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Listening Through Dementia By Guest Blogger, YS Thorpe

My friend, who is 91, has non-Alzheimer's dementia. In 2003, already experiencing the frightening signs, she said "I think I'm entering a new phase of my life. I want to think of it as an adventure." She lives today in a locked-door Alzheimer's care facility. She does not know my name.

I cannot not go see her there. Some days I think I just can't go. I go anyway.

Once she was verbal, colorful, vivacious, an accomplished writer, actress, poet, outspoken activist. Now words escape her. All her story lines have come untied.

I think this relationship now asks more of me than lies within my capabilities, yet I show up. Something beyond understanding holds me steady just past what I'd think I'd choose. I listen.

With my entire body, the only listening that counts now, I take in her gestures and her eyes. The rhythms of her breathing, her uncertain gait, her changing face speak for her, teach me to hear.

When she still spoke she said of her condition "The worst is when I don't remember that I don't remember." Today there is nothing for this space without a past but to be a listening presence, embodied: beyond my preferences, my dread (will I be next?), beyond any other place I might think I'd rather be, beyond the insidious desire to make it better, to contribute something of more measurable value, to do something, I am required simply to be simple, bare attention with no frills no fix no facile hope.

On occasion she strikes out with trembling fists against those who would "redirect" her. She has always been a majestic force of nature and does not take easily to operating within reduced autonomy. I am grateful for those whose job it is to get her to the shower, then the dining room, to bed.

At times in spite of high intention my heart wilts. I promise to return tomorrow, or the next day, another day, soon. I wish I weren't so grateful I know the door code, I can leave.

I always return, refreshed. Kiss, touch, eyes, skin, gesture give back my friend to me through ever-changing rhythms, textures, and I hear her present "yes" with a sweetness I've not found in the fleeting enchantments of romance, the delights of measurable worldly success.

No romance, no measuring this! At best clear sight, clear-hearing heart, willing steps into a deep unknowing, a vast home I could find easy to resist.

The Buddhists speak of awareness, of sickness, old age, death as "dukkha" / "suffering." Of our shared time I catch myself starting to say "profound," then the word itself seems a rude, heavy timber crashing into the subtleties of body and mind I dreamed of telling you, lived only beyond words.

Her total silence offers a new and reassuring place for me to discover my own ways of knowing home.

It seems to me she is almost completely focused on an internal "beyond," in relation to which all else is peripheral. So that in brief moments of "reconnecting" it is as if her attention has slipped back out to us through a window, then retreats and the window silently closes again.

She resists intrusion, and I say bless her! I am with her mostly in silence. Yesterday I was feeding her and she smiled the most beatific smile & I melted, but when I whispered "I love you so much" the window closed; even whispered words seemed too much, intrusive. I think there was too much of "I" in them.

"For better or for worse." Plain friendship's vow. Who is not asked to befriend?

There is no escaping this call to care. I'll go today and every cell of my body will be required—no, invited—to be this stripped-down living unnamed yet recognized presence, a new compassion, a way of being listening itself. No more, no less, and absolutely nothing "else."

Within the condition our world calls dementia, I hear the angels sing. They sing for my friend, they sing for me.