

“The Journey Home”

by Rahima

What is my heart’s guidance about my practicum? I prayed for guidance, to have the truth revealed to my heart. I have always loved singing and had an affinity for the Names of Allah, the beauty and majesty of His sacred qualities that we each have inside of us – waiting to be washed, nurtured and revealed, waiting to reflect God’s perfection that resides in each of our hearts. The first vision of my practicum entailed sharing the 99 Names of God with musicians in town, creating a video of their reflections and experiences with singing the qualities and sending this video to different musicians here and abroad. I wanted to spread the messages of peace, love and mercy far and wide. My vision later became more refined. My intention then was to hold individual healing sessions and to help clients embody the qualities by singing them. I believe that we all have the ability to tap into our inner, true voices, and to feel our unique expression of them. I was planning to track clients’ experiences with singing the qualities and to see how this helped with core issues over time. While either of these visions would have been a beautiful journey, something didn’t feel complete. There was too much I-ness in them. I wanted, my vision, my intention, I planned. The practicum in my deep heart was soon revealed.

My neighbor, Shane, was a quiet, self-sufficient man. He would use his wheelchair or walker to make his way down the driveway to check his mail or to drag his garbage and recycling bins to his carport – slowly and painstakingly down the driveway and back up again. I offered to help a few times, but it quickly became clear that Shane would have none of it. He wanted to do things on his own. We began visiting from time to time, mostly small talk. He shared that he had been in a car accident and had suffered a stroke, as well. Shane had undergone intense physical and occupational therapy to regain use of his legs and arms, but his recovery would never be full. I set an intention to continue visiting with Shane, to be a good neighbor, to give love and kindness, to love as Jesus would love.

Shane later developed throat cancer and was undergoing treatment. I again made a silent intention to visit with Shane, to be available. Where was this intention coming from? Was it coming from my heart? Was it coming from a desire “to be good.” I noticed what I felt when I offered to help, when I set an intention to visit. I was aware that I was noticing myself, that I was intending to do good things, to be of service. But I also noticed the beauty of giving and receiving and the love in my heart. I noticed the smile on Shane’s face and the light in his eyes when he could visit for a while. He had a distinctive voice and laugh and vibrant spirit. He was clever, quick-witted, funny and loved to visit neighbors. The experience of being giving to

others and of befriending someone wasn't new to me. But after being on the Sufi path, and spending time with the practices of Remembrance, of reciting the Name and the beautiful qualities, I had faced many facets of my being and was walking through core issues. Light had touched those deep places, had revealed illusory pictures/images, beliefs and voices and had transformed me on certain levels. I was experiencing being giving and loving my neighbor in a subtler way.

Shane's throat cancer went into remission. I continued to visit with him, but on a couple of occasions, I saw that Shane was looking me up and down and sometimes looking right at my chest. I found myself avoiding him. A few months passed. I had fallen asleep on the couch one evening and was awakened by the EMS and fire trucks across the street, in front of Shane's house. I made my way across the street. Shane was sitting in his wheelchair talking to the paramedics, so I went back home. I went to see him the next day, and his sister informed me that Shane was at the hospital. The cancer was back, and he had to have surgery the following day to have part of his vocal chords removed. So strange that Shane, who had this distinctive, funny, emotive voice and laugh, and who loved to visit with friends, would now not be able to talk. I went to see him at the hospital that night. He was in good spirits, despite the difficult road ahead. His sister contacted me the following day. It was discovered during surgery that the cancer had spread to Shane's tongue, so they had halted the surgery. He was given the option of having part of his tongue removed or leaving things as they were (tracheotomy with some use of part of his vocal chord) and he would have about six months to live. Shane chose not to have part of his tongue removed. I visited him a couple more times at the hospital. He communicated by writing notes to me. I felt guided to talk with Shane about his spiritual beliefs. He wasn't a religious person and didn't have much to say, but he listened and was thoughtful.

After almost two weeks at the hospital, Shane was transferred to a hospice facility. His health declined pretty quickly after that. His lower lip and chin swelled up. He was congested – which is not easy to deal with when you have a tube in your throat. He was able to speak slowly... very slowly, but mainly communicated by writing notes. I visited Shane a few more times at hospice. I spoke with him about spiritual matters again, about his heart. Shane had given this real thought; he wondered if it was too late to ask for forgiveness, if it would be "fake" of him to turn to God now as many people do when they learn that they're dying. He had a heavy heart and expressed regret about past decisions. I reassured Shane that if he was feeling regret in his heart, then he was being sincere, and that it was never too late to turn to God. During one visit, I asked him if he wanted me to bring him anything to read. Shane pulled a few porn magazines out of his nightstand and laughed. I smiled and gave him a quizzical look and said, "Given where things are at, don't you think you ought to aim a little higher with the reading materials?" He laughed again and said he probably should. The last time I visited Shane, he was very loopy

from the medication, and was applying and reapplying chap stick to his very swollen lips. He couldn't focus and was somewhat despondent. He later emailed me and apologized for not being able to visit. We exchanged notes about when the next visit might be.

It was Christmas break and I felt the discomfort come over me again. I thought about visiting Shane, and felt resistance. I had thoughts like, "I don't want to *have to go*....I shouldn't go out of obligation"...and so on. I procrastinated and chose to spend my vacation time preparing for Christmas. Two days after Christmas, I knew that I should go see Shane. It had been a little over two weeks since my last visit. I felt that it would be the right thing to do, that it would be good. I bought him a chrysanthemum plant and headed to hospice. I felt lightness in my heart, I felt happy thinking about surprising Shane with a visit and a gift. I went to his room; his belongings were there, but he wasn't. I figured he was visiting on the patio with friends. I went to the front desk and asked for Shane. The nurse said, "You don't know? He passed away a few days ago." I heard her words, but I didn't hear them. She said it again. My heart sank. I walked outside and sat down. I felt such remorse and regret, not only for not visiting sooner, but for any hurt or sadness I may have caused, and because of the places in me that were in resistance to visiting him. I felt ashamed and upset with myself for being selfish, for not being more in service to Shane in his time of need. I felt moved to go back inside and asked the nurse if someone else might enjoy the flowers. She chose someone who had not been visited by anyone since being admitted. I walked with her to give the flowers to this gentleman.

I left the hospice facility with a deep knowing in my heart that spending time with a hospice patient was my real practicum. I left knowing that Shane had given me gifts that would live inside my heart forever... the gift of knowing him, of being his neighbor and friend, and of opening my heart to the truth...the need to be generous of heart, to be selfless, and to give whole-heartedly. I knew I needed to traverse the places in my heart where I felt resistance to being available and present to someone who was dying.

Upon checking into hospice volunteer work, I discovered that I had missed the training dates. I spoke with the Director of Volunteer and Bereavement Services, who is a friend of my ex-boyfriend's and his parents, to see what was possible. She told me I could volunteer as a massage therapist since I had been a Licensed Massage Therapist. I explained that my initial interest in massage had come from seeing my dad experience pain from cancer and that my intention seemed to have come full circle. I also explained that I was completing my practicum for a spiritual healing and Sufism program that I had attended, and that while I didn't plan to proselytize to the patients, I had hoped that God's mercy and compassion would flow through and bring them peace and help them in their transition. There was no hesitation as she spoke – "That makes perfect sense – and it really would flow through with touch and massage." She

then offered to meet with me a couple of times to orient me herself, and offered to act as one of my references. The door was wide open. All I needed to do was to step through.

My next step was to prepare for the massage therapy license exam (my license had lapsed). I crammed for about two weeks. As I read each question on the exam, I realized that I did not truly know the answer to every question – well, to about a third to half of the questions! I thought, “If doing hospice work is my calling, what Allah wants for my heart, then I’ll pass this test.” I passed the exam – not with flying colors, but a decent passing grade. I met with the Director and Volunteer Coordinator, received the required TB tests and began shadowing massage therapists at a hospice facility in town. I signed up for two shifts per week immediately. It felt as though the way had been prepared for me.

My deep heart’s wish was that working with terminally ill patients would help me to deepen in service and to walk through the places of resistance. I prayed that I would deepen in surrender to God’s will and, with God’s help, help someone walk to their Lord. I believed that because of my own experiences with loss and grief, that I could help someone open to receive the Love, Mercy and Peace during their transition. I prayed to step more fully into how Allah wanted me to serve Him and others.

Over the last 13 years, I had discovered voices and beliefs that I am lacking or deficient – the painful belief being that “There is something wrong with me.” There were memories and real events tied to this belief – my parent’s divorce and how I processed this as a little girl at the age of four, which created the filter through which I perceived the world and shaped my perceptions; my difficult upbringing in an unpredictable home environment; my dad during his last days at the hospital and my regret for not spending more time with him; and more. There were also pictures and beliefs around my own mortality – believing that my life was lacking (not married, no children, no sense of home, an empty job, and so on), fear of not living fully and of looking back on my life in regret. Many days had been filled with intermittent, low-grade anxiety. Through sessions with a psychologist (who happened to be on the Sufi path!) and through prayer and Sufi practices (before and during my time as a Spiritual Ministry student), light had touched core wounds and revealed the origins of my pain. I had real, felt experiences of this dense pain dispersing and leaving my body and of being filled with what can only be described as love and mercy. I felt expansion in my heart and, at times, as if my body was without limits. I could not deny this. Healing was a real, visceral, palpable experience.

What more was needed? The practice of Remembrance and Tawba. I would practice Remembrance to turn to God, and God Alone. I would recite Tawba to return my mistakes to Allah, for any pain I may have caused by not being more available to my dad and to my neighbor who were terminally ill, and for resistance in my heart to be present and fully giving and in surrender to how Allah wants to move me. I would pray for the voices and pictures to be

washed. I longed to be content and to be truly grateful for what God gives and has given. I would pray for my father and for Shane. I would also now pray for the hospice patients I would soon come to know.

Al-Fatiha

Each verse, each word of Al-Fatiha is blessed with deep meaning. It allows my heart to open and carries me through the inner worlds of my heart, and in reciting it as a closing prayer, it sustains me in my continued journey in walking to my Lord. I made a practice of reciting Al-Fatiha before, during and after massaging and spending time with patients. I did this silently. Reciting this beautiful prayer helped me to be present, to be in the moment with each patient and their family members, and to give from my heart. I pray that Allah filled each person's heart, soul and secret with His Mercy, Compassion, Love and Peace. I believe Allah's Mercy permeates all things. I felt the mercy in touch at times, I felt it in patients' rooms, and I felt it create openings of hearts, allowing God's Love to carry patients and their loved ones. Sidi writes in Music of the Soul, "When He says ar-rahman, ar-rahim, He means to give everyone mercy, to change everything to ar-rahman, and to send mercy to anyone, beginning with yourself. Give mercy to yourself and help yourself to change everything from outside to inside, to walk in the way. Now give mercy from yourself to yourself. He put the mercy inside you, in all of you, outside and inside. There is nothing but the mercy." The meaning of this moves more deeply in me now. I am in awe of how Allah's Mercy and Compassion operates in this world, and that it can work through me and others, to help others, Insha'Allah.

First Day of Hospice Massage

My first day at hospice was to entail shadowing a massage therapist and observing her with the patients. The first patient we visited had a note on her door that said in large print that she did NOT want anyone to enter her room who used perfume, hairspray, lotion, etc., etc.!!! and then ended with, "I say this with love." I had heard she could be "outspoken." As we entered the room, I was immediately taken aback by the patient's physical state. She was so gaunt, like an Auschwitz prisoner. She asked if I could massage her instead. I was startled by this rapid transition from observing to being the massage therapist, of stepping into the practicum in a very real way. I massaged her legs; she was not only gaunt, but skin and bones, and she had a far away gaze which I later learned indicated that a patient was "active" or actively dying. The second patient we visited was a teenage girl who had been diagnosed with cancer a year ago. She was alert and talkative, but so, so frail. The massage therapist asked the patient's mother if she would like a massage. The look on her face was of deep relief and yearning. She asked in disbelief if she could really be massaged. I was touched by the need for the family to receive care and the comfort that it could bring. I massaged both her and her mother, the patient's grandmother. The third patient was a woman, just a few years younger than me, who had

become ill due to environmental reasons. She was bright, alert... and bed ridden. I was struck by her inner strength, although her focus was more outward and she seemed anxious. I wanted to help her turn her heart towards God, but the timing wasn't right. I was also not yet ready to speak of this. When I left hospice, I noticed that I felt somewhat sick, or off. It wasn't nausea – it was a swirling feeling in my heart center and solar plexus. What came to me was that I was sensitive to the winding down of life, and that it was also triggering my own grief.

The Gifts of Giving

Over the course of my time volunteering at hospice, each patient I spent time with, whether awake and alert, or unconscious and actively dying, taught me and helped me walk through places of grief in my being. There were days that the experiences were more poignant and rich than others, but nevertheless, I was deeply affected each time. I've learned that giving is truly a reciprocal act – that in giving, I receive. I knew this from facilitating healing sessions as a student at USHS, but giving at hospice was another layer of experiencing this. It was giving in the world, giving to others who may or may not be conscious of what they were receiving. At times, I was not conscious of what I had received in the moment. There were several times, though, where I felt overtaken by a shared moment with a patient and the gifts that Allah brought through. The realization would percolate and rise up, my eyes would brim with tears, and unspoken, wordless love and reverence would fill my heart. Reverence for the patient's life, for mine, for the messages of hope, faith, peace, love, mercy and so on. These were much like my experiences with Sidi and his transmission entering my being, like a wall of truth. It became a practice to leave hospice in gratitude for what was revealed and for the tenderness in my heart. I could walk through my own grief and see my past losses through a clearer lens. Another piece of my heart had been washed with Allah's loving, merciful light.

Hope

Sally had stage 4 breast cancer. It was clear she was going to pass away soon. She didn't say much and seemed detached, but would look so long into my eyes when I spoke with her. Sally loved receiving massage. It seemed that she didn't have many friends or family members in her life. The television program playing during my visits was always "TMZ", the entertainment gossip show. I offered to change the channel or turn off the TV, but Sally wanted it on. I set an intention to connect with her and to give to her heart. She received the attention and gentle touch of massage quietly and really sank into the experience. I offered to massage her again, and she said gleefully, "It's a date!" Sally's young daughter and her father were visiting the next time. I remarked that Sally's daughter was lovely. Sally replied, "Yes, she's a real gift." But there was a felt disconnection between them. I wondered if this was Sally's way of letting go of her attachments. I wondered how her daughter would cope in the world without her mom. Her daughter had a sadness about her that is foreign to most children her age, and her daughter's

father (referred to as such) was distracted and distant. I so wanted to help them feel the love, and for Sally to feel supported and loved. During my third visit, I told her that if she wanted to talk about what she was thinking or feeling that I would be a good listener. Sally thought for a moment, and said, "I don't think I'm going to live much longer." She went on, "I'm afraid to go to sleep." I was caught like a deer in headlights. I have real access to my heart and feel such reverence for life and for the sacredness of witnessing another's transition from this world to the next, and this is what I said: "It's okay to rest." I went on to ask her if there was anything she needed to feel at peace. Sally shared that she wanted to contact her family, her mom, and others and should probably make a list. I had missed the real opportunity to give hope, as Sidi often spoke of giving, and to comfort her when she spoke of her fears. I visited other patients that afternoon. And then I made my way back to Sally's room. I knew it would be the last time I saw her. I looked into Sally's sweet eyes, and said what came to my heart. "God bless you." She looked lovingly and knowingly back into my eyes. I'm not sure that I was supposed to give hope to Sally when she was so close to death, but saying "God bless you" and being in my heart and deeply present to Sally in that moment, was a true wish for her soul – that Sally would be blessed by God and that she would return to Him. This was the real hope in my heart for her.

Faith

Mary was sitting in bed, visiting with her ex-husband when I entered the room. She had a brightness about her, a reddish complexion, and a joyful tone to her voice. She had cancer and was in pain, but was excited to receive massage. I was touched by her liveliness despite the severe pain she was experiencing. Mary went home that week, but was readmitted a month later. The second time I saw Mary, the pain had been managed well and she was only staying at hospice for a few days. She was happy to see me. As I massaged her, Mary spoke about wanting to go home, to spend time in her garden. She said she was at peace with her illness and that she wasn't afraid to die. She said that she wanted to be in the garden, that this is what God wanted for everyone, "to be in the garden with Him." Mary and I looked at each other in recognition through tearful eyes, remembering that we were God's children. The truth awoke in my heart. It was alive in me, the lamp in the niche. Just like in the Qur'an and in Bible – His Word is the living word. Mary was ready to go home, to journey home to God. It was such a blessing to witness Mary's faith. It ignited the faith in my heart. And remembering Mary's faith rekindles mine.

Peace

Estela was in her mid-30's and had two teenage daughters. She had stomach cancer. The first time I laid my hands on her, I felt depth of heart. I was immediately in the moment, present to her, prayerful. She was quiet and reverential, polite and there was a wisdom about her. Estela was obviously a good mother. She spoke very little English, mostly Spanish. I spoke in Spanish to

her and her daughters, which seemed to be a happy surprise for them. Her eldest daughter, who spoke English, introduced herself. I could see the love for her mother in her eyes, and the pain of impending loss. I visited Estela a second time. Again, I dropped into my heart and felt presence as soon as I touched her back. Her daughters were leaving and Estela asked her eldest daughter for money. She put the bill in my pocket. I explained that I couldn't accept money for the massage, that massage was on a volunteer basis only, but Estela was insistent. I could see that she was giving from her heart and that it was important for her to give. When her daughters left the room, Estela looked directly into my eyes. She asked me if I believed in God, and then she shared with me that she felt peace when I massaged her, that my hands felt "like the sun". She had recognized a believer and spoke directly to my soul. The sharing was a deep transmission; we recognized our love of God in one another. I responded, "Con juntos". I felt she understood what I had hoped to convey – that the peace came through me and her and we felt together what it was that God had given. We were in communion. She was a perfect mirror for what God has given each of us - the ability to touch another's life, to heal with our unique gifts. I am forever grateful for having met her. As I was leaving the room, she blessed me and my family – "todo su familia." I felt the blessing in that moment. I thought to myself, "This is what Sidi was talking about... bringing the messages of peace, love and mercy to others." I now have a deeper, more visceral knowing of what I can give, with God's help. God is The Healer. Ya Allah Ash-Shafi.

Estela went home for a couple of weeks and was later readmitted. I had the privilege of visiting her one last time. She was somewhat sedated, so I just lightly rested my hand on her head and silently prayed al-Fatiha. I told her daughter that it was an honor to know her mother and to have met them. Estela's mother was present as well. The family's love and faith in God was apparent – this was a holy space. Estela passed away the next day. Knowing her and being in that sacred space with the family as they lovingly held her heart was a beautiful gift for my heart. The impression will stay with me forever.

Love

Melanie enthusiastically accepted my offer of massage. She had a form of lung cancer that was due to an environmental reason. During a couple of visits, Melanie spoke about her journey with her illness and about family. Her son was visiting and it was clear that he loved his mother dearly. Melanie expressed gratitude and would give me a big hug when I was getting ready to leave. The love in her heart was so accessible and available. Melanie went home for a while, and returned to hospice about a month later. The decline in her health was visibly noticeable; she was so thin and much more fragile – physically and emotionally. During a visit with Melanie and her son, Melanie shared that her husband was ill, as well, and that she was feeling so much

anger, and that she and her husband were going to bed every night angry about being sick. I felt moved to reach out and touch her hand and said, "Be with the love. You have so much love in your heart, for your son, your husband. Be with your love for one another and for God." Melanie acknowledged the truth and said, "You're right. I need to refocus. I forget. I get so angry." I responded, "Be with the love from here on." As we gazed at one another, the truth of this sharing seemed to penetrate her heart. As I said my goodbyes before turning the corner of her doorway, there was a felt sense that she and I knew this would be our last visit. Melanie taught me to love now, to not waste my time. This is ever-present in my heart and inner knowing.

Veronica was in her mid-30's and a mother of three. She had cervical cancer. I had heard that she only spoke Spanish, may not want company and wasn't very warm with people. I introduced myself in Spanish. Thankfully, her husband spoke a little English and her daughter was fluent in English. I joked in Spanish with them. They got a kick out of my sense of humor which seemed to open Veronica's heart more. Veronica liked to have her feet massaged. She gladly accepted my offer of massage each time I returned for a visit. I took notice of the way the family interacted, the way her eldest daughter treated her mother with the utmost respect, the way her husband made sure his wife's dignity was protected and his effortless love for her. The unconditional love and care was undeniable. This kind of family, this kind of love from a husband and child was what I had hoped for in this life. Veronica was surely blessed, as was the whole family. She had a regal-ness to her presence, which I imagined was in part due to her feeling truly supported and honored by her husband. There was a seamlessness to their relating, completely organic and real. I believe Veronica felt supported when I massaged her feet, and I feel blessed to have been shown the kind of love that her family shared. I have a desire to be surrounded by loved ones when it is my time. I have a fear that the kind of emotional availability I long for from others, whether a beloved, family or friends, won't manifest. I was reminded that the kind of love I seek is really possible.

Mercy

Greta had unspecified illness that entailed frequent bouts of pain. She was in her 70's, yet her age did not detract from her beauty. Greta loved company and would find ways to stretch out the visits; it was easy to say 'yes' to her and stay longer. Our conversations turned to more personal matters fairly quickly. She spoke about her family, the loss of her husband, her son, and her beloved dogs, and the discord between she and one of her sons. She was hard on herself and others, and even stated that she wasn't every really loved, except by her husband and son who passed way, and did not now love anyone. On the outer, she was an eternal pessimist. But underneath this was a longing for connection and love, and a need for the mercy. This was a message for my heart and the timing was just right. My mom's birthday was just a

few days away. She passed away in 2000 and I had been thinking about how her birthdays have come and gone without much reflection on my part. I had not fully forgiven my mom for her mistakes, especially for how I was mistreated as a little girl and into young adulthood. My mother could be much like Greta. And I had spent years caught in negative thinking and dwelling on what is lacking in my life. Healing has occurred on many levels and I have had long periods of relief from negative thoughts and energies and the density of that, but it had started to come into play again this past year. I needed to sit in Remembrance, to receive God's mercy more often, to drink this in more deeply. I needed to pray for my mother and for forgiveness in my heart.

My intention was to help Greta feel the mercy for herself and for others, to believe that she was worthy of God's love, to know that she was loved by God. This was medicine for my heart, a well. I took my chance. I gently guided Greta to remembering the love she has experienced in life, the goodness and love she felt in her heart for others, the need to rest her mind, worries and preoccupations with negative thoughts, and the need to feel God's mercy – that this was truly possible. Greta took this in and debated a bit along the way. And then she softened. She felt the possibility of allowing her heart and mind to rest. She shared that she had taught Bible studies in her youth, and that she had not been a very religious person in a long time. I spoke with her about connecting with the love in her heart and of turning her attention towards God. Greta's heart was opening. I encouraged Greta to remember to ask for help, to ask for what she needed and to know that God's mercy is real. Greta went home that week, but was readmitted to hospice a couple of months later. She seemed lost in dark thoughts again. I spoke with her gently about our previous visits, and she would look up, but then return to preoccupation. I tried a few more times and as I was getting ready to leave, I looked into her eyes and said, "Much love to you." Her eyes lit up and her face softened, and she said, "Oh, much love to you, too." And I felt the love coming from her heart and it was present between us. I don't know that Greta is recalling things well now or how she is processing things, but I believe that God's love and mercy filled her heart in that moment.

The Gift of Grief

My sweet Alice, my beloved dog, fell ill just after the Fourth of July weekend. She was racing around the yard and playing with her brother Jacob one day, and was in apparent pain and couldn't walk well the next. Over the course of the next three weeks, the diagnosis went from back pain, to pneumonia, to immune-mediated disease. Alice actually did have pneumonia during that time, and it was hard on her. I would fall asleep with one hand on her to monitor her breathing, and was so worried every day. It took three different attempts with meds to address the pneumonia. By the third round, Alice's fever was still spiking. This happened at night and involved trips to the emergency vet clinic, one of which involved a weekend stay. That

vet, who specialized in internal medicine, determined that Alice had a Lupus-like immune-mediated disease which was attacking Alice's joints, tissues and organs. The vet prescribed Prednisone, which took a huge toll on Alice over the next few weeks. She lost the muscle mass in her skull (which would never return) and her entire body. She was weak and often feverish, which left me in a constant state of worry and hyper-vigilant watch over her. The process of caring for Alice and feelings of helplessness took their toll on me. Even after doing everything possible, I still thought there was something I needed to do to make her better. But every improvement was met with a set-back, and I realized that whatever God had in store for Alice was going to happen no matter what course of action I took. It was truly not in my hands. I needed to surrender it all to God.

Alice's health began to improve at about week six into her illness, and I had real hope. I celebrated each time Alice would eat a bowl of food, would push her bowl around the floor and nudge her food with her nose (her funny, neurotic routine), and had a skip in her step as she headed out to the backyard. I carried her often and showered her with love. She was my little soul-mate. And her brother Jacob would lick her head and face incessantly and lay to the side of the blanket, giving her more space in their bed. For the last eight years, they had been like two peas in a pod.

Before Alice became ill, I had planned a trip to Mexico with my boyfriend. I waited until two days before my departure date before determining that I could really go. Alice seemed to be on the mend for over a week and she would be in good hands with her "Paw Paw", my ex-boyfriend Mark, and his parents. I called every day to check-in and all was good until the day before my return. Mark's mother had tripped and fell while holding Alice. Mark assured me that Alice had not been injured and that he was hoping that Alice's meds could be lowered because of how tired she was all of the time. I called the vet and she agreed to start Alice on a lower dose of Prednisone. I was gleeful and had new hope that Alice could recover, maybe not fully, but well. I returned home the following evening; Mark had left a message that Alice was not doing well at all, and that I should come see her. When I saw Alice, it was clear she needed to go to the emergency vet clinic. She had stood up for the first time all day, tail sweetly wagging, happy to see me. But she could barely focus her eyes; they were glazed over and her gums were pale, and she was in pain. Mark and I took Alice straight away. The vet wanted to keep Alice over the weekend to address the fluid in her stomach that was found in the X-ray. There was no movement in her stomach; surgery was a possibility, but the vet would try other measures first. I received a call three hours later. I was asked to come right away; Alice was not going to make it through the night. I saw Alice briefly before she passed. So, so heartbreaking. I lost my little girl. I don't have children. Alice was literally like my little girl. I will miss holding her and making a "chaise lounge" for her with my forearm that she rested her head on. I'll miss

cradling her delicate face and making a cave with my hands, covering her eyes as she sat ever so still. I thought this might have reminded her of being with her real mom when she was a puppy. I will miss my precious little Alice.

I went through the stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining (in the form of wanting Alice to come back), depression and now acceptance. The anger was particularly strong for about two weeks; I kept recounting the details leading up to her death and was angry at Mark and his parents for not noticing sooner that Alice needed to go to the vet, although there was no certainty about what things looked like when I was gone. I talked with all three vets who cared for Alice to see if she could have been injured in the fall with Mark's mother. I was absolutely convinced that her health declined rapidly because of this. All three vets told me that Alice had developed an infection and that there were no signs of trauma. It still took a while for my mind to let go of my story. When I told Alice's regular vet, who is normally not the most compassionate man, that I probably sounded crazy to him, he said, "It's okay to grieve the way you need to." This went deep into my heart. I had needed permission to be upset, and that this was my way of grieving – to protect Alice. I was so grateful for my vet's kindness. It was time for me to let go. Letting go wasn't sudden, but ebbed and flowed, just like the grief still does. Forgiveness slowly came into my heart - for Mark and his mother. Experiencing forgiveness myself was still needed.

After the anger subsided, depression took ahold. It had been there, but was now front and center. I was so upset with myself for going to Mexico, for leaving Alice when she wasn't entirely better, for not being at home to keep a watchful eye on her. I finally spent time praying and asking why I had left my Alice, what was it in me that I chose to go when she wasn't completely better, and why had I been resistant to spending more time with my dad and Shane when they were ill. Had I been selfish? Was that at the root of my choices? I was asking God to show me. I shared what was on my heart with Tim. He listened intently, gently acknowledging my feelings and then said, "You need to stop making a monster out of yourself." I replied, "But maybe I have been a selfish monster. It *is* like being a monster, that part of you that wants what it wants regardless of another's needs." And then he said, "What would you say to me if I had done the same?" I took the question in and when the answer came, warm tears streamed down my face, and the words that came were, "I would say, know that you have a good heart." Before I spoke those words, I had realized that they were the perfect medicine for my heart. They were not just my words; they came from a sacred place. It was the mercy coming into my heart and speaking the truth – the mercy that touched my core wound around the dark belief that "something is wrong with me." This insight or epiphany has lived on in me since. The merciless belief was also at the core of my resistance to being more present and available to my dad and Shane and to not fully forgiving my mom for her mistakes. I have returned to work with

my Sufi psychologist to face more directly this painful place inside me and to open to receiving Allah's love and mercy. The insights have continued to come. My psychologist shared with me years ago a quote by Rumi. "Keep your intelligence white hot and your grief glistening." The meaning of this has been revealed again and again recently, and I am filled with gratitude. My heart tells me that God's love and mercy also gives you inner knowing. The grieving opens your heart to receiving the love, mercy and insights – which fill you with gratitude for having time with your loved ones, for your life, for the gift of grief. I am filled with a thankfulness in my heart that keeps my intelligence white hot and my grief glistening. Thank You, my Beloved Lord. Alhamdulillah!

Journal Entries –

I am in the midst of grief with the loss of my sweet Alice. I've returned to hospice, massaging patients - most of whom are there for their last days among us. I'm aware of my own sadness and I'm trying to give from my heart. My heart is available, but it's heavy.

I massaged two men at hospice on Tuesday. Both were lively, engaging and alert. By Sunday, they had succumbed to their illnesses, and were making their journey home. Life is like this. Things can change so quickly. Death can come upon us so quickly. I want to live appreciating every moment and loving fully. Why do I waste my time? I get caught in my sadness, caught in my despair, caught by what seems lacking. What can I do? Pray, pray and pray. Be in Remembrance. Be in gratitude. Be thankful. Be in service. Surrender to God whole-heartedly. Ask for help.

I think about the loved ones who must go on living. I am struggling with this now. I see Jacob struggling. I know what it means now to want for your loved ones more than you want for yourself. I want Jacob to be happy and to enjoy life. He looks for his sister. He waits for her. It's heartbreaking. I wonder how beloveds who are married for 40 years deal with the loss of their spouse. I imagine it's like losing half of oneself. Up until the last breath, they feel they are one. This can continue. The illusion is that that the oneness is no more after their loved one dies. We can still feel them. We can still feel Sidi's spirit. We just need to tune in to that ever-so subtle place, asking for God's help, if it is in God's will.

The grief, the loving grief in another's heart is accessible. The act of sojourning with another was palpable on Sunday. To look into another's beseeching, mournful eyes and to say, 'God bless you', is real. God's blessing is a real experience that's given by God, received and felt. We can be in communion together...without separation. There's such beauty in life's final moments, and in

its passing. Loving one another, whether individually or on a universal level, seems more possible. Fruit that is ripe for the picking. Why do we waste our time?

Alice taught me how to be more tender, to communicate from that precious hidden place, soul to soul. Reverence for her life has opened me up to reverence for my life, and inspired me to be awake and alive in each moment. This is the gift that someone can give in their departure from this world. This is the gift that we can aspire to give others in this life. Estela gave that to me.

The homeless man stands at the corner every afternoon, stationed and ready to ask for money. As the hoard of college students and others walk past him, he repeatedly says, "Got any spare change, got any spare change, got any spare change...". Having two older brothers with whom I share a twisted sense of humor, I quietly laughed aloud as I thought about this man's persistent and relentless approach. I thought, "He's got a real system down." And then I listened from a deeper place, with the ear of my heart. I noticed how the words had a rhythmic quality, timed perfectly, like the beating of a heart ... like the beating of all our hearts. And what I heard this time was this: "Got any spare mercy, got any spare love, got any spare peace..." This is the undercurrent in each of us, calling out for God's mercy, for His love, for His peace, aching and yearning, and yet we seek it from others. If we could just turn our neediness to Allah. Then we could give, heart to heart, even in the form of spare change. Then we could give wholeheartedly. Subhana wa ta'ala. Beloved Lord, Beloved Allah, help us to turn to You, to be generous of heart, so that we may also help our brothers and sisters, so that we may be kind with Your creation. Help us to give for Your face, to see You in everyone. I went home with a kind of surrender in my heart that I hadn't felt since I heard the truth pouring from Sidi's heart, and before that, since the day I took the Promise. Gratitude. This is what I received because of the homeless man on the corner today. This is the hospice work at play in my heart. This is what I and you and we can take out into the world. Alhamdulillah!

Reverence in Death and in Life

During the first year of class at USHS, we listened to a recording of different singers, reciting and singing prayers. We were asked what came to our hearts with each singer's version. With one particular singer, what came to my heart was an experience of deep reverence. I shared this with our teacher and she said, "This is information for you." Reverence has always been important to me, especially after experiencing a succession of losses every two years from 1998 to 2006. But I didn't conjure up reverence, I didn't strive for it, it just came. I am so thankful for having reverence in my heart. It connects me with others hearts, with my own heart, and, I

believe, was part of my traveling to the Sufi path, to meeting Sidi, to receiving teachings, and to the knowing that serving God is the most important thing in life. I am thankful for the real practicum entering my heart and for being able to volunteer at hospice through touch. The phrase, “to touch another’s life” has a profound meaning to me now, even literal. There were those who could not speak, who were unconscious and in their final stage of dying. Touching and massaging their hands and feet was a gift to my heart. I pray that other’s transitions have been made more comfortable through receiving massage in their final days.

Reverence leads me deeper inside, to the hidden places – where I can imagine sitting next to a river, gently gliding my hand in its flowing, feeling the stream of life around me and in me. Reverence leads me to prayer, to surrender. And reverence brings me back to life and all that is present. This is one of the gifts of grief – to live in reverence of life as well as death, to see, feel and touch the beauty of all that is given.

Preparing to Meet my Lord

Many people have passed away since my time at hospice. There were several times when a patient whom I had massaged one day, would have died by the time I returned two days later. There’s an obvious difference between honoring those who have passed and accepting God’s decree, and becoming numb and complacent. I have witnessed the latter; it is not a road I wish to travel. To have known these patients, to see their uniqueness, to be a part of this sacred time, has been a holy experience. Words aren’t enough to convey this.

Cancer is so, so prevalent, and there are many in their 50’s and 60’s that are dying from this in all its forms. There are many people dying that are close to my age. And death can come slowly or very quick. You can see the change in one’s eyes, and the change can be met with sorrow, fear, denial (in many forms), acceptance, peace, and many other ways. The importance of preparing oneself for death is more than evident to me now. I don’t want to waste any time. I want to live fully now, in gratitude, in Love, and continue walking to my Lord. The awareness of this is ever-present.

With the loss of Alice and of loved ones for whom I still carry grief, self-care has been needed. Death has been a constant at hospice; walking with this has been a constant, as well. I feel a new sense of urgency for spending my time wisely, for focusing my attention on what matters most: love God, love others, love myself, be sincere, help others, be kind, make amends, make peace with God. It’s not that I didn’t have these intentions before, but there’s more certainty in the truth of this now. Love and faith have grown, and the importance of carrying the messages of peace, love, mercy, justice and freedom, of living the Promise, is profoundly embedded in my heart and soul.

What Allah Wants for Me

I believe one of the signs came through Estela. She felt peace through the massage. I don't know yet if massage is the route, but I do have a felt sense of knowing that healing presence can move through one if their heart is open, and that I feel called to help others. I am praying for guidance as to how to move forward with this and to know what Allah wants for me, and to live according to His Will. Being in gratitude is one of the keys.

I want to face myself, to be present to someone in need, to be engaged whole-heartedly in giving. I want to move away from self-observation and self-focus and to live in prostration, in surrender to God.

Ash-Shakur – The Grateful, the Receptive, the Understanding

Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi, Sidi's daughter in-law, writes in her book, Divine Names, "Ash-Shakur can open the connection to our true self, where grateful love enables us to enter again the dance of the joy of life and where our eyes turn away from flaws, from that which is lacking, and realize the abundance.... Ash-Shakur connects us and makes us generous. Ash-Shakur also brings humility to the heart when it has become all too arrogant, complacent, and insensitive, and this humility links us to the Creation and the All-Giving. Ash-Shakur is the antidote that counteracts our feelings of separation, loneliness, and poverty." I am ready to enter the dance of the joy of life. I am ready to stop dwelling on lack and to be thankful for what is given – both in difficult times and in times of ease. This is what is coming to my heart. The signs have pointed in this direction. I am ready to follow.

Fawzia also writes, "O Allah, help me carry You in my heart and be with You in every breath; help me to be grateful to You at any moment, and help me to serve You in everything!" This is my prayer. This is the real medicine for my heart. This will be my practice moving forward.

Tracing Alice's Steps

There is a stretch of grass in my backyard where the path is worn, leading from the deck, across the back of the house, to the chain link fence on the side of the house. Alice and Jacob had made this trek back and forth to bark at the neighbors and to peer out into the larger world together. After Alice died, I noticed that the grass was beginning to fill in, making the path less visible, and a deep sadness came over me. I began walking from the deck to the side fence and back, tracing Alice's steps. A sense of reverence and comfort came into my heart, but a message came, as well. We each have our own way of remembering our loved ones and in so doing, the meaning of their lives can dwell in us and we can carry them in our hearts forever. And we can find new meaning as we carry on. Alice and Jacob had left a path for me to walk and remember Alice. It also reminded me of this adventure we all embark on. The journey

home – transitioning from this life to the next – is one we must all make. We are all returning to the Oneness, on this path of love.

An excerpt from The Prophet, by Khalil Gibran:

Then Alimitra spoke, saying, We would ask now of Death,

And he said:

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in heart of life?

The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.

For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.

In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;

And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.

Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.

Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour.

Is the shepherd not joyful beneath his trembling, that he shall wear the mark of the king?

Yet is he not more mindful of his trembling?

For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?

And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?

Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.

And when you have reached the mountain top,
then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs,
then shall you truly dance.