

Famous Last Words

A friend of the family, Mary - who wasn't very nice - was dying. Mary was estranged from her children, we were the only friends left standing, and it fell to her granddaughter Sue to companion Mary through her last days. I tried to support Sue.

The two of us spent hours at Mary's bedside. It was a trying time to say the least, mostly for poor Sue. Although I am rarely at a loss for words - I really struggled with knowing what to say. Mary was hard to love, but it seemed to me that her last conversations in this lifetime should be meaningful ones. I came to feel quite responsible for this. When we talked, I tried to express affection, concern and authenticity, often asking difficult but (I thought) important questions like, "Are you afraid of anything, Mary?" or "Is there anyone or anything you'd like to talk about?"

What I did not do, what I should have done, was just sit in the silence with her. I am not so good at silence.

When I received a phone call from Sue saying, "It's happening," I dropped everything and drove to the hospital, not wanting either of them to be alone as Mary died. I got there in time and Sue and I sat on either side of the bed, each holding one of Mary's paper-thin hands. She hadn't spoken for several days by then and her breathing was laboured. Staff confirmed that death was imminent.

It felt surreal, companioning her on this very final journey. Again, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility, compelled to do the right thing, acutely aware that there would be no "do over" here, for any of us. Mostly for Mary who, in spite of everything, deserved dignity and peace at the end of her life.

I racked my brain: what would she want? What would be helpful, reassuring? How could I best provide comfort? I had the image of Mary crossing a sacred threshold. And that brought to mind a "threshold choir," and that gave me the idea of singing. Once I had the idea, it gained traction. This, I thought, was an Excellent Plan.

As Sue and I sat vigil, I began to sing softly. I started with some familiar hymns I felt might befit the occasion: "Spirit of Life," "Go in Peace," even "Amazing Grace." The more I sang, the more I felt certain that this was the right kind of midwifery. I envisioned my music accompanying Mary across the bridge between worlds, providing the spiritual soundtrack for her passing.

I fancied myself to be quite the little earth angel.

But I soon ran out of ideas for songs. It was disappointing, in those critical moments, to realize how few sets of complete lyrics I knew. Stymied and pressured, I wondered, Should I just hum? It seemed inadequate. I went (mercifully!) quiet for a while and then panicked a bit, being not-so-good-with-silence and all. I did not want Mary to die without what I now deemed my essential musical accompaniment.

What could I sing?

In a desperate absence of inspiration, I landed on Kumbaya. (Oh, like you would have had a better idea!)

I was only a bar or so in, and just hitting my stride vocally when Mary – bless her dearly departed heart – mere moments away from the Big Sleep and having been non-communicative for days, woke up, looked directly into Sue’s eyes and said her last words clearly: “Shut. Her. Up.”