



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Maria's Mother

With the determination of the born multi-tasker not to let anything drop Maria declined our offer to postpone the visit. In addition to being a wife and mother and coordinator of the meditation groups she was the principal carer for her dying mother. All her children were warmly committed to the care also and willingly took on additional times to sit with their grandmother who had lain in bed at their home for several months. She was not in pain or distress but slept deeply or drifted quietly in and out of consciousness day and night. Her existence seemed already to have migrated to a different plane of consciousness without fully leaving the one we familiarly know as life, the daily life filled with activity, thought and the preoccupying sense of time, of keeping appointments, enjoying mealtimes and making plans.

Even as we followed the schedule of the visit, talks and meetings, a retreat day and sessions with schoolchildren, we received frequent reports about the dying woman. They were reports of no change, all is well, she is peaceful – reassuring to Maria especially as she placed herself more fully in the plane of daily life. Yet in reality she was evidently not separated from the presence of her mother and the peculiar peace and patient expectancy that the process of dying well can silently create.

On our last and quite full day Maria asked us to her home for dinner, at a Latin hour, with her family and some supportive clergy. We tried politely but unsuccessfully to decline. I should have remembered that the things we try to avoid frequently turn out to be the ones we never forget. So, when we were feeling ready for bed we found ourselves instead sitting with a large and very energetic and energizing group around a very well laden table.

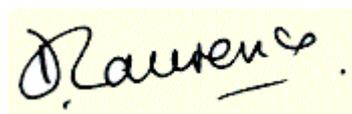
As the end of the feast, as we were preparing to leave, Maria asked me to visit and pray with her mother. I was embarrassed to realize that I had sat through the meal quite forgetful of the dying woman in the same house and I was further moved when I discovered that her room was right next to the one where we had been dining so merrily. As we stepped into it we entered the atmosphere that universally accompanies the last phases of life, surprisingly similar to the expectancy and uncertainty of an approaching birth. It is a liminal experience, here and there at the same time, a frontier moment. Maria's mother lay in a neat, well-

made bed that spoke of the loving attention that surrounded her, her head resting peacefully on a pillow, not looking at all sick or restless. She was breathing gently and calmly and her presence filled the room in an egoless way. Like the divine presence it made no demands, or a total demand, and so felt both irresistible and unthreatening.

Maria and I sat beside her and meditated silently for some time. I then prayed in words and we were silent again. She showed no sign of responding to our presence except through a deepening sense of her presence. It was communication in silence, the communication that is silence. After a while we stood up to leave. I blessed the dying woman and Maria led the way out of the room. As I moved away from the bed I looked at her mother and saw that her eyes were open looking directly at me. A full gaze of an abyss filled with light. Later one might call it a blessing. I called Maria back but her mother's eyes were closed again. Intuitively we sat down once more, not with any purpose or intention, just to be there and, in the full sense of the phrase, to see what was happening. It was a moment, rare in life, of full certainty that we were in the right place at the right time and had nothing to do except to be present. The dying woman continued to breathe gently but the sensation of an imminent change grew stronger. After a time her respiration changed, she seemed to gasp for breath one last time and then effortlessly gave up the instinct to survive and surrendered fully into another kind of life. Her last breath seemed to throw open a dimension of unrepeatable stillness, a sacred finality that at that instant consumed all sadness and loss in a total consummation.

The only moment of life that fully matches the drama of birth had come to pass. As at levels of deep prayer feeling and thought were temporarily irrelevant. Peace and joy were not identifiable experiences but simply accidental aspects of a reality that spoke for and of itself alone. Maria's mother had died. Maria had lost her mother.

With much love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Laurence". The signature is written in black ink on a light yellow rectangular background.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto and also Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org)

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