

Painting with Mom by Pamela Sukhum

What a wonderful visit from my favorite studio mate in Thailand...

Over the past two months it's been a joy to be with my parents in Bangkok. In our precious time together, I am acutely reminded of my familial lineage, what is passed on to us, and what lives on through us.

My mother was the first to teach me about finding and creating beauty in everyday life. She continually called my attention to the smallest of details and always pointed me in the direction of refinement. Of course, as a wild tomboy of a child and even more rebellious teenager, I found this all just too annoying. I could not be bothered with being so picky about appearances or how food was always plated and attractive or how to dress or comb my hair in a way that showed self-care and respect, manners, or attention. My mother always found a way to elevate everything she did. Food was never eaten out of wrappers or disposable containers. My mother could literally raise the peanut butter on toast sandwich to an art form. Even when my parents were starting out in the U.S. and did not have many financial means, she could find a way to beautify anything and everything so that nothing ever felt cheap or hastily thrown together – the way of the artist – resourceful and creative with whatever tools and materials she is given.

Like many spirited young people, it would take me many years to realize the deep and profound impacts my Mother's way of being has had on me that will now, hopefully, endure throughout my life carrying on the lineage of the heart of the artist.

For those of you who know this beautiful lady and to read more about how she is doing these days (and what she continues to teach all of us), read more below:

Mom can no longer sit up on her own (we prop her up with pillows and braces) or speak very much. We celebrate each single word answer she may give us each day with us often having to read her lips for the one word as her voice is no longer very audible. When I ask her if she would like to paint, she replies "Chob" in Thai, which means "Like". I load the brush for her and she holds the brush. For each spot she wants to place the dab of paint on the painting we simply wheel her chair forward so that the brush in her hand touches the canvas where she chooses. What a joy to witness and be a part of! Here the smallest of victories are the greatest of victories. It is a poignant reminder that in our days filled with so much hustle and bustle and a seemingly endless stream of choices, distractions, and stimuli, that the smallest of moments are often the greatest of moments. These slow moments that draw us into the gaps where everything truly resides.

My mother requires such presence, slowing down and attentiveness. Due to a very rare blood disorder, as we move her, we cannot let any part of her body bump into anything as it will create huge internal bruises that often do not stop bleeding. Additionally, due to a traumatic brain injury and subsequent mini strokes, her left side is now paralyzed and the right side is also very limited in strength so she is not able move herself or sit up on her own anymore. Her short term memory has been non existent since the fall 5 years ago and once a math whiz from the Wharton School of Business, she no longer can compute the simplest $1+1$ equations. So what remains? What remains with so much loss of body and mental function? How do we value a person who no longer is a “productive” member of society and in fact takes enormous resources to support? What I have had a deep privilege to find out is that her value is not ONE IOTA diminished. I see that with the right attitude, those that surround her feel a sense of both duty and honor to care for her with such attention. By the nature of her physical and mental condition, we are asked to be 100 percent present to her needs throughout the day and night. While it can be tiring at times it is also brings such depth of unspeakable joy to give oneself fully to the care of another. One disappears in the act of changing one’s mother’s diapers as roles reverse and linear time no longer has meaning as inevitably, the dawning that one’s mother once cared for them in this same way when one was a baby. We make the most of every day with her. Even though she is essentially bed-ridden we lift her each day into her fully padded wheel chair and bring her out to the main room to be with everyone else...to be able to see the growing jungle of plants on her balcony and watch the pigeons that come to drink water from a small basin we have left for them. We make sure she has her favorite foods. Even if they need to be blended as she must be spoon-fed and can no longer chew solid food, there is always a plated display version of her food so that she can make the connection to seeing what she is eating. We beautify her home and surroundings, lovingly brush her hair and put make up on her every day as she so loved doing all the years of her life. It is an unspeakable joy to care for her as she once did for us. Although she does not speak much anymore, she laughs more than most people every day and each and every smile and laugh from her brings a wave of joy throughout the room.

Each day with Mom, we are constantly reminded of what is most important – caring for one another with a heart broken wide open...as if it is the last time...the last day....and the profound simplicity of a gladdened and happy heart.