

OPENING DOORS

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I spoke recently with a graduate student studying alternative spiritual approaches as interventions to palliate anxiety, particularly death anxiety, in counseling patients. She was interviewing me about the dual-voice trance technique developed and taught at Diana's Grove Mystery School, and the ways I have used that technique in my work with hospice patients.

First, a big *yay!* that counseling students are officially studying and writing about these modalities. And, of course, I was thrilled to have a captive audience while I talked about two of my personal passions: the particular and skilled use of this unique approach to trancework, and the expansion of the hospice model to embrace all forms of spiritual expression. If you know me, you know I can spend hours on a soapbox about either of these topics.

The interview was fun, exciting, collegial. The time passed quickly. Suddenly we were wrapping up and I was asked what one thing I thought was most important to say to students beginning their studies in trancework, or deathwork, or both.

As is often the case with me, I didn't really know that I had an opinion about this until someone asked me the question. And then the answer rose swiftly and with certainty. The most important thing for students of both trancework and deathwork to remember, I told her, is humility.

Like many hospice workers, I've been told that I'm a "saint". That my willingness to be in the room when someone is dying, and to witness the grief of their loved ones, makes me an official "good" person... someone who sacrifices their own comfort to serve others.

And like many trance facilitators, I have stood in the center of the circle and felt both the pressure and the *rush* of holding that place of power. I have felt personal validation when someone says "that trance you led changed my life." And I have looked into the eyes of trance students... I have *been* one of those trance students... who see the trance leaders as rock stars. Who envy and aspire to that visible, powerful role.

It feels good to be good at something. It feels good to flex skilled muscles. And when what you're good at is also something that can serve other people's real needs... at the deathbed or in ritual...you can be so easily seduced out of humility. You can confuse your skills with your importance. Every one of us will fall into that trap from time to time. But stay in that place of inflation too long, and it will slowly kill your

excellence. It will starve the intention that lies at the heart of all truly excellent work.

Excellence arises from the confluence of honed skills and pure intention. Excellence arises when you want something to *be*, in the world, more than you want to be the agent of its becoming.

When I began working in hospice, I went through a slow and painful process of peeling away the layers of ego that were standing between me and my ability to do impeccable service to and for the dying patients and their families. It was tricky because, at first, I would stand outside the door to the patient's room, collect myself energetically, and enter with the intention "I want to help." What could be wrong with that? But inside the room, there was still something in the way. Something blocking my full engagement with what was actually happening, and my ability to respond flexibly and appropriately. After awhile, I thought I understood the problem, and I changed my intention... "I want there to *be* help." I let go of being the one who did the helping. I just wanted help to exist.

And maybe you can spot what still needed to be peeled away, and took me a few more tries to get right. It can't be about *me* wanting anything. And it can't be about *help* as I define it. *What is needed* is defined by the one who needs it, not by the one who gives it. So many pieces of our own unspoken agendas can exist, subtly and stealthily, in intentions that sound and feel selfless.

Now, I walk into that room with the intention "may space be made for whatever is needed." Sometimes my presence is *not* needed. Sometimes I find someone else who can provide the comfort and connection that I cannot. Sometimes what people need most is something to push against – a way to express their anger at their fear. Sometimes the target of that anger is me.

May space be made for what is needed. This is also the foundation of trancework as it was taught to me. Each person has their own wisdom. Each person knows best, and knows so much more than I ever could, about their own wounds and strengths, motivations and memories and potent inner symbols and the faces of their own gods. As a trance facilitator I simply help open a space in which everyone present can access the wisdom that belongs to them. Far from being a "rock star" role, the job of the skilled trance facilitator is to disappear. People should not remember my 'beautiful' words... they should remember the experience they created for themselves, in the space that I helped hold. *That* is the experience that can heal.

When I stand next to a deathbed, or in the middle of a ritual circle, I have the least *knowledge* of anyone in the room. I have some skills. I have some techniques and some confidence. That's all. The person in the bed, the people who are journeying... they know things I will never know. They know *everything*. When I perform excellently, all that I do is open a door. You are the celebrity arriving at the awards show, and I am the anonymous person who respectfully opens the car door for you and then steps back into the shadows. That red carpet isn't my path. It's yours.

Humility. We who serve are served so much more richly by those who allow us to be a part of their journey. We who lead are so privileged by the confidence and trust that is placed in us, and to be empowered by that trust to do the advanced personal work that comes from putting ego in its place. Not putting ego *away*... there is still room for pride. I am proud of my skills, but I aspire to hold that pride always in balance with gratitude. I am grateful to those who taught me these skills. I am grateful to the earlier versions of myself that did the work to learn them. I am grateful to everyone who gives me the opportunities to practice and share what I know. And I am profoundly grateful for, and humbled by, the knowledge that *what I know* is just a tiny piece of the wisdom that is present, collectively, in the communities I am invited into. I am *allowed* into rooms where the blinding honesty of imminent death is present. I am *allowed* into circles full of people who are brave and inspiring and joyful and committed to growth.

In the face of all that gratitude, humility is not a hard thing to feel. There is no sacrifice in staying open to the awe of the opportunity to be of service. That awe keeps me in contact with my deepest intention for doing the work. I am proud of that connection. I am grateful for it. And I am humbled by it.

And I am so glad she asked me that question.