

Laurel Singer

The third heart valve replacement surgery had not gone well for my mother. But even at age 64 she was still a fighter. She fought her way through the six subsequent surgeries required during the next 72 hours to re-open her chest to find the source and stop the massive internal bleeding. Following the surgeries, she fought to sustain herself for over a month on “ECMO,” an invasive heart and lung machine, when ten days typically signals the point of no return for most. She even survived another two years despite reliance on a steady stream of oxygen, eventually finding her way back on to the golf course and into the fishing streams that she loved. But her time for fighting was coming to an end.

As I sat beside her as she lay in bed conscious of the fact that her breathing was becoming more labored, I saw the fear of this recognition register in her eyes. For me, her pain became a silent but deafening plea to “do something.” I was more than eager to snap to action: call someone, get something, find a pill, move, run, anything. Watching someone I loved so deeply, suffer so immensely, while realizing that there truly was nothing I could do, flooded me with feelings of helplessness and powerlessness I had never known before. Just as suddenly, I understood that the most powerful thing I could DO for her was simply to BE with her. Somehow, I found the strength not to run for help, but just to be of help: to hold her hand, open my heart to the depth of my love for her, and keep her company through her suffering so that she would know she was not alone.

This I believe: that our loving presence and courage to truly be with another person, particularly in their most painful moments, is the most important and precious gift we offer each other. When my mother died two days later in my arms, her calm demeanor and serene smile assured me that she could not have felt more loved and at peace. As mediators, we are called upon to serve people who are suffering. Their anger and rage are pleas that we do something, anything to make it stop. Yet we are of the greatest service and our highest calling when we suspend our need to fix their situation and focus more on being a compassionate presence as they journey through their darkness. Emboldened by a sense that they are not alone, people can find the courage to face their own pain and find their own path to peace.