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When Breathing Fails  (Continuing from page 1)

Each shallow breath was a painful, laborious adventure as I lay motionless in my CCU bed. I could vaguely overhear snippets of conversation between my wife, Anna, and the doctor as she tried to pin down his analysis of the illness. "I've got some thoughts about it," I overheard him say. "But let's see what the blood tests show."

Once it registered upon me that they would be checking my blood, my mind began reacting. It immediately brought up the leukemia that had been the cause of my mother's death 10 years earlier. I remembered her bone marrow transplants and multiple transfusions as the doctors tried to strengthen and cleanse her blood.

My thoughts galloped ahead of me heightening my fears. "Maybe I have the same disease as mom? Maybe it's hereditary? If so, there's no solution. Once there's cancer in the blood it's over with. It flows all over the body," I assessed with finality.

Before I realized what was happening, my fearful thoughts had led me into a state of considerable stress. It wasn't until I was able to shift my focus to what was actually happening in my body, moment-by-moment, that my mental condition calmed and became less oppressive. In this way, my thoughts lost their power to mesmerize me and transport me to some fictitious future. Instead I was drawn into the intensity of the uncomfortable sensations that were occurring each moment. My body and the attention that it required became the foreground, as thinking slipped into the background.

"Allow each moment to be exactly as it wants to be. Step into the moment and feel what is needed. Be honest enough to meet what is happening."

I remembered these words from a workshop with our dear friend and teacher Charlotte Selver, who Anna and I had studied with for 25 years. Charlotte had a small, frail body that housed a fierce warrior spirit. Her hearty laugh and dry sense of humor evoked warmth and European charm for me.

"Every moment is a moment when the air comes and goes. Allow your breath in and out without thinking, without demanding anything. Don't have an idea of how it should be. But really enter the moment as it is."

"Each situation is an invitation. It can be like fresh bread, not like old bread."

"Everything we do is worth experiencing more fully. Fully be there for the difficulties also. Permit your organism to be more there for this moment."

Although the very nature of the sensory world I was currently experiencing was one of considerable discomfort, being present for it at least enabled me to be grounded in the moment, rather than indulging in fearful, depressing mental fantasies. Calling upon the Charlotte alive-in me, I resolved to sense and explore everything "as it is," just the moment-by-moment sensations, no judgment, no labeling good or bad, just inviting it in, being present for it without trying to change anything.

I felt much better the next morning. I now saw the hospital more clearly as a kind of retreat center, a place where I could learn how to be in the moment free from mind games. After a warm greeting, my nurse Lori and I chatted during my morning check-up, quickly discovering that we were each Vipassana meditators. Applying the "seeing it as it is" quality of Vipassana practice to my physical discomfort was my way to stay balanced and be in the present. This moment-by-moment practice which was closely aligned with Charlotte's work was the only course of action that made any sense to me.

After a bland hospital breakfast, Anna arrived, and I shared with her all that I had been experiencing. This led us to make a pact not to speculate about my condition until we had concrete information from the test results. We would only give credence to what was actually known. But since friends, nurses, and doctors all had their concerned and thoughtful opinions about my condition, this was not an easy discipline to apply, particularly in a hospital environment. Whenever uncertainties would arise in the days ahead, I would watch the tendency of my mind to go off on fearful flights about the future. Whenever I was able to see that this process consisted of unreal fantasies, the cycle would instantly be broken and I would return to the present moment of each breath.

In my condition there was no "natural" breathing. I had to plan and strategize each new breath, sometimes shallow and gentle, at other times painful and compressed, usually with considerable discomfort. Out of these circumstances, "being present with what was happening, pleasant or unpleasant", became my silent mantra and my primary intention.

In these intimate hospital moments of breath-by-breath excursions into the unknown, Charlotte's teachings spoke loud and clear to me: "Everything we do is worth experiencing more fully. Fully be there for the difficulties also. Permit your organism to be more there for this moment."

Remembering Charlotte's inspirational words helped me navigate the stressful hospital world in a balanced way, providing me with solid ground to stand upon to meet the next moment whatever it was, pleasant or unpleasant. This helped me to be more available for what was occurring moment by moment....the touch of my legs and torso upon the
New book on Sensory Awareness and Drawing

By Connie Smith Siegel

After many years of preparation, I am happy to announce the publication of Spirit of Drawing, A Sensory Meditation Guide to Creative Expression, a weaving together of my life experience as artist, university art teacher, and long time student and leader of Sensory Awareness. This new approach to creative expression began in 1972 as I explored drawing with fellow members of the first Sensory Awareness study group, starting in Mexico. When the group rejected my favorite university exercises, we explored the source of drawing more directly—in the sensations of movement, touch, weight, and space. From very simple drawing processes, often with eyes closed, we moved naturally to the magic of seeing and drawing the world, noticing the effects of each different perception on our state of being and drawing style. As we worked together it became clear that drawing is a natural language inherent in everyone, an important means of inner discovery and an intimate connection to the vitality and wonder of the world. From these first exciting beginnings on a porch in Barra de Navidad, I evolved the processes that appear in the book. The experiments presented are illuminated by many examples of students, colleagues, and well-known master artists, which can inspire, but leave the reader free to find their own creative way.

The book, published by Watson Guptill, is available on Amazon.com, and can be ordered in bookstores as well.