I opened up a book this morning, “How to Live a Feminist Life” by Sarah Ahmed, to a random page and read a Grimm’s fairy story about a willful girl. I hesitate to write about this because it turned out to be such a horrible story but I’m reminded by Janie Brown’s comments recently about events we often call ‘miracles’ or ‘mystical’ perhaps being so because we take the time to notice and see these things.

My most vivid example of this happened at the February, 2017 Callanish retreat. We had just finished wrapping up a 2-hour session examining and coming to terms with our fears about living with cancer (e.g. Will the cancer come back? Will I die in the next year? What are my fears of the unknown? etc.). You get the idea – and you can imagine some pretty deep emotions were laid out for us all to see. At some point, Janie happened to look out through the beautiful picture windows and gasped with pure glee, pointing. We all turned to look. Right by the glass, in snowy surrounds, was a large white rabbit! It didn’t move a whisker and seemed curious about us all. Even when a few of us went to the window to get a better look, the rabbit merely hopped a few steps. Meanwhile, Janie thumbed through a book and announced that the ‘rabbit,’ in some aboriginal traditions, represents ‘fear.’ No one could have written that script. Was this just a coincidence? Or was it that we took the time to notice our surroundings?

With my faith in this wisdom, I am pushing through with the coincidence of reading the willful girl story this morning. I have no idea why I even picked up the book! In a nutshell, the fairy story is about a girl who was deemed to be willful because she was disobedient to her mother’s demands. As the story unfolds she got sick under the weight of her willfulness and died. The mother laid her to rest but even in death she was willful. As they covered her with earth, her arm popped up. The arm would not be settled, so the mother found a crowbar to force the arm down to complete the burial. The moral of the story was presumably to warn young readers that they better comply with their mother’s wishes or the same fate might be bestowed upon them!
woman recently told me that her doctor said, “If the radiation doesn’t work, there is nothing more we can do for this tumour, until it spreads. In some ways, you are lucky you got cancer so young as it’s shown you what’s important in life and now you can do the things that count, in the time you have left, as opposed to wasting a long life doing nothing.” I am in shock that the oncologist thought that a ‘seize the day’ speech would be helpful to this mother of a 4-year-old who knows full well the seriousness of her situation, and is living in terror every day of dying too young, too soon.

The oncologist’s words may ring true but they are devoid of any feeling that conveyed his understanding not only of the heartbeat of the situation and the terror of it, but also of the mystery and longings of this woman’s life. No one, not even our experts, know the ending of her story---her short or long life is, as yet, unknown.

What if her doctor had said something like, “Let’s put our hope behind the radiation working, and if it doesn’t, we will figure out the next steps together. There are new treatments coming down the pipeline every day.” Or, even some generic words like, “I am inspired by the way you live your life with such grace in the midst of so much uncertainty. I learn from you.” What about giving something to the person, rather than taking something essential away?

After hearing this particular story, I read Rilke’s poem to myself with the oncologist as the narrator speaking to his patient, rather than God talking to humans (no pun intended). What if the doctor could have held out his hand for her to go to the limits of her longing, to flare like a flame with hope, to accompany her in the shadows, to offer beauty as an antidote to her terror, and to encourage her to keep going? Isn’t that what we all would want?

After thirty years working in the field of oncology, I have been inspired many times by the people who have outlived their prognoses, who have found truly collaborative and caring partners in their oncologists, who have taught me about the capacity of the human spirit to live in hope about life, even up until the very end of it, when terror can be assuaged by beauty, as we hold each other up in the shadows.

I can only hope that the magnificent words written by poets like Rilke can find their way into the hearts and mouths of the professionals who have the power to hurt, or inspire hope in the people who, by necessity, must come into relationship with them. I will muse upon this deep longing of mine every day and hope that my words can somehow make a difference in this country [we] call life.

My first line of defense or argument to this, is that I was recently diagnosed with a CHEK2 gene mutation. My cancer is hereditary so it’s not my fault—as if it was, even if it was not hereditary!

Perhaps I was a willful child? I’m not sure if willful is the right word. I think it’s more that my spirit rose beyond the societal conditioning of women.

I’m so grateful to Callanish for ‘seeing’ me in all my willfulness, my spirit. What I learned from the retreat was a reconnection with my core spirit, that I’m playful, happy, curious, and connective when I’m in that space to be me. My space — my spirit. I had without knowing it, lost a bit of myself in the three years of treatment—a kind of resignation to the drudgery of it all.

The Grimm brothers represent the oppression of the patriarchy and I’m reminded of how much we need to stay connected with our core selves and speak up when we see injustice, when we see ourselves being consumed by the cancer treatment process, and when we see our identities being eroded. This is what we can do for each other and for ourselves.

The coincidence of my reading this story then is that it provided me with a space to write a response, to continue my process of reconnecting, to claim back what is my spirit. Callanish did not claim my spirit back for me, the team provided the caring, nurturing, varied activities (spiritual, cognitive, physical, nutrition, somatic, group, individual) and space for healing so I could do that for myself. Callanish is truly amazing!

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Words from Janie cont.

What to do with this story? Hate the Grimm brothers? Hate the context in which this story is set? This was after all an era when ‘children should be seen and not heard.’ Much like my parent’s Victorian values which made it difficult for me to come out as a lesbian for many years, and when I did, to experience the weight of their predictable rejection.

So, what is this story and the coincidence of reading it about? Was it that I was a willful child like the one in the story? Should I equate that my cancer was punishment for my chosen life-style? I could. But I don’t choose the Grimm’s patriarchal view of the world.

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Generous Gifts to Callanish

This year so far there have been some wonderful offerings to raise funds for Callanish for which we are truly grateful.

RBC Volunteer Work Party – RBC sent an enthusiastic team to help make our outside space beautiful in preparation for summer, and we received $1,000 in addition to their helpful hardy work.

Tip A Wee Dram/Whisky Wisemen – this annual event sold out in hours, and was the first of its kind as a collaborative event with Al Jones’s team with the Whisky Wisemen group. They raised over $6,000 for Callanish!

Joy Butler generously chose to have her 60th Birthday gifts come to Callanish as donations, raising close to $2,000!

Shredding for a Cure – we generously received $3,000 from the annual shred-a-thon in honour and memory of Ashley Brear, one of our young adults who came to Callanish and inspired us all.

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Words by Joy cont.

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Photo by: Mike Wakefield, North Shore News
Words from Danielle

My mother, Barbara, was diagnosed with colon cancer on my 20th birthday. I vividly remember the two of us having lunch together trying to celebrate my birthday but doing so with this undertone of uncertainty and fear lingering between us. A year and a half later my mother died of colon cancer. She was 51 years old.

Over 16 years since my mother’s death, I still find myself drifting back in time remembering special moments with her. Certain memories in particular are as clear as though they happened just yesterday.

I love that about memories, they are such incredible tools that we carry with us all the time that help us maintain a continuing bond with our loved ones which binds us from past to present and into the future. I know for me, especially in the first few years after my mom died, without these memories I worried that she would become this distant figure who ‘once upon a time’ was part of my life.

I was incredibly fortunate that my mother had the courage to carry out ‘legacy work’ in the year before she died. With help from family and friends, my mom put together audio recordings of her reading my brothers and my favorite storybooks from when we were little. I remember her sitting in the dining room with a man who brought all the equipment to do the recordings, and my brother, Michael, being there with her.

One day not long after my mother died, my uncle handed me a CD from my mom with the words, Barbie’s Nursery Rhymes and Short Stories written on the cover. He told me it was a gift from mom for me and her future grandchildren. I can still remember holding the CD in my hands with a combination of gratitude, anxiety, and heartache. I wasn’t sure what to do with it. Where would I keep it? When would I listen to it?

It took me three years to finally bring myself to bear the unbearable and listen to the CD. It was a winter evening. I was alone. I remember my heart pounding as I took a deep breath and pressed play on the CD player. I sat down and closed my eyes and suddenly the soothing sound of my mother’s voice permeated every cell of my body. In those first few seconds I could physically feel my heart ache as I breathed in the presence of her comforting voice and the loving messages she relayed to me, my brothers, and also to the grandchildren she knew she would never meet. The tears poured out of me.

More than twelve years have passed since that first experience I had listening to my mom’s CD. I now have my own daughter, Ellie, who, in a few years’ time I will be able to snuggle up with and together we will listen to the CD. Just knowing that Ellie will be able to hear her grandmother’s calming voice and that my mom can be with us as we engage in these intimate moments, means more to me than I can describe in words. I have a feeling that after we finish listening to the CD that Ellie will want to know everything about her grandma. And as the sound of her grandma Barbie’s voice echoes through our ears I will delight in answering her questions and bringing the essence of my mom back to life.

Words by Gail Belcher

I wrote this piece at a Callanish writing group soon after the fatal shooting in a Quebec mosque last January. My husband, Charles, embraced the Muslim faith as a young man. On the day after this black moment in Canada, he came home from work. On his way in the door he called out to me, “I’m a Muslim. Don’t shoot.” We both smiled at each other, confident of our own brand of non-judgment.

SHOT IN THE BACK - by Gail Belcher

I have been shot in the back, shot in the back by love. I was kneeling down and praying and saying aloud with my father, “Now I lay me down to sleep, pray the Lord my soul to keep,” or “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” He shot me anyway. The pain of that is still with me.

Asalaam Alaikum, they were praying. Speaking the name of God aloud. Allah u Akbar. They were shot in the back by hate as they prayed. The pain will last forever. That’s what pain does. These are profound losses. The pain permeates every person who feels the loss of innocence for our land.

When I was shot in the back, I built a wall of steel around my body. I lost my innocence. In spite of the steel wall, my 12th thoracic vertebra collapsed from cancer. The bullet wound had not healed. It could not heal encased in steel.

Those crafty little angels found a way inside. There was a little trap door in my armour right over my heart. Then, those little angels, of every colour and nationality, would arrive on tippy toes, unlock the steel door and land smack dab in the middle of my heart. They sang and danced and laughed with me. The love and joy they brought were overflowing. I am loved. The bullet hole has healed. Now I just have to make trap doors everywhere in my steel body so the angels can do their mischievous magic everywhere. May the body armour, the steeled muscles and nerves and connective tissue, the flap jackets, the reinforced helmets, the exploding bullets be replaced by the grace of the angels. Take us to a healing place where we can truly embrace all mankind and womankind and childkind. Bullets are for cowards and bullies.

Allah u Akbar—God is great! I invoke the Infinite Spirit to heal the bullet wounds everywhere in the world.

I experienced breast cancer 10 years ago and went through radiation, surgery and chemotherapy. My response to that was to join a breast cancer dragon boat team. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer of the bone a few years ago I joined Callanish. I have not looked back.

I have attended two retreats at Brew Creek that have changed my life. I was on death’s doorstep and in palliative care about two years ago, and have resurfaced fully well, thanks to a brilliant oncologist, an equally brilliant naturopath, my own stubborn but positive resolve, the spirit of Callanish and the love of my family and friends. I attend numerous groups at Callanish, but so far, my favorite group is the writing group. The act of writing, the guidance and poetry reading of Janie, and the amazing listening skills of every member of the group have transformed me. My short prose passages often contain humour and magical thinking and reflect the laughter that has been integral to my healing. May we all heal our flagging spirits.
Honouring a Volunteer
Jeanette Frost

We are so grateful to Jeanette who chooses to give up her Sunday afternoons every weekend for the Callanish Recreational Cycling group, through the spring and summer months. Jeanette is a passionate cyclist who loves to encourage others to discover the joy of cycling, or to support people who want to get back to physical activity after treatment for cancer. Many Callanish retreat participants have expressed how truly grateful they are for Jeanette’s amazing commitment to helping them reconnect with their bodies and their life. Thanks Jeanette for all you do for Callanish!!

Golden Flax and Nut Bread

1 cup    almond flour (or ground pecans)
¼ cup    golden flax seeds
½ cup    water (boiling)
⅓ cup    arrowroot (sifted)
¾ tsp     salt
1 tsp     baking soda
2 tbsp    apple cider vinegar
3        eggs
2 tbsp    oil (canola or coconut)

Soak flax seeds in hot water for 15 minutes. Place cider vinegar in a medium size bowl and add baking soda. The mixture will foam like a chemistry experiment but it works like a charm to cut the baking soda flavour.

Combine soaked flax seeds, beaten eggs, oil and baking soda vinegar mixture.

Mix almond flour or ground pecans with arrowroot and salt.

Add the wet mixture to the dry ingredients and mix well. Pour mixture into a loaf pan that has been well oiled or lined with parchment paper.

Bake at 350º F for 30 min.

We Remember with Love

Jane Goodfellow
Liza Goncalves
Dan Gunn
Lorraine Moysir
Eve McLeod

We send our love and thoughts to the family and friends of these remarkable people.

Special Thanks to:

The family and friends of Dan Gunn for their generous memorial donations.
Martha Lou Henley for her steadfast commitment to bringing food and flowers to our young adult group every month and for her donation of many Vancouver concert tickets, and her ongoing generosity.
The Lotte & John Hecht Memorial Foundation for their generous scholarship support and matching funding.
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Renee Mitchell at Choices Market for their discount on retreat food shopping.
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Allison Prinsen for her endless hours helping us with our design needs.
Jim Glen for making a special trip to Brew Creek in February to take his beautiful photographs for our website.
Our fabulous baking team of Sherri Silverman, Janet Silver, Susan Stine and Karen Hoffman for donating their time and the ingredients to bake the much-loved Callanish cookies.
Lynn Buhler, Sarah Sample, Claire Talbot and Erica Tsang for volunteering to wash dishes on retreat.
Suzanne Hong at Granville Island Florists for bringing beauty to our retreats through her flowers.
Neil Prinsen and Mike Cates for driving participants to retreats.
Daphne Roubini of Ruby’s Ukes for teaching us how to play the uke and for donating ukes and tuners.
Alex, Christina, Samantha and Zuri from our film "I’m Still Here," for presenting at the Canadian Association of Psychosocial Oncology National Conference on young adults with recurrent cancer.