

# Drawing The Circle

By Laurie L. Mulvey

I'm waiting for someone to die. I've purchased the powders and soaps, the towels and eye pillows, the cotton, the bandages, the diapers, the candles, and the container for three days worth of dry ice. My bag waits in the basement, overfilled with the tools of someone trained in how to prepare and maneuver a body that is no longer pushing blood through its own veins. No, I'm not a funeral director. And I'm not Jewish or Muslim or Amish. I just experienced something with a dog. Nearly twenty years ago.

I can see all of the somber shoulders facing forward from my backseat perch in the family car. We were transporting Mandy to her final visit to the vet. And we were mostly silent, stricken—especially as her awful panting persisted from beneath the swaddling of a sky blue cotton comforter that my mother donated for this concluding venture. My dad, my mom, my two brothers and me. We all decided to be present because my great aunt had suggested that being there would help.

As the quiet car carried us to our grim destination, my twenty-three year old brother, Rick, held Mandy on his lap. I was reminded of the similar tenderness and trepidation with which he held her when both she and he were half their current size, and he and our two younger siblings were sneaking her into our basement—the heart-thumping climax of a daring and devilish plot to defy a parental injunction against adopting a dog. Their plan was complete with all of the shortcomings of fourteen-, twelve- and ten-year old strategizing—in particular how they would manage a squealing puppy long enough to endear her to our parents. But shockingly, despite my parents'

characteristic tendency to walk their talk, the coup de tat succeeded. Now I realize that my brothers and sister triumphed because they understood far better than I did that my parents were soft on the inside. As they rightfully predicted, Mandy created a permanent place for herself, patiently and with great diligence, gaining one more step, one more landing, one more chair until the house was as much hers as ours. She charmed even those who were most indifferent to four-leggeds—as my non-dog-loving uncle often reminds us. “I always think about what a great dog Mandy was,” he urges us to appreciate—as if she had wiggled her nose one day and unlocked a door for him.

Nine years later, after all that exertion, Mandy was leaving the center of our world, shifting the shape of our family again, taking us outside of ourselves on an abundantly bright summer afternoon that was bumping up against the solstice. This time, it wasn't the puppy squeals that we were anxious to quiet so that our basement refugee would not be discovered; it was the tortuous panting of a dying body's last attempts to force oxygen into its nearly unbellowing lungs. We had decided to speed her release from that failing body, and all we could do to stem the torrent of our own aching was to accompany her.

I almost began to describe what a sorry sight we were that day—all five of us gathered around, sheltering our sweet companion, carrying stiff lumps in our throats, and trying to unblink our eyes to keep the sorrow from puddling on our cheeks. But a pitiable characterization would be incorrect. Mandy had become the family nucleus that day, shaping us into a singular organism—Mom, Dad, children and dog—all hardly breathing, all marching forward reluctantly, all saying goodbye as one. That union would be one of her lasting bequests to us.

My dreamy impression is that the front doors opened without effort as we approached the clinic, and we seemed to step onto a conveyor belt that whisked us without need for words or direction into an open examining room. Moments later, with no time to wonder or to worry, to take a deep breath or to acknowledge any of the others, I watched as Mandy was laid on her side on the table and the rest of us found our places in a circle all around her. As two syringes were prepared, the vet told us that Needle One would send Mandy to sleep, and Needle Two would stop her heart. And that's what happened. Instantly. No drama. No huge release of tension. Just a barely detectable movement from suffering to stillness. I might have missed it had I blinked or looked around to see how anyone else was doing.

"We want to take her home," my mother announced to the vet just as I was getting back my breath.

"It's not really allowed," he said, hesitating. "But...yes...of course. I'll just turn my head."

So one of us re-swaddled the sky blue shroud around Mandy, and again it was Rick at the front of our procession, carrying her utterly still body back to the car with the same gentleness with which he'd carried her living body. I was sure he was grappling with the knowledge that this time would be his last.

Though I cannot remember any words spoken on the return trip, I knew that we were acting as outlaws that day—all charged with the proper disposal of a body, yet never having done anything like this. Our unity of purpose and movement continued as we mapped out Mandy's gravesite beneath a young white pine in our backyard. Rick had already placed her on the grass where she laid for the next hour in a cliché of sleep while

shovels began heaving, and a substantial mound of dirt was piling close by. My grandparents and my sister flanked us on the deck, watching the entire act unfolding from a slight distance.

As my father and brothers dug, and the sweat christened their foreheads, the passive tenor of the day shifted and we began to recover from the shock of our helplessness. The task even took on a ceremonial quality as we clipped a single curl of Mandy's soft fur, told stories, and offered flowers and mementos to her memory. Naturally, the nine years of affection that we had felt toward her was bubbling to the surface, easily accessible in the protected place that we had all known together as home. Even though her spirit had left, with Mandy's body among us, in our care, her life faded from us unhurriedly, organically, rhythmically. None of it was scripted by the protocols and time constraints of a vet's office, a crematory, a cemetery—or any other establishment. We could have sat with her in the grass all day if we had wanted. And that spaciousness allowed us to begin to absorb the immense and mysterious nature of this act of burying the husk of a being who had been a living part of our family less than an hour before.

The freeze-frame moment arrived late in the episode when my youngest brother, Ray, said to me, "Laur, you've got to do this. You've got to get your hands in the dirt. It feels so good." His words broke through as both a revelation and a shoehorn sliding me waist deep into the dirt. I was shocked to learn that anything could feel good on this sad occasion. But Ray was right. As I scooped up those handfuls of earth, I was awakened by the coolness of the granules, the stiffness of the clay, the mix of stone and soil. And in

that simple encounter, I first made contact with a profound principle—that pain can open to pleasure, ugliness can reflect a facet of beauty.

When I jumped back up to ground level, I never imagined that I was carrying away the seeds of a revolution in my soiled hands—steadfast seeds that would wait nearly two decades to sprout. On Mandy’s final afternoon, as we wiped our eyes and closed this chapter of our lives with layers of soil carefully hoisted upon her, all I could grasp and all that really mattered then was that we had done it all. We went shoulder to shoulder to the absolute end. The breathing in the house felt deep and clear the rest of that day. Even when the grief would surge, it seemed to dissolve without getting snagged in any barbs of regret.

Years and loved ones would pass before I grasped the significance of witnessing and digging and laying a body once loved way beneath the skin of the earth; of watching from a porch, season upon season, as the grave grows flat and shaded and overgrown; and the significance of sensing that something is held there, mixed with the rest of the living, not completely departed.

By chance or by fate, my husband and I arrived in Florida to visit his mother the last week that she was alive. We didn’t calculate the utter precision of the timing. But Maxine’s timing had *always* surprised me. On the first day we met fifteen years prior, she said, “Just call me Mom—that’s what everyone calls me.” Taken back by her instant easiness, I thought, *Mom is way too familiar for a first encounter*. And then, I realized, *Maxine is too informal*. I never found a way to resolve this initial dilemma. Several years later, on an unremarkable fall afternoon, I received a letter from Maxine in my

mailbox. The plain letter-sized envelope contained a scribbled note and a single index card folded around a diamond ring. There was no occasion, no reason, no engagement to her son. Just a winking smile audible on the other end of the phone when I called to thank her. I playfully considered this *our engagement*. But I still stumbled on her name.

Keeping with her unpredictable syncopation, Maxine had a catastrophic fall during our visit just a handful of hours after I concluded that her health was unusually vital. *Maxine is going to be with us for a while*, I remember thinking. As it turned out, she broke her hip, her shoulder and her wrist, leaving her with only a few days to live. At the time, I didn't know broken bones could produce with such immediacy the scene I encountered when I found her hospital room—Maxine lying comatose in a waist-high bed, flanked by her two sons and daughter-in-law, all looking stunned and mournful. I actually stopped short in the doorway, and questioned how to approach, what was appropriate to say, how much volume to give my voice. With this sudden shift to dying time, I had landed in territory that turned me into a stranger to the woman with whom I had shared the effortless camaraderie of two people on the same team.

When Maxine was transported to a hospice care center, everything changed, especially the casual way the staff received her and related to her—styling her hair, putting perfume behind her ears, dressing her in her own nightgown. She was no longer the elephant in the room when they got involved. The sheer normalcy of their way of interacting with her made Maxine one of us again, and became an unwitting tutorial for me on how to care when it appears that somber waiting is the only thing left to do. No longer having to stand dumbstruck at the bedside of a scary specimen, I suddenly found myself smoothing the skin where Maxine's brows were wrinkled with pain, stroking her

hands to remind her of our presence, massaging her scalp with the lightest touch, joking with her about moments she would have found amusing. Just like my great aunt had predicted when Mandy was dying, hands-on participation mattered.

Somewhere, in the flowering of this sad, yet tender time, when the only thing I had to offer to Maxine was myself—unpeeled and unadorned—I naturally began to call her “Mom.” The name left my tongue like a perfect swan dive. And without even a splash, I had at last assumed my place in her family. Only hours before, I had presumed that I knew how our story ended. Yet, when I came in close, there was actually more living to do. By the time Maxine left her body two days later, on another sun-spilling prelude to the summer solstice, we had both been transformed. And I realized that I hadn’t simply lost someone dear to me; I had also gained something beyond measure.

But as quickly as this stirring episode began, it ended. We did not swaddle Maxine in a special quilt and carry her body tenderly to the unstructured intimacy of her home where loved ones could have gathered with her in their own time, on their own terms. We did not accompany her all the way through. Instead, she was zipped into a body bag by strangers and rolled out of her room and carted to a funeral home where she was cremated several days later. But where did her body lie for all of those hours? How tenderly was it moved from resting place to resting place? What sacred acknowledgement was given to her earthly form in the moment before its burning? For all I know, Maxine’s body may have been disposed of with the ceremony of trash collection.

Years passed before I asked myself, “If I cared for Mandy’s body with such tenderness and respect, why didn’t I think to do the same for my mother-in-law?”

Because I was operating on a myth then. My assumptions were narrow and mostly incorrect—as were Maxine’s when she pre-planned her cremation so that her family would be spared that task. None of us knew that caring for the deceased actually doesn’t require a special degree or a professional license. None of us knew we could have brought her body home and then to the crematory ourselves when we were ready, if that was what we had wanted. We could have buried her body on her daughter’s beloved farm, or at a natural cemetery. In fact, one called “Glendale Nature Preserve” had opened in Florida three months before she died. Glendale was her birth name. She would’ve loved that. But even if I had recalled the baptismal moment that occurred as I was standing in Mandy’s grave, I would have thought, *disposing of a dog’s body is one thing; disposing of a human body is something else.*

Yet it is legal in nearly every state for a family to care for the bodies of their deceased loved ones—on their own terms, without a funeral director. And that means you are free not only to bury a loved one in the earth (with some restrictions), but also to host a viewing or an entire funeral at home, with no embalming, according to your own traditions, quirks, values—and means. And because a loved one’s death is so momentous, the reckoning that accompanies personally participating in the disposition of the body has the power to become a rite of passage, the kind of encounter where each gesture attains a significance that is deeper than the mundane act itself. So, in the midst of what might feel like utter destruction, the work of building a wooden casket oneself or the effort given to personally designing a ceremony can actually turn into a welcome act of creation. And these contrasting experiences of creation and destruction can begin to restore a person’s sense of equilibrium.

But we turned away from the possibilities when Maxine died. We followed a professionally scripted sequence of events to dispose of her body. A funeral home handled all of the details because we thought there was nothing more for us to do, nothing more for us to experience. We thought someone else knew better how to “take care of the situation.” We thought this was *the law*. We were wrong.

Professional assistance can be helpful and important and even preferred—especially when a death is violent or severely disfiguring or when it occurs in a distant place. But the rampant misinformation about what is legal and what is possible can be tragic when a death occurs suddenly. Without some level of direct involvement, survivors surrender the last opportunity they have to finalize a relationship in their own private way, at a very potent time. In so doing, they forfeit a means to begin to reshape their lives without the one who is deceased. Those are tall orders to leave up to the well-intentioned words of a sub-contracted religious official or to the limited calling hours of a funeral establishment. The largeness of this transition demands that we involve ourselves.

This morning, for the first time, I watched a bee die. Instead of the usual buzzing and pretending to threaten me, she was nuzzled against my sneaker on an otherwise busy day for pollinators. My husband bent down and offered her a grassy lifeline—which she grabbed like one being rescued at sea. He pulled her to an out-of-the-way place in the shade where she remained while we sipped coffee and turned our attention to the conversation vining between us. Eventually, my eyes dropped back to the ground and I noticed that the bee was on her back in a shallow puddle, doggy-paddling in the air. This

time my husband lifted her up onto the dry picnic table where she continued the air doggy-paddle. As her pulse apparently ebbed, I watched her with captivated stillness, recognizing the universality of this tiny moment.

This bee wasn't the "someone" for whom I've been waiting. There were no preparations or perfumes or parting words. But it felt natural to take the time to lower her into the forest of peonies below our deck so that her body would suffer no further affronts on its way to the Great Rejoining. In return, I felt connected for an instant to the same matrix that lends some of its breath to each of us—person, dog and bee—and then, one day, charms that very spirit back to itself. It really is that elegantly simple. Like the gesture of drawing a circle in the air, I keep finding that I just feel more whole when I follow it around to completion.

But most of us are still convinced that disposing of a human body must be a uniquely complicated affair—requiring toxic chemicals and sealer caskets, alien professionals and an almost ghoulish, antiseptic decorum. The funeral industry is content with this characterization—for obvious reasons. And most citizens unwittingly go along with the ruse—maybe because we've just gotten out of practice with the cycle of things. No one is going to tap you on the shoulder and ask you if you want to take your dead grandfather home in your car. But if you are moved to care for a loved one until there is truly nothing left to do, and if you believe that you know better than a well-intentioned stranger how you want that caring to be expressed, then the only true obstacle in your way is lack of determination.

Compared to Mandy's burial, Maxine's memorial service looked more like theatre. My sister-in-law played the organ, I shared the story of Maxine's last days, and my husband appealed to his mother's mischievous side and spontaneously played a dormant drum set that was on the altar. Though our sentiments were personal and particular, the setting design made me think of stage and audience, not a community of mourners joined by our shared connection to Maxine. I walked away from the occasion unmoved, missing something important. And I don't think I was alone. Since the others present were little more than spectators to her bon voyage, since they did not escort her, and themselves, to the next stage, something had to be missing for them as well.

I'm convinced that the *something* we were all unwittingly craving that day is *involvement*—a bitter remedy perhaps, but one that may be designed to help us through our grief if we're willing. Though this realization has taken nearly two decades to fully break ground, I've now devoted myself to learning the laws and the practical methods that enable regular citizens to reclaim a loved one's time of transition—not as a sanitation problem to be solved, but as a human experience to be recovered. So my bag is full, and I'm committed to the caring and the compassion and the completion that I first discovered nearly twenty years ago when the one crossing into the untamed jurisdiction of the life cycle was my dog. And so, I wait.

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