

# Cranial contact with Hilary

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Over the three years before my partner died of cancer I was privileged to be able to travel some of the journey with her, helped by my craniosacral therapy skills.

She was often in a great deal of pain but entirely rejected conventional pain relief because the drugs drove her out of herself, leaving her in a nightmare world that she couldn't escape or find any respite from. She found this twilight of consciousness worse than the pain and developed ways of working with the experience of pain that were awesome to see. There were many occasions when I would retire to bed still hearing her agonised cries as she waited for her body, bones depleted by calcium loss, to settle into a bearable position.

Sometimes, though, I had the energy to tune in to her and be with the tide of her being. At first it was hard to believe, knowing how ill she was, that the rhythms of health in her system were intact and often felt strong and potent. And those sessions, often going on late into the night, would enable her to rest and sleep as nothing else could.

I had no idea what I was 'doing', I just observed and validated the tide, which gradually spoke more and more clearly. My own pain and confusion were also quietened by those long sessions of being in the moment, with the health of primary respiration under my hands.

And she loved the cranial contact, became co-practitioner in the process her system needed, so we would find ourselves responding with sighs and grunts and even laughter to the subtle responses in her system which were indescribable in words.

Throughout, it was the health that I was able to focus on. I was aware of the other - the tumour that gradually replaced her breast with a hard, useless proliferation of cells with no form; the invasion of her struggling lymph glands, the disintegration of her bones and the filling of

her pleura with fluid that prevented her lungs from expanding.

But in cranial terms, what spoke was the life force maintaining integrity around, under and in disregard of the alien vegetative growth invading her structure.

The sessions were so hard to start. I had to plough my way through my own urge to run away, through my fear and my identification with her pain and through the reality of her impending death.

So I would commit myself to the process in stages. Sit still for long enough to feel my bum on the chair. Wriggle. Adjust the bed height. Find another pillow. Feel my bum on the chair again.

Often I would have cold feet. Although this was often metaphorically true, it was also a practical problem as autumn drew on. Hilary's room had French windows which she left open day and night, and what had been a welcome flow of air helping her struggling lungs in September became an icy blast that she still welcomed from under her duvet in October. We hung coats on the door to wear when we were with her and I kept a spare duvet to wrap around myself.

Once settled, my hands joined her at the well-known meeting places and her system came strong and sure to meet me. The stillness and confidence came from her to me.

For the first few minutes I would have a familiar feeling like a rapid rewind on a video as the things I was anxious about at the time presented themselves to me and then dissolved.

And then there is timelessness - movement, shapes, fluctuations and fulcra appear, clarify and move on. At two in the morning I am unable and unwilling to make a differentiation between my existence and hers. My tired



*Hilary and Ellie (Vivien Ray's granddaughter) born three months before Hilary's death.*

body speaks; her pain re-evaluates itself to ... what? What words can encompass the enormity of the space that opens up where none of that is relevant? Where it no longer matters that this is a process pointing towards death for her, separation for me? We would be there, sometimes for a long period, sometimes for an instant of recognition; and for her there was relief from pain, sometimes even a chance to sleep, and for me the feeling of completion before we disengaged from the contact.

Throughout her illness, Hilary had got huge support and love from Park Attwood, an anthroposophical clinic which offers a combination of conventional and complementary therapy from doctors, nurses and therapists embodying the insights of Rudolf Steiner. She spent the last six weeks of her life being lovingly cared for there, and I was also able to have a room in the attic and be cherished and supported in the last part of our travelling together.

## It is hard to know where to touch her

Anthroposophical remedies and therapies were very helpful to her, but this is a diary entry from a night when everything on offer seemed unequal to the task of bringing her some peace.

Rose (the nurse) wakes me to come to Hilary, maybe four a.m., still dark. She is thrashing about in agony, grasping the air, grabbing one hand with the other, pushing onto her right hip. It is hard to get near her, as if the pain is larger than she is, a miasma I have to stretch through to reach her.

Her skin is greeny-grey, stretched tight over her bones, lips hardly able to draw over her teeth, huge eyes filled with fear.

It is hard to know where to touch her. I sit on the bed, feel her pelvis, curve a hand under her sacrum and search the ilia and the abdomen. Her bowels are cradled deep in the ilia, skin like a springy bowl dipping towards her back from the curve of the ilia's wings.

I am drawn to the organs: dry, massed, confused, they lie inert against my hand. I feel confusion, a literal loss of identity, loss of purpose. I stay there, startled at first. I feel a wave of recognition and grief wash through me as I realise the reality of this perception: these organs have finished their work forever. Flow beneath that. Hilary is still writhing and gasping, 'I can't... I can't...' as if there is no end to the sentence.

I am aware of Rose giving off waves of anxiety, hovering on the edge of the pain, loving and strong. I find her presence constraining, and I have to acknowledge even here my desire to perform to an audience. I invite Hilary to make eye contact but she doesn't want that. (The next day she was able to explain that if she can keep her focus on her third eye she can access stillness.)

## These organs have finished their work forever

Now the component parts are becoming apparent. Adhesions and a glue-like absence of fluidity. Her old appendix wound rises and falls. The hepatic flexure is kinked tight and that whole corner of bowel is thrust up against the liver. The small intestine is tired, quiet and distant. A bubble of air is struggling through with nowhere to go.

As these sensations come into my hands there begins to be some relief, as if the organs are explaining themselves to themselves. Announcing to themselves the end of their life.

In recognising this new reality there is space for peace. She starts to retch, all-absorbing, huge convulsions. I feel she is making an effort to escape, literally turning herself inside out. There is nothing but a little phlegm to show for all this effort. In a moment of calm Rose gives her homoeopathic nux vomica and she is quiet. Now I notice the fluid lying above her abdomen from the subcutaneous drip and feel it able to disperse further. It softens and my attention moves on.

And there is a tide. Stiff and creaky, the familiar rhythm, about two and a half breaths long, starts to drag my two hands with it. Longitudinal, sometimes hovering at an edge, sometimes starting to turn and then finding a new surge of potency.

She changes from saying 'I can't, I can't' to 'God help me.' God does and the potency tide, overriding the physical disintegration, takes precedence.

I ask if she wants Rose's hands too but she finds that confusing. Rose gives her injections of belladonna, chamomilla and hyoscyamus and there is a sense of increased spaciousness.

I am finding it hard to cope with the discomfort of trying to get close to her. I am sitting with one leg on the bed, a chair is too far away. The metal edges of the bed are hard and in the way. I am still struggling with the afternoon's process and the deepening sense of the change being near.

I recite the Lord's Prayer, feel an edge at the 'Forgive us'. Stay on the edge as a hand-felt process and try to stay away from thought. Hold the words and the tide. Perhaps it is then that she starts to say, 'God help me.' Time seems very spacious here. 'I will there be light', today's lesson from *A Course in Miracles*, hold onto that.

She is still and soft and calm. My left arm, cradling her liver, is aching. I realise I am holding up a huge weight. It feels like half a hundredweight of damp clay and sand stretching itself to return to the earth. I am washed by grief and I have a very immediate need to let go and pay attention to my own pain. My arm aches. I put a pillow under the spot to support the weight. 'It's heavy,' I say and I know she knows what I mean.

Now I am able to curl up on my chair in the corner. Since I have decided not to run away I have made a nest with a duvet and a blanket and I am reasonably comfortable. I lie there and review the miracle of the session and then return to bed. I wake at ten-thirty after deep, refreshing sleep.

She is still quiet when I visit. Maurice, her doctor and beloved friend, says the gut is rotting. This we both know. We have both come to a place of profound acceptance of this reality in the night. He has ordered rice water. I learn from one of the nurses, Veronica, that he has talked to her about using Pethedine and they are ordering that. How little she tells me. (The shadow is always lurking.)

After that session there was a change in the quality of the contact we had with each other. It began to take on the form of a fairy story and I found myself able to follow it as if we were in a living myth.

The story starts with a dream that I dreamed. Two women are on a grassy slope. It is all right to be there but below them they can see a beach, the most beautiful, perfect, beach. The women are already in swimsuits. To their left is a railway tunnel. To get to the beach the women have to go down the tunnel.

One of the women discovers that it is possible, by lying on a sort of carapace that is formed of their backs to slide down the railway tracks. But they don't know how long it is to the next train. She shows the other woman how it is possible to slide. The second woman is anxious: what if the train comes? The first woman points out that this is the fastest way to travel. It involves losing control but it would be impossible to get out of the way of the train on foot anyway.

Then there was a dream that Hilary dreamed. 'There is a very dehydrated woman walking along the road. There

has been a mix-up and the sister has made a mistake and the woman has had no fluids. She meets a Sacred Lady in white.'

The rest of the story unfolded in the cranial sessions that we shared over the last few days of Hilary's life. Resting deeply in the tide the story unfolded. Now the two women are standing on the shore. In front of them in the water a little boat waits with a white sail unfurled, beside them stands the Sacred Lady in white.

'One of you must travel on,' says the Lady, 'and one must turn back.'

'I thought it was flying,' I say, because Maurice had talked of death in terms of flight and wings.

'It is,' said the Lady, 'but first the traveller must go to the island of birds.'

Amazed, I returned to the room and the other reality. The next time we visited the shore, the one who was to turn back found she had three gifts to give to the traveller. A silver cloak to protect her from the moon, a golden globe to draw nourishment from the sun and a turf of green grass as a gift to the island of the birds.

The traveller took the gifts and got onto the boat. Immediately the wind filled the sails and the little craft tugged at her moorings, straining to be on her way.

'Cast off the ropes,' called the traveller to the one who stayed on the shore. And the one who stayed behind gathered the mooring ropes and flung them onto the little boat. But still the boat couldn't sail away. A heavy iron chain hung over the side of the boat and an iron anchor held her to the sea bottom. The boat swung and tipped, held by the iron chain and straining with the wind in her sails.

## She drew out the sword that had been her heart and cut the silken link

'One of the links of the chain is made of silk,' called the Sacred Lady, but her voice was lost in the wind. The one who was still on the shore added her voice to the voice of the Lady, 'One of the links is made of silk.'

The traveller looked down the length of the iron chain and saw that indeed one of the links of the chain was made of silk. Reaching into her chest, she drew out the sword that had been her heart and cut the silken link. And immediately the boat swung into the wind, the sail

filled and the little boat with its precious cargo set off across the sea.

Returning to the room, I felt honoured and amazed to have been witness to the journey. I was convinced that, left on the shore I could know no more. But I was wrong. In accord with the agreement we had made earlier I continued to tune in to Hilary's system as speech, movement and even breath reached the end of their time. The boat sailed out of the bay and across the open sea until it came to the island of the birds. Here the traveller alighted. She spread her silver cloak on the beach and went to the highest point of the island. Here she placed the golden globe.

There was no grass on the island of the birds. She found a sheltered cranny where the earth made a little crevice and placed her turf of green grass onto the soil. Then she looked around. On the island were all the little birds she loved so much, the wrens and robins, tits and finches. But there were also more frightening birds, geese and swans, crows and vultures. Now the traveller didn't know what to do. Slowly and sadly she made her way to the far shore of the island and lay down. She had reached the end of everything she knew. And the birds came and picked the flesh off her bones until the vault of her ribs was laid bare. And slowly, tentatively, from out of the vault crept a tiny golden bird. For the one who stayed on the shore, the journey back took some time, but that is a story still unfolding.

## The ribs on the healthy side were exposed like the roof timbers of a cathedral

In October she died. I was with her as her spirit finally broke free of the clinging body and, floundering at first, began to expand into the dimensionless realms of death. We were in craniosacral communication as she died. I had received her permission long before to stay with her as far as I could and I always felt welcome and trusted in that contact.

After her last breath, in the stillness, I became aware of floundering and confusion.

'She doesn't know she's done it,' I said to her doctor and beloved friend.

'You must tell her,' he said. And I did. 'Well done, beloved, you've done it; don't fight any more; you can go with this; allow yourself to go with the light.'

Over the next two days I was able to experience that expansion as she let go of the imprint of her bodily existence. Her body was laid out in the bed she had died in, beautifully dressed in blue silk. It was smooth and immediately felt totally different from an animate body. Over the next two days I stroked it often, feeling it take on a quality like porcelain. I was literally experiencing the clay vessel her life forces had created for her journey on earth. It became fiercely cold, much colder than the surrounding air. I was reminded of china dolls.

Then, after two days, she told me not to touch her body any more. Here was the beginning of the body's relinquishment of its form, returning to undifferentiated earth. Time to let go. For the first twenty-four hours the energy was also still palpable in her body - directionless like a static buzzing without flow. She died on Sunday, just after the dark of the moon.

On Thursday I accompanied her body to the crematorium and witnessed the whole process of her cremation. The oven door had glass spy holes. It was a very beautiful process. I saw the shapes in the sutures of her skull, achingly familiar from my contact with her living system. I could see the uneven pattern that I had been in touch with and had learned by heart as I tracked her system's accommodation of the shapes.

And later the cranial base was visible. The feeling I had was of looking down a tunnel into the processes that had held her life.

The cancerous side of her body burned away rapidly while the ribs on the healthy side were exposed like the roof timbers of a cathedral. It seemed poignantly relevant that her heart was on the side that disappeared. Later there was a mass of honeycomb filigree, the expression of the silica in the connective tissue.

Then, thinking the process complete, the technician, Martin, opened the oven door and, lying on the floor of the oven as a last gesture of love and laughter, her occiput and sacrum were still intact amid the ashes. Those two precious handles that I had so often been in touch with in the long nights when she struggled with pain, cradling her tide between those two beloved bowls of bone that were now all that remained.

*For reference:*

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