

The anniversary looms. Gwen asked me many months ago to prepare a memorial tribute to our much loved friend, long standing Women's Centre supporter and fierce feminist, Miriam Ketonen. With a little trepidation I agreed. It sounded like a reasonable task that a friend SHOULD be able to do, in a reasonable time frame. But as the months progressed the trepidation got louder and each time I tried to find my voice about this, it was weak and superficial. I realized that I didn't have access, to my feelings.

In perusing my resistance I found myself back in a conversation with Miriam, walking through the field at Sunshine, in our 20's, talking about our fathers who had both died recently. It was an uncommon thing to share in those days, since most peoples' parents lived much longer. That was the mid 70's and death awareness literature was coming into its own. We had both read Ernest Becker's Denial of Death, and some of Kubler Ross's work. We were both excited to learn of one another's scathing appraisals of religion as mythology created for the pretense of life after death. We agreed on the tyranny of the death care industry and how it was all connected to the existential dread proposed by Becker. Miriam was my model Atheist. She was clear and certain in her belief that death was an exclusively physical event and that the natural world was the only place we needed to look for rebirth. She wasn't afraid to talk about death, didn't need to use euphemisms, and heartily embraced death related humour. She could always tell a good joke, drawing it out slowly and then dishing out the punchline within a state of suspense. She particularly liked the one about the old guy who hobbles precariously downstairs from his sickbed to the kitchen, wafting with the aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, reaches out shakily for a cookie and gets WHACKED on the knuckles by his wife. "Get away from those cookies. They're for the funeral!".

Becker thought, as many who followed him, that we use various strategies to protect ourselves from the idea, almost impossible to conceive of, that one day, we will not exist. When I entered my 25 year hospice career, we talked a lot about denial. A running joke was: "Denial is more than just a river in Egypt". Not a glib comment, not a judgement, but an understanding that people don't really CHOOSE denial, as Climate Change deniers might, but that denial is a strategy used often without our consent. That fear and anxiety can sit right under the surface, and motivate thinking and acting without the benefit of conscious thought. It is considered, by some of the great thinkers on the subject, to be one of an array of maladaptive methods used to "manage the terror" of our ultimate annihilation and/or that of our loved ones.

I was quite smug about the denial issue. I had studied about how malevolent its manifestations can be: It reinforces a world view of self and "other", it causes abandonment of those at the end of life, rationalizes inhumane and futile treatments and probably of most relevance, translates to a lack of adequate palliative and bereavement care which is needed by 100% of us. I learned that by seeking to understand the needs of the dying, or the bereaved, one cannot avoid entering the fray of mortality. I have always thought a lot about death. So I thought I had the inside scoop, and I wouldn't fall prey to the clutches of denial. I would be able to face death head on.

On a couple of occasions before Miriam's diagnosis, as her persistent little cough continued, our conversation skirted what we both feared. I felt myself in a suspended state and time stood still. My gut

(a concept I don't think Miriam supported) knew what was coming, and I promptly constructed a shield around myself, like riding on a cushion of air. Who better to trigger my death anxiety than someone who I identified so closely with, looked up to, felt protected by, felt safe with. Someone whose presence made more air in the rooms I entered.

It's complicated, being a mortal. It's not easy to say goodbye to everything and everyone we have known and walk boldly into the void. No wonder people make up stories about heaven. But I want to be prepared. I want to do it with courage and intention. As Miriam did. She didn't want to die, no matter how much pain it might save her. She wanted every last breath. Every last loving caress from her family and friends. She had guts. But it wasn't just the guts to die, it was the guts to fully Be here as long as she could. And that is what I need to learn, to fully embrace my own mortality. How to drop the shield and live in this finite world as it now is, without my dear friend holding the door open for me. My rock. Smooth, warm and hard, from the shores of Lake Superior.