



Heart Broken Open

I met and married my soul mate Jim fourteen years ago. He was everything I wanted in a relationship, and we made wonderful plans for our future together.

After two years of marriage he experienced his first bout of cancer where he had his upper left dental arch removed. Fifteen months later he had another more serious bout of cancer

which required removing his lower left jaw, replacing it with his fibula, and radiation. His recovery took a long time.

Three years later he suffered a major stroke which left him unable to read, speak and write. He was in hospital for three months. He was 'gone' for a while, but he came back.

Then came the onset of vascular dementia. It seemed like Jim was gradually walking away from me without turning around to say good-bye. At least with cancer and a stroke, Jim had a chance of healing and the ability to come back to me, come back to the relationship. We were available to each other; we shared our innermost feelings. Not so with dementia.

My experience with dementia over the past four years has been one of heartbreak. Although still in love with Jim, I gradually became heart-protected and contracted my feelings – like having my arms wrapped around myself for protection. Over time, Jim became non-conversational. It became more and more difficult to visit Jim in long-term care and witness his decline. I felt myself painfully and sadly emotionally moving away from him – even though I regularly visited him.

Reading Parker Palmer's *Circle of Trust*, I was introduced to the idea that **I could choose whether to stay with my heart being broken – or find the courage to allow my heart to be broken open.**

“But there are at least two ways to understand what it means to have our hearts broken. One is to imagine the heart broken into shards and scattered about – a feeling most of us know, and a fate we would like to avoid.

*The other is to imagine the **heart broken open into new capacity** – a process that is not without pain but one that many of us would welcome...my heart can break open into greater capacity to hold more of my own and the world's suffering and joy, despair and hope.”*

I made the choice and commitment to allow my heart to be *broken open and invite in a new capacity within myself*. I allowed myself to unconditionally fall in love with Jim again. I did that by looking at our photo albums, remembering the amazing moments we shared together, reminiscing about our life together. It was painful of course – but so was being broken hearted. With the intention of allowing my heart to *break open into a new capacity*, I found a renewed sense of peace and comfort.

Rather than resisting, I began looking forward to visiting the “love of my life”, to being in a heart-centered place of fully loving and accepting him just as he is now. He energetically responded differently with me – making eye contact with me in a deeper way. Small glimmers of ‘the former Jim’ showed up. He has always been intuitive – on some level he knew.

I felt his presence meet mine differently as we drove along in silence or listened to music together. I held his hand even though his response was not there. I allowed my heart to be full.

There is a deeper nuance of unspoken connection now. This has helped me to be in my *heart breaking open* place and be at peace at the same time as supporting Jim. I feel stronger, more centered and more at peace with what is.

May you find the strength and courage within yourself to allow yourself to have the experience of your *heart breaking open to a new capacity* as opposed to your heart being broken down; to be willing to accept life as it is and create a different kind of beauty and connection with your loved one.

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