



Unexpected Gifts

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My younger brother, John, and I had a heart connection and when he died, my heart wept. Yes, his health had been declining for years but still -- so fast. I had flown across the country to be with him when his newest doctor gave him the prognosis and treatment options for his advanced cancer. We left the doctor's office thinking John might have as much as two years, instead he was gone in a week, gone two days after I flew home.

John's life was turbulent, a karmic bonfire I often said. He was only 19 years old when severe mental illness derailed him. Job loss after job loss followed, then alcohol addiction, evictions, episodes of manic distortion and of profound depression, suicide attempts, kidney failure followed by dialysis, and for the last several years, rapidly declining health. He was only 69 when he died.

Over the years of John's many crises, I was often his main family support but looking back, I see now that my work with him was motivated largely by a desire to honor my parents' wishes, a sense of duty to a sibling, and, yes, by pity. My meditation practice changed all of that. That change and others, as our teachers tell us, had been happening unseen and gradually, with every hour spent on the cushion, whether a sit felt "productive" or not.

Just before John got really sick several years ago, uncanny coincidences started occurring regularly in our partnership. Some led to finding him his first stable housing ever. Others would serendipitously bring me to his side from across the country just as a new health crisis hit and I was needed. The pattern was welcome, if a bit unnerving.

Then John got seriously ill. He spent 6 months in three different hospitals and three different rehabs and almost died. During this time, I flew across the country over and over again, spending weeks and weeks away from home and hours by his bedside. I did this with a patience and deep love that took me by surprise. "Who is this person and where did she come from?" I asked. I hardly recognized myself! Real compassion had welled up replacing that sense of duty and pity and it startled me. It was in those days that John and I forged our heart connection, and we both could feel the difference. Further synchronicities occurred, one leading to a diagnosis that had been previously missed, and once treated, gave John five more years of life. From then on, John and I

thanked each other regularly – he, for my help and support and I, for the gift of the important insight he gave me. Discovering this new capacity led me to volunteer with NODA (No One Dies Alone) at Harborview Hospital and with a hospice program. More gifts.

This March my dear John died, and because his death occurred in Covid time, we siblings could not gather to bury his ashes and have a service. We asked his minister, Rev. Rachel, to help us with a “just family” remote service for now, and assured her we would hold a larger, traditional memorial in person later. Gently, she posited another option, “Would we be willing to include John’s community in the service now?” There was deep grief around John’s death and the isolation dictated by the virus just compounded it.

The widespread grief was not a surprise. I knew from my time with John that he had formed deep, healing connections outside his family, in AA, in his church and with friends. He gathered strength from community and gave strength back to others. His psychiatrist told me that John had become a beacon of hope for others with chronic mental illness; his AA friends spoke of how he inspired members struggling with addiction. And John had this special quality -- somehow, when he needed help, those who stepped up found, just as I had, that roles were mysteriously reversed, and they were the ones that received a gift.

John often lamented that he was not as successful as his siblings and that was true in a material sense. But he had been wildly successful as a friend and a mentor to so many. “You will have more people at your funeral than any of us,” I had told him. And, for his celebration of life, held virtually on Zoom and presided over by Rev. Rachel, the house was packed. In a time when no one wanted to board an airplane or even leave their home, over one hundred friends and family “gathered” from all over the country to celebrate his big heart and to send him off with a deluge of gratitude and admiration for the way he managed his life and gave to others.

In what seemed a metaphor for John’s life, friends worked with others who were technologically challenged to make sure they could be there. At the service, a man whom John had befriended and who depended on him for companionship and stability shared how much John meant to him. He was there because another friend worked out a way for the two of them to safely attend together. Our 94 year-old uncle, the last of his generation, attended proudly, because his daughter spent hours over the phone helping him to learn to Zoom.

The ceremony itself had an unexpected intimacy. People who would normally shy away from speaking in public were comfortable sharing stories from a chair in their own home. It was easier to show grief openly in that setting too. Everyone had a front row seat for the slide show and a view of the pianist’s fingers creating John’s favorite music. We even gathered in breakout rooms after the service to chat and were able to move

from room to room to say hello to others. Tears flowed freely throughout.

True, we could not gather to break bread afterwards and we couldn't share the comfort of a hug, sing together, or feel the embrace of a sanctuary. Still what was achieved had an intimacy and a connection I would not have thought possible. "Together," we were able to celebrate John's tumultuous life, laugh together at some of his foibles, share our admiration for the way he overcame the many obstacles that life threw his way, and yes, grieve together that he was gone. Synchronistically (yet again), the date Rev. Rachel picked for the service happened to be Day 48 of the 49 days of a soul's transition after death in the Tibetan tradition. So, we sent John off to whatever comes next on a wave of love. And he gave us back yet another gift, connection in a time of sorrow.