

Before and After

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Death is not waiting for us at the end of a long road.
 Death is always with us ... she is the secret teacher hiding in plain sight.
 — Frank Ostaseski, *The Five Invitations*¹

In 1991, I served on a Kaiser Permanente team to prepare staff for the Patient Self-Determination Act and how to speak with patients and their families about advance directives. Years later, I mentored Permanente Medical Group and Group Health physicians in teaching their colleagues how to have conversations about death and dying.² In 2016, my partner of 36 years unexpectedly died. During this time I wrote the following haiku about my experience.

BEFORE AND DURING

Doing the right thing
 Consequences multiply. Right?
 Yes, but still sad

Heart breaks when he says
 “I want to come home with you.”
 That’s what I want too

“it’s out of your hands”
 Striving to do what I can.
 Limits are unclear

What to do? I asked
 Be present. Speak up. Hold him.
 More than good enough

Feel nausea heart quakes
 Dead. Gone. Ashes.
 Nevermore. Am I in a dream?

AFTER

Sliding through each day
 Without notice: remember.
 Images flood mind

Going through motions
 Get up, walk, eat, pretending.
 Act as if I live

Time drags me under
 Too much time not enough time.
 I succumb to time

These are early days
 Four and one half months so fresh.
 Walking the Bardo^a

Open or push down
 Each moment offers a choice.
 Present/Distraction

My constant mantra
 He’s not suffering. He’s safe.
 I did my best

Easter services
 Happy? No, just not crying.
 Solace in a crowd

I am sore angry
 “Get on with it,” one voice says.
 I will not be pushed

She’s speaking my words
 Only someone who’s been there.
 Echoing my truth

I am very strong
 No proving needed; just ask.
 People want to help

AT THE LIBRARY

I told her he died
 She remembered his last name.
 He’s not forgotten

Glimmers will appear
 Accept hard times will remain.
 Give it time she says

Each day a new day
 To breathe, to feel: remember.
 Six hundred plus days
 ❖

^a “Bardo” is the Tibetan term for the intermediate state or gap we experience between death and our next rebirth. More generally, the word “bardo” refers to the gap or space we experience between 2 states.³

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