya," I chanted along with the tape, settling and centering myself as I drove. "Oh-oh-oh-ohm Na-Mah Shi-va-ay-ay-ay-ay-ah," the voices of the choir echoed, swelling and receding in oceanic waves.

Less than an hour earlier, I had received the call to come to the bedside of a dying friend, and I knew this chant would help me prepare. "I bow to the divinity within," the Sanskrit phrase declared, over and over, the hypnotic rhythms rolling across the hum of the sitar like surf unraveling on an endless strip of shore. Calmness pervaded my being as I entered into the music, allowing it to wash over and through me. I trusted that this leave-taking was in divine order. After living for nine years in the shadow of a brain tumor and after months of physical decline, my friend Tim would, in spirit, at last be set free.

Several weeks earlier, I had dreamed that I was standing on one side of a river with Tim's wife, JoAnn, as he looked back at us from a peaceful bank on the other side. After a while, he turned as though hearing a call and began to follow it, dissolving into the distance. It was as if he was being summoned to some new mission. The message was clear—that he was going on ahead of us and that things were as they should be. There was still more for JoAnn and me to do here, before we, too, would cross over. Now this day had finally come. I felt alternately nervous and relieved as I approached the home of my closest woman friend and her dying husband.

Thick, gray February clouds outside my kitchen window that morning had outwardly affirmed my intuition that the death would come that evening, perhaps around seven. I had packed an overnight bag with pajamas and toothbrush, preparing to stay with JoAnn on her first night in the house without her husband's physical presence.

"Om Namah Shivaya," I continued chanting, as I sat

beside Tim on the bed, taking my turn keeping watch over him. Unable to eat for days, he was now very thin. Lightly covered with a sheet and clothed only in a white adult diaper, he looked like Jesus at the crucifixion. Instructions to periodically moisten his lips with a sponge added to the feeling of ministering to the Christ in human form. He had lost virtually all motor control of his body by this time and was unable to move voluntarily. Though he appeared to be sleeping, it was difficult to know to what extent he might be conscious. His breathing rose and fell heavily, a telling rattle in his chest, as the chant continued. "I salute the divinity within." I knew Tim would understand. It seemed as if things had come full circle.

"Om Namah Shivaya." The words and rhythms are central to the tradition of Siddha Yoga, a Hindu lineage of spiritual practice. It was in a Siddha Yoga meditation group that Tim and I had first come to know each other, as fellow explorers on a spiritual quest. We had sung this chant over and over, seated on opposite sides of the meditation center, women on the left, men on the right, during Thursday night lecture and meditation sessions. When Tim and I caught each other's eye, coming up the stairs one night, I felt something very familiar about him, as if we'd known each other for lifetimes. Tim was a former actor, bearded and slight in stature. Extroverted and intuitive, he had a gift for reaching out to people in many different contexts—from the homeless person on the bus to arts community benefactors. What I appreciated most during our occasional conversations at the center or in restaurants or coffee shops was that he was so empathetic and easy to talk with.

When we first met, Tim was in the midst of a painful divorce, separating from the mother of his only son, Adam. His surgery for the brain tumor took place about a year later, and after I heard about it I felt called to reach out. I, too, had gone through divorce, a serious illness,

and surgery, and I wanted to offer moral support through sharing my own experience and the awakenings I had received. I wanted also to share my faith—my belief that healings were always possible, that doctors' predictions did not always come true, that alternative methods can help.

It was spring when I visited Tim after his surgery in his brick house by the lake. I brought a bouquet of yellow roses to welcome him back. There I met his parents and eldest sister, and invited him out for a walk. As we meandered through the flowering neighborhood, Tim described to me the results of his surgery. The doctors, he said, had removed much of the tumor, but a portion that had imbedded itself too deeply still remained. It was uncertain what would evolve, though things seemed to be going well so far. Strolling past the older two- and three-story homes along each block, we acknowledged our gratitude for the support of our families and for the ways that a brush with our own mortality had extended our sense of meaning and the larger design of our lives. We spoke of dreams and divine appointments, and the work that was still ours to do. I knew I had more to accomplish by way of artistic expression and community service. Tim dreamed of contributing to the community by opening a small alternative theater. We both held the vision of finding our true life partners.

As it turned out, I was destined to assist Tim in attaining this last goal. A fellow artist, Paula, introduced me to JoAnn a year or so after my walk with Tim. Paula must have sensed our potential for spiritual kinship. Soon after we met, on one of our many long walks and talks, JoAnn made a prophetic remark. "Oh Katherine, I just know I'll meet someone through you," she said. She added that she'd been looking for thirty years to find the right man. Like Tim, JoAnn was an imaginative artist with a quirky sense of humor and an accepting way with others. My gift to her was an introduction to her future husband. Their gift to me was the model of one of the most emotionally supportive and spiritually attuned relationships I have ever witnessed.

JoAnn has said that living with the brain tumor probably helped them to avoid many of the pitfalls other couples fall into. They recognized the preciousness of their time together, knowing it might be quite limited—just seven years, it turned out, from start to finish. It was

a pleasure to me to sense the comfort they found in each other's presence and to observe the emotional support they jointly extended to friends and family as well. For example, with compassion and tact, they helped ease family tensions during a gay friend's coming out process and offered their hospitality when his partner was dying of AIDS.

As artists, Tim, JoAnn, and I pursued our visions. As friends, along with Tim's son, Adam, we formed an extended spiritual family. Tim realized his dream of opening the Brave Hearts Theatre, hosting many performances by local and visiting artists over a six-

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year period. The theater filled a gap in the community, offering a performance venue for actors starting out in their careers or trying out new and experimental works. The productions often confronted difficult personal and cultural subjects—homosexuality, AIDS, racial and gender issues, unemployment, mental illness, capital punishment. JoAnn and I also continued our individual work as visual artists, deepening our friendship and often exhibiting together. We even showed our work at the Brave Hearts.

JoAnn and Tim saw me through the coming and going of several boyfriends, while I encouraged JoAnn in her efforts to balance her artwork with her upcoming role as wife and stepmother. I offered what support I could, as well, when Tim's brain tumor started to grow back, and when, shortly before their wedding, he began radiation treatments. We quietly celebrated their engagement with a private dinner at my apartment, complete with crepe paper streamers and Luciano Pavarotti's Neapolitan love songs in the background. I also lent them Marianne Williamson's *Return to Love* book on tape for their car trip to Colorado, where the wedding would take place. The book sparked Tim's interest in the *Course in Miracles*

and a new perspective on Jesus as a teacher.

After a time of searching for the right fit in a spiritual community, JoAnn and Tim found a small United Church of Christ congregation within blocks of their house, one which Adam also seemed to enjoy. The minister, Charles, a strong writer and speaker, offered helpful grounded messages in his Sunday sermons, a shared sense of humor, and an understanding ear as Tim and JoAnn contended with the fears that living with the brain

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tumor sometimes evoked. Aided by JoAnn's evangelical Christian background, Tim seemed to flow into a new experience of Jesus and relationship with God as Father. Keeping centered through prayer and meditation became a daily practice for him.

I found my spiritual community within the open atmosphere of the Unity Church, a mystical, metaphysical blend of practical Christianity and East-West philosophy. Here I felt free to combine my interest in Eastern religions with my spiritual base in Christianity. Meditation was emphasized as a means of attuning to the Christ within, the flow of spirit, and a oneness with divine mind.

JoAnn, Tim, and I were able to share the unfolding of our spiritual process comfortably with each other, something more easily accomplished together than within our families of origin or with some of our other friends. Rarely did we sit down for a meal, whether in a restaurant or at one of our homes, that Tim did not reach out his hands to initiate prayers of thanksgiving.

Three years after their wedding, Tim dreamed one night that he was on "a train bound for glory." He noted this in his diary. Within months, the brain tumor recurred again, more fiercely than ever. Tests since the radiation had indicated no further problems, but now, advancing with a vengeance, the tumor devoured Tim's short-term memory, and the train left the station with frightening speed. I was shocked at the news. Not only

was I horrified by what was happening to my friends, but fears about my own health surfaced as well. If Tim's illness could come back, what about mine?

My first reaction after hearing of the tumor's raging progress was denial. "This train is moving too fast," I told JoAnn, "and we don't have to get on it. Miracles can happen. The doctors don't always know everything." This attitude had always seemed to help in the past, and Tim's life had extended beyond previous prognoses. I often used to say that we'd still be visiting each other well into our eighties. Tim was now just forty-eight.

The blanket of denial did not protect us for long. It was snatched away the next morning when, as JoAnn and I talked in a hospital hallway, a social worker and priest approached JoAnn to explain the hospice program. We looked at each other in disbelief. How did we go in less than a week from planning art exhibits to arranging hospice care? JoAnn turned to the priest while I stepped into an office with the social worker. "This train is moving too fast," I repeated and burst into tears, "and we don't want to be on it." She reached out to touch my shoulder. "I know," she said.

The resurgence of the brain tumor and rapid decline of Tim's health coincided with the closing of the Brave Hearts Theatre due to cancellation of a lease and Tim's subsequent struggles to find another suitable location. Much of Tim's sense of purpose, he said, was invested in Brave Hearts, but now with his illness, his period of active service to the theater community had come to an end. It was time for others to step forward in his place, and many of those he had once helped, often without financial recompense, now saw their opportunity to give back. Friends from the theater community organized a benefit performance to raise funds for Tim and JoAnn, helped to dismantle the theater, and offered other practical support.

"Om Namah Shivaya." I bow to the divinity within. In the end, Tim's physical life could not be saved. We had asked and prayed for a miracle, explored last minute alternatives that finally appeared unworkable, and held on to hope when a new chemotherapy drug seemed to reverse the tumor's progress, at least for a few weeks.

With Tim's sudden loss of short-term memory and the steady decline of his bodily control, he became as vulnerable as a toddler and required around the clock

care. The church community, friends, and family rallied to the cause, but still the demands on JoAnn's physical and emotional energy were enormous. Yet she never seemed to lose her composure, her humor, or her graciousness. Her faith and creativity were needed now more than ever, she said. And Tim, unable to move his arms and legs toward the end, would still beam at friends and family who came to visit. As Dan, Tim's acupuncturist, observed, "We witnessed a miracle, but not the one we were asking for."

Pease, it seemed, came in surrender. The more dire Tim's physical situation became, the more the atmosphere of love in the house seemed to expand. Even in the midst of a dying process, Tim and JoAnn were community builders. Blessings poured into the house in the form of food, money, nursing help, poetry books, hugs, and moral support. Friends found the ways they could serve best: by cooking, cleaning, listening, organizing, playing the piano, participating in a prayer circle. Surrounded by this outpouring, in the depths of his illness, Tim stopped some of us in our tracks by asking, "What are your needs in all of this?" What a reminder not to ignore the central questions in our own lives! Yet the rewards of helping were so great. Gifts in abundance flowed from the house on Ohio Avenue—especially in moments of heart-to-heart connection and new-found friendships.

Though I contributed through cooking and kitchen help, my main role was as prayer and meditation partner and confidante to JoAnn. Once a week, Tim, JoAnn, and I would sit on the sofa at their house in front of our coffee-table altar. I lit our three little multicolored candles, and we gave thanks for our immediate blessings: friends and families, the beautiful day, our time together. We asked for wisdom, courage, and guidance in what we'd be called to do next. Despite his memory loss, Tim could still offer the most beautiful, poetic prayers—astounding, considering all he was going through. He addressed God as "Father" and most often asked to keep living in harmony with his will. For me, these candlelit evenings were magical heartwarming times. I felt deeply connected to Tim and JoAnn on the spirit plane, and I'd always leave feeling uplifted and more emotionally healed within myself. On a new level, too, I was learning to let go, no longer needing to control the process or the timing. I loved being part of

Tim and JoAnn's large group of friends—a community that grew in those last months. It was as though we were all gathered, for a time, into a sacred circle, and it became difficult to stay away. So many helpers were drawn to the house that, finally, someone posted a sign on the door, asking for quiet and privacy in Tim's last days.

"Keep singing," Charles, the minister, said as he entered the bedroom where I sat keeping watch. "Om Namah Shivaya," I repeated, teaching him the chant,

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and we sang together for a while. After he left, I opened JoAnn's hymnal and began to sing my favorite hymns, songs I remembered from my childhood in the Catholic Church. Later, after the other visitors had gone, JoAnn joined me again, climbing onto the bed to sit next to Tim, and we spent the afternoon singing every hymn, every chant, every Christmas song we could think of. There was comfort for us in singing, as if, besides offering our prayers, it was all we could do, our last gift to Tim, our last celebration of our time together as three friends and prayer partners. Finally, we progressed to the old Negro spirituals. Through the strains of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," it was easy to feel the angels draw nearer.

At around four in the afternoon, Adam, who was then sixteen and who lived with his mother, arrived for his last visit with his father. He had been coming every day that week to play the cello at Tim's bedside. Previously, I had left Adam alone with JoAnn and Tim at these times, but this day I stayed. My role as witness seemed important in that moment, as Adam, too, offered the gift of his music. Afterward, JoAnn and I stepped out of the room to allow him time alone with his father. He laid down gently on the bed and embraced Tim for the last time. "I told him I love him," he said later, "and that I would be okay. I knew he

wouldn't feel free to leave until I was able to say that."

"His feet are getting cold," Adam added, and then left for home. He had chosen not to stay for the last hour.

Tim's friend John came in next, intending to help JoAnn lift and wash Tim and prepare him for the night. Tim was still breathing heavily, haltingly now. For

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several seconds he stopped, while JoAnn was out of the room fetching some medicine. "Tim, I need you to keep breathing!" John called out. He must have been thinking, as I was, "Don't go before JoAnn gets back." As if jolted back from somewhere, Tim looked suddenly surprised. His eyelids fluttered, opening partway. He began to breathe again, and I beckoned JoAnn to return to the bed.

With Tim in her arms, and John and me on either side, we started to sing again: "Thy Holy Wings, Dear Savior," JoAnn's favorite Swedish hymn from childhood. The heavy halting breaths stopped again and we all fell silent, waiting. "Sing something, Katherine," JoAnn cried out then, and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" immediately sprang from my lips, a song everyone knew and joined in. In another breath or two, Tim was gone. Months before, I had feared the death would be like the dull thud of a door closing. Instead I felt, in the final moments, an influx of grace and the sense that we were handing our friend over to a higher realm. In my mind's eye, I could see Jesus and the angels swooping in to claim Tim's spirit and guide him through the portal to his new life.

My earlier dream of the river had prepared me for this moment and to be present for JoAnn at this turning point. As she continued to hold Tim's body and slowly absorb the fact that his spirit had left it, I was able to keep a clear head and call the hospice nurse, the minister who would notify Adam, and a few other close friends. As I expected, JoAnn, Adam, and I spent the night together, camped out in the living room, drawing comfort and reassurance from each other's presence.

Since my relationship with Tim was as a fellow artist and spiritual sister, my sadness at losing a friend was not

the deep cellular grief that JoAnn and Adam experienced in losing a beloved husband and father. Nor was it the profound emptiness his parents and sisters must have felt in the loss of their son and brother. Though I was there for the shedding of the body, for me, Tim's spirit never really died. I continue to see it at times in sunlight streaming through a windowpane or hear it in playful laughter on a breezy summer day. I still experience Tim as a guide sometimes, when I'm judging myself too harshly. I hear him say, "How do we know that was a mistake?" encouraging me to listen to my own heart and trust the unfolding of my journey. Then I tell JoAnn I've had a "Tim" moment.

I continue, as well, in my role as witness, listener, and friend to JoAnn and Adam. After Adam's graduation from high school this past June, we met for dinner in the brick house by the lake. The three of us held hands, as we used to do with Tim, for our prayers of gratitude. Often, now, it is Adam who reaches out first. We smiled that night at the thought of Tim, somewhere in the heavens, beaming with pride at his grownup son.

Adam shared some of his anxieties about leaving friends and family to go off to college. He plans to become a neuroscientist, conducting medical research on the brain. JoAnn and I offered encouragement, recounting our own experiences and insights about leaving home for the first time, and I gave Adam a graduation gift: Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. There will always be a bond between us, but I feel a sense of completion now, not of our friendship, but of my role as escort on this particular leg of the journey.

"Om Namah Shivaya." I salute the divinity within. If there was one most valued realization for me in the experience of Tim's dying process, it was in relearning when to yield to a power greater than myself. The privilege of consciously accompanying a friend to the doorway between worlds, I discovered, is the privilege of the midwife supporting the birth of spirit into new life—bowing to life's never-ending determination to complete and renew itself.

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