

For a little over a year I've been working as an assistant to Arlene, a woman who's been battling oral cancer for almost two decades. This wasn't the type of work I was looking for, nor do I have any training in medical support, but we were brought together by a mutual friend and things just fell into place. After spending six months continuing to look for a full time job while I worked for Arlene, I came to recognize that I was meant to continue with Arlene and see her through to her death. When I shared that decision with her, Arlene expressed great relief. We had developed a bond that had become very important to her. She is a fiercely independent woman who found solace in the support and consistency I was providing for her.

For the next six months we fell into a routine where I would work for her a couple of times a week, making phone calls, doing housework, paying her bills, taking her on errands and to doctors' appointments and being a companion. I'd eat my lunch while she fed herself through her gastric tube and we'd have conversations (she'd write notes because her lower jaw, tongue and soft palate had been removed...and she has a trach tube).

I found I was quite willing to offer myself in just about whatever way Arlene asked of me. Then we had a disagreement at the end of last year that made me question my commitment to Arlene. I realized that I had assumed Arlene would be well on her way in the dying process by that point – and she wasn't. Arlene is a fighter, not ceding control nor completely acknowledging that the cancer would ultimately take her. That sort of denial is a two-edged sword, but I absolutely believe it gave Arlene an ability to keep the diminishing effects of the cancer at bay for quite a while. After reviewing my assumptions, I recommitted to staying with Arlene to the end...however long that might take.

But now Arlene has a 24-hour attendant and is under hospice care. She has declined quite a bit since December, but she has continued to be the Energizer bunny of cancer patients: no matter how much the cancer ravaged her body, she kept on going and going and going. And even with all the support that hospice and her attendant provide for her, she wants me to be with her as much as I can. As a result, I'm currently going to her home 5 days a week.

These past 14 months have offered me an amazing opportunity to examine issues of liberation and renewal as I observe Arlene approach the end of her life. Each time Arlene has wrestled with yet another insult to her body, she has found her way to acceptance and carried on. Each time she has renewed her sense of her Self. Arlene has told me that she does not know what happens after we die and has indicated that that unknowing is quite unsettling for her.

After great resistance toward seeing the hospice chaplain, she finally relented a few weeks ago. It so happens that Jamie McReynolds, who led us in worship last month, is the chaplain with her hospice service. I was so relieved that Arlene was open enough to answer Jamie's simple questions about her ideas of God and the end of life. She related her fears of being judged by a punitive God. I wanted to tell her "no, it's not like that," but I held my tongue, trusting that Jamie was the expert and he would guide her to a more peaceful understanding of the spiritual accounting as she leaves this mortal coil. Arlene has reluctantly met with Jamie three times during which she's had the opportunity to explore her spiritual assumptions and to hear Jamie's alternative thoughts, which appear to give her some comfort.

Arlene's cancer is now spreading, with lesions growing on her cheek. The pain is constant. She's getting weaker. She hasn't left her house in weeks and spends most of her time in bed. A few weeks ago she began to struggle with desperately wanting the end to come, but not being willing to accelerate the timeline herself. Her despair has been so difficult for me to witness. All I could do was acknowledge her conflict and remind her of her options: increase her morphine dosage and/or refuse food and water. Arlene remained in this personal standoff for a couple of weeks. During this past week, however, each time I saw her Arlene wanted to talk about hastening her death. Yesterday she indicated that she was ready to take action. I anticipate there will be further days of seesawing between decision and doubt, but Arlene's fierce will to live is rapidly ebbing. If she can come to a decision, whether it's to take action or to let things take their course, my sincere hope is that Arlene will come a peaceful place in her final days. When she is gone, I will feel relief knowing that Arlene is finally free from all the suffering she has experienced, both physical and psychological.

This time with Arlene has been such a gift for me. This is the first time I've been intimately involved with someone as they approached their death. In this time I have been given a chance to renew my sense of self as I see my ability to be loving and giving toward another. To be of service, to witness and embrace Arlene in her journey toward the ultimate liberation is a serendipitous gift. It is a gift that will aid me when my mother is facing her death and has given me an

opportunity to consider how I might respond to my own. Yet, I won't know until the time comes how the very complicated relationship I have with my mother will affect me when she is dying, nor can I possibly know how I will behave at the end of my own life. Instead, I can try to live each day with exuberance, free of worry about tomorrow, at peace with the reality of today.