

Crossing What Was

Written by Vivian Bikulege

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Recently, something strangely interesting dawned on me. It's this. There are times, by choice, circumstance, or accident, we reencounter the paths we have been on with people we no longer have in our lives. Is this too obvious? It's a bit of a revelation to me.

It was sort of a transactional trifecta that awakened my muse to consider such crossings. On a recent visit to a local nursing home, a friend explained that being there is hard for him because he is still getting over the loss of his father. Another friend set out on a difficult journey, and revisited a town in Italy where she'd traveled with her husband who passed less than one year ago. And then there is my sister, back in the infusion center where we'd been with our mother, only now she finds herself there with her son on their journey to his wellness.

Not too long ago, I took a neighbor to MUSC - The Medical University of South Carolina - for a procedure, and found myself right back in the same waiting room where I'd been with my mom. It was akin to the levees of the Mississippi River giving way during Hurricane Katrina - a flood of recognition breaking the fragile walls of emotional concrete. But there I was. There was no running away, no escaping the memories. I was there on a mission of assistance. And so, I remembered. I made sure to keep breathing. I understood that my mother had endured a lot of physical pain in these very walls, but she never quit, and whether I wanted to be on that journey with her, or not, I was there. What else can we do?

It's disorienting to be in a place where you've been before, only this time, someone is missing. It's then that we have choices. Yes, we have moments of grief, of absence, and wishing it was different. But hopefully, over time, our way of thinking changes to a kind of quiet

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gratitude, thankful that we had what we had when we had it.

Sometimes we journey back to places to get stronger. Sometimes, we go places because someone else is still there, left behind, who needs our hand. I'm coming up on the first year anniversary of losing an all-time best friend in my life, my beagle Toby. Man, do I miss him. Toby was a snuggler, and his brown eyes were one of the deepest places on the earth where I could look, and know, he saw my heart. I still see him on the path by the Coosaw River, running ahead of me, his whole butt wagging in crooked delight, the miracle of Dr. Guilloud's hands repairing his broken hip. The best I can do is give myself over to the void and allow myself to be swallowed up in *the what was*. Maybe cry. Maybe smile... after I cry.

Reminders of what was. They're everywhere. But I've learned a trick from a photographer friend. She taught me to turn around after I take a picture, to look the other way, in a new direction, maybe see something I have missed. With that lesson in hand, I can see the woman in assisted living who needs that smile, the tourist on vacation that can be helped because we've walked to that shop before, or sit in that seat at the hospital again because there is hope, healing, and a healthy lifetime ahead. Perspective in our lives is as important as it is in photography. It's the composition of our days, our point-of-view and dimensional focus, and the color and scale of the world inside and outside of ourselves.

The courage it takes to confront reminders of pain and sorrow can be daunting. It takes courage to remember. Courage helps us dig through the muck of loss and find something good between the cracks of a broken heart. We have it in us. It is there. Some days, it is harder to find. Keep looking. Turn around. Courage may be following you, and it's about time to have that face-to-face meeting you've been putting off.