

I wrote this article for Oak Leaves shortly after spending a couple of weeks caring for my Aunt, Claire Dedrick, until she died of cancer in 2005. She had been Secretary of Resources for the State of California under Governor Jerry Brown back in the 70's and before that had been Vice President of the Sierra Club. She was a great woman and a lot of fun. As an ancestor, she comes to me when I'm in trance. We're still very close.

Loss and a Loved One

---- Rev. Kirk Thomas

When we look at the Celtic tales, we see great heroes going off to their deaths, dying in battle or by other means, often due to violations of their *gessa*, like CúChulainn and Conaire. Some die of broken hearts, such as Branwen, when she reflects on all the death and destruction that has occurred in the fighting over her. Death is viewed as a violent thing, presaged by omens, even when a person dies quietly. The banalities of our modern attitudes towards death ("Oh, he's better off now," or "She had such a good life") didn't matter to the ancients. They gave death the dignity and potency that it deserves.

But only rarely do we read of how their loved ones fared. We know that thrice fifty queens, who loved CúChulainn, gave "a scream of wailing and lamentation" and smote "their hands" as they knew they would never see him again. But no one mourned for Branwen, at least in the tale.

I remember when my father died, years ago. I was only 24, and his dying was a long a painful experience. I remember the horror I felt as he slowly wasted away, until he was little more than a living skeleton. I felt separated from him, as though a wall existed between us. I didn't know how to talk to him or be with him. At one point, my mother told him that one of their friends wanted to come and see him. His response was, "Cripes, I don't want her coming over here and blubbering all over me!" I was so afraid that I'd do something wrong, that my grief and fear, too, would be unwelcome. Living through that whole experience was like walking on eggs.

Since that time, I've found peace with my father, and he is one of my most revered Ancestors – the first to come to me in fact, before I re-found Paganism. And in that time I've learned a lot and supported other loved ones through that greatest of transitions.

One of the givens in my life is that seminal work by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. It's been talked of and bandied about over the years so much that it has practically become a *cliché*. But I think it would be a mistake to dismiss it out of hand. In the book, she tells of the five stages of dying, as she puts it. These stages, Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance, were used to describe the experience of the dying person. People going through these stages could go through them in any order, and even come back and revisit stages multiple times.

But we mustn't forget that the care-givers, the loved ones of the dying person also go through these stages, and can return and re-visit any of them at any time. The process isn't neat and tidy.

It is my belief that we all go through grief processes every day. Any loss, however small, causes grief to occur. Some people bottle it up until they explode in anger or frustration, while others are able to get through it easily.

In ADF's Dedicant Program, we have a section about disciplining the mind. One of the meditations recommended is that of finding the "silence". This centering exercise teaches the mind to become quiet and instead of living in the past (guilt), or in the future (fear), we can live in the present moment, experiencing everything that comes, avoiding nothing. The message of this meditation is

simply, "now".



A couple of months ago I got a call from my favorite aunt informing me that she had been diagnosed with lung cancer. She had been a heavy smoker and drinker for much of her life. I was stricken. But we agreed that she'd come down to visit in a couple of weeks, so while I began grieving, I knew that we'd have good times again soon.

However, a week later I got another call from one of her friends that my aunt was in the hospital and might not live out the night! I immediately got on a plane and got there around 11 pm, to find her in very bad shape, indeed.

She lived for another two weeks. During that time, because I'm fairly strong and in reasonably good shape, I became her primary caregiver, getting her up off the floor when she fell and, when she became bedridden shortly thereafter,

getting her in and out of bed, taking her to the bathroom and then just getting her on and off the porta-pot by her bed, cleaning her up whenever necessary.

And I grieved. Oh, yes, I grieved. The overwhelming pain I felt about losing her was the hardest part. But whenever I was with her, my meditative practice came to my aid, for I was totally in the present with her, laughing and joking and telling stories. I wasn't denying my grief, but my joy at being with my aunt was so great that I didn't notice the grief until I was out of the room, or in bed at night, when I allowed myself to think about the future and remember the past. We actually had a great time. And we had real quality time.

I can only describe my time with my aunt as magical, in all senses of the word. The Kindreds were there with me the whole time, and I regularly made offerings to them. Finding the "silence" is part of our magical practice in ADF. How wonderful it is that magical practice can involve so much more of our lives than only the time we spend in ritual.