

A lesson in death and dying

Melissa Rooney, Durham News (Raleigh News and Observer), February 2014

On Wednesday, Jan 22, I mass emailed a final request for comments regarding (former long-time County Commissioner) Becky Heron, which I planned to read to her around 11 AM the following day. In the interim, a good friend of Becky's and mine stopped by.

'The only word I heard Becky speak when I was there was 'Hurt,' she said. 'The Hospice people say it may seem like she's talking to you, but she's just talking in her sleep. She doesn't even know you're there.'

'How do they know that?' I asked.

'Science,' she said. "She's got dementia, and she's on morphine for pain," she added.

'The science is not at all conclusive on that subject," I said. If Becky can hear and understand me, even a little, then it's worth my while; and if she can't, then it gives me a chance to celebrate her while she's still a part of my world.

My grandfather worked in Hospice the last 20 years of his life; and my mother was always voluntarily and determinedly visiting terminally ill and/or dying people, particularly the elderly. My own father died when I was four, so my intense interest in consciousness and death began at an early age.

Among the first quotes I ever recorded was Lucretius:

"What has this bugbear Death to frighten man,
If souls can die, as well as bodies can?
For, as before our birth we feel no pain.

...

What is there left for us in death to fear?
When once that pause of life has come between
'Tis just the same as we had never been.

I nearly majored in religion while at the College of William and Mary but majored in English and Chemistry instead. Then I went to Chemistry graduate school (which I chose over English because the former would pay while the latter would cost me). My graduate research involved fabricating micro-electrodes to insert into rat brain tissue and measure electrochemical brain signals. Though I doubt I could return to experimenting with live animals, it was amazing stuff. After all, what has more to do with human consciousness than the human brain?

Since then, I have accepted that science doesn't explain human consciousness any more than religion does. Not knowing no longer unsettles me, and that has freed me to be close to death.

Based on my increasing visits during her recent decline, people think that Becky and I were close friends. Truth be told, though I've always felt a strong connection with Becky, I was just another person who knew her through her role as County Commissioner. I emailed or phoned her every so often and saw her at government meetings or public events. I didn't know where she lived until after she resigned from the Board of County Commissioners last year, when, for the next several months, I'd received emails from active Durham friends about Becky's declining condition.

Through my grandfather and mother, I know how elderly people, particularly those with dementia, often spend the last chapter of their lives inert and unstimulated. It hurt my heart to imagine the extroverted, animated and driven Becky Heron 'watching' t.v. or staring into space until she died.

Then my daughter's annual violin performance at a nursing home reminded me of the universal power of music. I arranged for my daughter and her friend to play for Becky. I wasn't sure if Becky knew who I was, but she told us she wanted us to return and play for her and her husband. Several weeks later, my son played guitar and my daughter played violin for Becky and her family. Though Becky couldn't speak, she clapped.

I didn't see Becky again for several weeks, during which I contemplated how difficult it is for most people to visit a dying person, especially someone they respect and admire as much as Becky.

How could I enable all those who loved Becky, but who couldn't bring themselves to visit her in death, to say goodbye to her as she departs this world? I emailed everyone I knew who might know Becky and asked them to email me any related thoughts or comments I could read to her when I visited.

On Thursday, January 23, before I was able to read her the wonderful comments I'd received, I was informed that Becky had died. Surprisingly, I was more grateful than sad. Becky Heron was my teacher in death as well as life. Just as she welcomed me at her table when she was county commissioner even when she didn't know me from Adam, she welcomed me to her death bed even though she didn't remember who I was.

Due in no small part to her husband, Becky's realism and lack of pretense never abandoned her. She and her family enabled me to be a part of her departure from this world, and I will never allow my fear or awkwardness with death to keep me away again.