



Kirsten Andersen

Losing Our Leaves

by Kirsten Andersen

It is hard not to be struck by the brilliance of the changing leaves at this time of year. At the park near my house stands the most flamboyant of maples. Its trunk is knobby and rough, its boughs curiously intertwined, yet its branches bear the most luminous golden leaves. They are the big, papery leaves of childhood - the kind you pick up, twirl in your fingers and carry home with you.

Each time I visit the park, and the maple, it stands steadfast, slightly more bare than before, but no less beautiful. In a few weeks, all of its foliage will be gone until spring, and while I will miss its dazzling yellow leaves, I remember, too, the fondness I have for its long, unadorned limbs in the winter. It reminds me of my own time without "leaves," so to speak, my personal autumn in this landscape of cancer.

Losing my hair, being bald, and having hair again are details I haven't wanted to attribute too much importance to, yet, inwardly, these experiences fascinated me. As soon as it started to fall out, I cut off my ponytail and realized how much I liked having a bob (I wish I'd found this out a decade earlier). However, this didn't last long as my hair was still noticeably thinning, so my very nervous hairdresser cut the remainder off. A few days later, my husband gave me the final "Sinead" buzz cut with an electric razor.

My first look in the mirror was a tough one, not because of my hair being gone, but because I felt like my privacy regarding having what was considered to be a "dreaded" illness was now obvious and that this "evidence" would now enter a room before I did. However, once I was over the initial shock, I found being bald very empowering. There was no more long, blond hair to hide behind (not that I was aware that I was even hiding) and I felt bold and defiant. People know you mean business if you are a bald female, regardless of what they think the reason may be.

I have since come to regard a bald head, particularly on a woman, as utterly beautiful and natural. It enables us to see another's face, bright eyes and lines of expression with so much more clarity. When I see friends who are undergoing treatment that causes hair loss, I am overwhelmed by the inherent beauty of each of their faces and am often struck at the actual "superfluousness" of hair. When I didn't have any, I started to find it weird looking and unnecessary on people who did. Funny and wonderful how the mind adapts.

What was actually more difficult was when my hair started to grow back in an unfamiliar colour and texture. Having always had pin-straight, long blond hair, I found the tight, brown curls that grew back to be somewhat disconcerting. It was hard to identify with, and, as I had experienced so many changes, I really just wanted my old familiar hair back.

I was told that the chemo curls were temporary and I gave them a good ten months before taking them to slaughter. They simply would not straighten-out or weigh-down, and in the words of one of my dear friends, I "looked like Ronald McDonald," just without the big red shoes.

Yet, I have seen others whose curls are utterly adorable and don't remind one of a fast food icon.

So, off they went, nearly a year of hair growth falling to the stylist's floor, but, low-and-behold, after that cut, my hair started growing back lighter and more-or-less straight.

Now, it's long enough to be slightly irritating when I walk in the wind to the park and stare up at the showy maple in all her autumn glory. I gaze at her and at the unfettered beauty and confidence that I see, love and appreciate in the faces of my brave, currently-bald friends and know that while we sometimes lose our leaves, we never lose our splendour.

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Next 8 session writing series for past retreat participant starts **Thursday, January 15th**. Call or e-mail to register.



Daphne Lobb
Retreat Physician

I recently attended a workshop for physicians with Dr. Rachel Remen called "Finding Meaning in Medicine". My friend's husband that I was staying with said, "You've been in medicine for 20 years and you haven't found meaning yet?" "Well," I said, "in moments I certainly do but overall it is hard to keep finding it these days within the system". It is a sad statement but probably true for many of my colleagues.

Western medical training still focuses on the intellect and mastering the

subject matter. Although there is more awareness nowadays of the "art" of medicine, I feel that there is still not enough support and teaching in the ways of the heart. Rachel, who has been a mentor of mine, and many others for years, says that the heart is the strongest place from which to live a life. She describes the heart as an organ of vision that sees below the routine or the ordinary and allows us to see connections, and with that comes the realization that our life and our work matters. This is what we need to hear more of as physicians and as human beings. If we cut off from our heart we become susceptible to depression, loneliness and apathy. The heart allows us to find meaning in our lives.

Since getting involved with Callanish 14 years ago I have found that working from my heart is the only way to be. My Callanish colleagues and participants have taught me that the heart is indeed the wisest place from which to live. My work at Callanish has encouraged and allowed me to be far more open to the 'mystery' rather than the 'mastery' of medicine and life.

During the last Day Retreat here at Callanish many of the participants were talking about their experiences within the medical system and how poorly they had been treated as patients in the past. They were talking about insensitivity and poor communication. Later, we were doing a writing exercise and for me the question "is kindness the antidote to insensitivity?" popped into my head. I wrote down some thoughts....

I wondered if insensitivity is created when we are focused on ourselves rather than on the other person; when we are protective of our emotions; when the fear of reaction is predominant; and when we stay separate and are thus less present. On the other hand, what creates kindness? Perhaps kindness is expressed when we focus on the other person rather than on ourselves; when we are open and allow ourselves to be vulnerable; when we see ourselves as not separate and are thus more present in our interactions; and when we stay open to the mystery of life, knowing that we don't always have all the answers.

At the end of the retreat day I wrote this vow and dedicated it to my work and my patients.

*May I stay open and present
May I focus on the other
May I stay in my heart and be able to be vulnerable
May I always be open to the mystery
May I remember that I am not separate
May I have faith in all possibility
And may I grow in kindness.*



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*We must have been serious!
Visiting those Callanish stones was not for the faint-of-heart.
A pilgrimage the dictionary says is "a long journey to a sacred place".
21 travel hours. Long indeed.*

*"We better get up around 5 a.m. I said if we want to have the stones to ourselves".
Our stones, they feel like.
Although we know they belong to no one.
Answering only to the wind, and the rain
the sun, and the moon, the sky and the earth.
For 5000 years.*

*What was I thinking?
Any normal, sane person would be tucked up in bed
at that wee hour of the morning.*

*Alone on the road, driving across barren landscape where sky meets the treeless earth.
Home to music of the wee folk who have inhabited the pagan hearts since the beginning of time.*

*Miles of rugged, wild land, where the summer sun sets at 11 and rises at 3.
Land that knows wet, where the bog cotton thrives and the sheep are the tourist attraction.
Heather making peat for the winter fires.*

*"But this is supposed to be summer", they moaned!
3 layers of wool for Gilly
Toques and wellies and raingear for all.*

*As we round the last bend of the single-track road
all those images of Callanish that have been imprinted in our minds and hearts, on the altar, in the cookbook, the website.*

*Those photographs cannot prepare us for this moment.
Forty-six standing stones grace the hilltop,
take our breath away.*

*Stark, naked, beauty.
Steadfast presence of the stone guardians
set between heaven and earth.
Welcoming pilgrims home once more.*

*This time the pilgrims come to say thank you,
with their offering of multi-coloured petals,
gathered that Summer solstice evening from the mandala
made by careful hands,
imbued with hopes and dreams,
all the way from Canada.
Pilgrims who have come to find the part inside
untouched by sorrows, and joys,
beyond life and death.
Drawn to know the eternal
from which everything rises and passes away.*

*Thank you for bearing witness to the comings and goings of all those human lives for 5000 years.
You have stood together unaffected by the elemental forces.
Impersonal in your blessing of everything and everyone.
Knowing too though that each human life matters,
that my kindness matters.*

*Thank you for the lineage across miles, across time, from your circle to ours.
We too bear witness to one another's lives.
We too devote ourselves to steadiness, trusting that our relationships with one another helps us to live and to die, with open hearts.
Our care for one another secures our place between heaven and earth, guardians for one another.*

*Petals offered to the wind
Taken up from our open hands
Across 46 stones
We say thank you,
for the backing,
for the love,
for all time.*

Janie Brown

