

Lung Time

The Letter My Mother Never Wrote Me

Almost every night, I wake at three a.m. I am restless when I awake and I don't find it easy to fall back asleep. I started going to an acupuncturist to see if Chinese medicine would help. Each time I would meet with Mary she would look at my tongue, take my pulses, and then ask me what I was experiencing with my body. In our initial meetings, I explained to her that it would take me a long while to fall asleep and then I would wake up after only two or three hours of sleep, exhausted but also restless. She asked me what time I woke up, and I told her that it always was around three in the morning. Traditional Chinese Medicine practitioners use a body clock to help them determine which organ may be overburdened. During a specific set of hours, individual organs are seen as primarily in control of the ebb and flow of Qi (energy) through the body, such as the large intestine, bladder, stomach, heart, gall bladder, liver, and kidneys. Mary looked at me as if I had confirmed something for her; she explained that according to the body clock, three to five a.m. is lung time.

She also explained, "lung time is about longing to fill the lung, the longing to fill space. It is about the body's natural rhythms." Before electricity, when the world went dark, that darkness called for people to turn to the comfort of their beds as the day waned. Waking at three a.m. in those conditions would have been part of the rhythm of sleeping and waking. "At three, you would wake to fill your lungs, to fill in the space of yourself, to awake to the day," she noted. However waking at three, when you only have been asleep for a few hours, might signify something else; it might signify a longing to fill absence, to fill a space that is bereft. Mary put it quite simply: "at three a.m., you may be experiencing a deep, unresolved grief. What is called to mind when I say 'grief'?"

And then the tears came.

It has been forty-five years since I lost my mother and yet the tears still come. It isn't only tears, it is an unrelieved longing. What I am longing for, what I am grieving, is my mother's affirmation.

When I was eight, we were in an elevator leaving our family doctor's office when my mother turned to me and said, "Dr. Varwig says I will not be with you much longer." I remember looking at her, stunned, in order to make sure that I had understood her euphemism.

Seven years later she died.

So I have wondered, with seven years to come to terms with the fact that she was going to die, might she have done something to leave each of her children with some sense of who we were to her? Why didn't she didn't leave a letter, leave some marker that I mattered, that my brothers and sister mattered?

During those seven years of her dying, my mother tried to teach each of us to own our accomplishments. I remember her telling me that she wouldn't be attending the award ceremony where I was to be honoured for my grades. She said, "that award is yours and you should own it on your own." I realize now that she was both pulling away and pushing us away because she believed that removing herself from our lives in those last years would make it easier when she was truly gone.

During the years when my mother dedicated herself to living she was a tour de force. She earned a master's degree and a doctorate during the 1940s. However, she never really used those degrees. When she married my father and moved to the Philippines with him, she lost the opportunity to follow her own career path. She spent her life pursuing my father's dreams and ambitions. She became a hostess of cocktail and dinner parties.

Even after Dr. Varwig gave her his diagnosis, when all was working well, she illuminated space. She would twinkle and twirl, moving among the guests, with a witty comment or a droll story. I learned that my mother was a constant variable. She could be a dissembler. She was a dramatist. She was *suis generis*. She was a woman of the moment, who made the moment, always in her own making. I was captivated by her. However, in the last few years of her life when she burrowed away, she eclipsed time and space; she was gone before she was gone.

My acupuncturist asked me if I could write the letter that I hoped my mother would have written to me.

I tried. I tried to imagine her composing a letter when she would have seen me with great compassion. I also struggled with the fact that I kept wondering, had she known me now, would she wish me well or would she resent me; given the limitations she faced, what would she have wished for me? My answer to that question is a bit chary. In the letter I finally composed, I struggled as I

tried imagining what she really would have written to me while also wrestling with my desires for what I hoped she might have written.

My dearest daughter,

What might I offer you at fifteen when you have so much life ahead of you?

I would like to tell you what not to suffer.

Do not suffer my loss. I wanted you and have watched you lovingly as you have grown.

Do not suffer the fact that you always will be zaftig. You will be. It won't be to your detriment.

Do not suffer your perfectionism. When possible, try to find ways to curb it. Try not to visit it upon others. And also know that it is your skill; it is your weakness.

Do not waste time worrying about who you have failed or what you have failed. In leaving you, I have failed you. We all are destined to fail.

I would like to tell you what to enjoy.

Enjoy your love of books. Read indiscriminately. Write in the margins, if you want. Look up the words you don't know. Remember to use a new word three times that day in order to make the word your own.

Enjoy your love of learning. Your father and I laughed when you packed your blackboard and chalk when we made that last trip to Africa. They clearly are tools you value. Use those tools.

Enjoy companionship. You have excellent friends. I hope you will find one you will marry.

Enjoy the big things and the little things. If you receive an award, love that moment. Also remember to love the flower that comes early; the dinner party where everyone was at ease, happy, and forthcoming; the day when your partner (she would have said husband, but in this imagined space, I like to think perhaps she might have known my partner wouldn't be a man) turns and, spontaneously and quite rightly, kisses you.

And here I stopped, unsure of what I had written. When I woke up, yet again, at what I now have come to call the hour of the ghost, I tried to fashion this letter and then was unable to continue.

The mother I have created here is so self-absorbed; so unavailable to the grief she caused my brothers, my sister, my father, and me; so intent on sidestepping the haunting hole she left in our lives. To some degree that is who she was, but only to some degree.

What I am sure of is that as a mother, she would have wanted me to be fulfilled. Perhaps she would have had to swallow hard to keep down some bitterness, were she here now, witnessing my life as an academic with a loving partner and daughter. However, I cannot doubt that as my mother she would

have said, in the end, “be, and, please be available to wonder, to contemplation, to your pulse, and, because loss matters, be available, *sometimes*, at lung time, be available to me, your mother who is gone.”