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Around the deathbed and the birth bed

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | May. 29, 2012 My Table Is Spread

On Dec. 21, my mother died. On Jan. 21, my granddaughter was born.

As my mother lay dying, my children came to say goodbye to their grandmother, the woman they knew as Atoo. For most of her last few days, mother did not open her eyes or speak. We kept vigil. On Monday afternoon, I turned to my older son, who is a physician, and asked him, ?Why can?t she open her eyes??

He said, ?Her body is struggling to keep blood flowing to the heart and the brain. There isn?t any extra strength left to open and close her eyes.?

We sat silently for a while and then my son said, ?Mama, she?s in labor. She has work to do, and she?s working hard. There?s nothing we can do except to try and make her comfortable. There?s nothing we can do but wait.?

That night, my mother opened her eyes and asked me, ?Am I dying??

No one has ever asked me that question. I did not know what I should say, but I sensed it was no time for lies, however kindly meant.

?I don?t know for sure, Mother,? I said, stroking her face, ?but yes,? I said, ?yes, I think you are dying.?

She wailed, her cries wordless and tearless.

?Why am I dying?? she called out, and began to moan. ?I don?t want to die!?

I wept.

She said, ?Where?s my mother??

?Right here,? I said, ?She?s right here, and she?s waiting for you. She loves you.?

She looked at me. She said, ?I?m going to miss seeing all the beautiful babies.?

It was as good a reason as I have ever heard for fighting death.

My mother would live about 36 hours more. She was silent, her eyes closed, unspeaking. Her death, when it came, was quiet.

My husband had been with me when my mother railed against her dying. He held her hands as I stroked her face. He wept with me, and with her. Later, he said, ?Well, it was like she was in labor, and on Monday night she was in transition. She was at that point where you just don?t believe you can go on, where you don?t know how you can see this thing through.?

?But she did,? I said. ?She saw it through.?

When I walked into the labor room just after the night of Jan. 20 had turned into the early morning of the 21st, I saw my daughter kneeling on a pillow on the floor beside her bed. Her husband stood behind her, massaging her back. She lay with her head on the mattress, her eyes clinched shut. She would say, ?Here comes another one.? I took her hand, and she squeezed it as the contractions came, doing their good work, pushing the baby down the birth canal.

My daughter moaned through the contractions. The pain was doing its work, and she was doing hers. The sound of her cries had its purpose, too, or so it seemed to me, as though she were calling the baby out, her breath moving with its own convulsive power, her breath rising up, higher and louder, as the baby moved closer and closer toward our waiting hands.

My daughter did not open her eyes during the contractions. She had work to do, and no strength left to open her eyes and take in the helpers who had gathered around her. We tried to make her comfortable. We waited.

I stroked her face.

Her doctor came quietly into the room and we knew the time was near. He and her husband helped my daughter upright and onto the bed, where she knelt, her arms around her husband?s shoulders, leaning into him for support, for strength. It was the posture that felt most natural to her, the one posture she felt she could endure what still had to be endured.

The birth, when it came, was quiet. The baby?s head appeared. We could see her thick, dark hair. Then the rest of her body slipped out, so easy it seemed, after so many months of waiting and so many hours of laboring. She gulped air and cried from the shock of it, but there seemed to be no shock or surprise in what she, briefly, opened her eyes to see. We held her, weeping and welcoming her, and she looked back at us, calm, as though our faces and our voices were known and soothing.

Later, when my daughter?s trembling had subsided and her newborn daughter was in her arms, we talked. My daughter said, ?I thought of Atoo the whole time I was in labor. I remember when she was dying and how familiar it looked to me. It looked like something I remembered, something I knew from Lucy?s birth.?

My daughter and her husband had two days in the hospital to hold their girl and study her face and her ways. They talked and prayed and cried and laughed, like their parents had done before them, when they were born.

Sometime in those hours, they knew her name: ?Elisabeth,? to be called ?Bess.? It was my grandmother?s name, Bess Arnett Curry, my mother?s mother.

?Where is my mother?? my mother had asked me as she lay dying. It was not an idle question. There was no idle talk around that deathbed, just as there would be no idle talk around the birth bed. What words we said we spoke in response to needs, and my mother needed to know that her mother was near.

?She?s right here. She?s waiting for you. She loves you.?

It was not until I returned home on Saturday morning and crawled back into bed that I remembered those words and my first ones to Bess. I stroked her head and swaddled her. I put my finger to her fist and she grabbed hold. Behind us, I could hear the doctor as he tended to my daughter. I could hear her husband as he murmured to her. The placenta was delivered. The helpers were cleaning and stitching and putting to rights.

?I?m here, sweet girl,? I said to my granddaughter. ?Ma-Maw?s right here. I?ve been waiting for you. We?ve all

been waiting for you. We love you. Welcome home.?

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