

*Elizabeth Corey Reflects on the Life and Death of her Colleague, Susan E. Colón*

Anyone who tries to say something about death must approach the subject with humility; for nearly everything of consequence has already been written, and multiple times—or, even more likely and perhaps more effectively, played, painted or conveyed in poetry. So I propose to write about life instead.

Susan was a colleague of mine, not exactly a friend, though we were quite friendly. Our work, in Baylor's Honors College, was to teach students and especially, in Susan's case, to help them become better writers. She was reserved and elegant, with a willowy figure all women couldn't help but envy. Susan was a beloved teacher, but she never cultivated a following, eschewing celebrity and recognition. She never seemed to worry about whether people noticed what she was doing; she simply did it.

The last substantive conversation I had with Susan was in November of 2011. We had just participated in Baylor's "Invitation to Excellence" weekend, where Dean Tom Hibbs had made a presentation and then we had broken into small groups for discussion. The topic that day was death, and Dean Hibbs had made the point that in the modern world we have little preparation for dealing with death. Either we sensationalize it, as in action movies, or we avoid it—fleeing from it, pretending it won't happen to us or to our loved ones.

But when death occurs, despite all our best intentions, we don't know what to do. We have lost the rituals that former ages had for accepting the natural transitions of life. Most importantly of all, as a society we have lost the faith that made death something comprehensible and natural and even, at times, to be welcomed. We keep the empty phrases, like "she's gone to a better place," without having a sense of what that "place" might be.

Susan and I ran into each other in the office a few days after Dean Hibbs's presentation, and reflected on the prospective students we had met and talked with. I remember commenting that one of the students in my group had insisted death was not a problem for *him*, because he had faith. I told Susan about this, and she said that this line of conversation had run through her group as well. Many of the students assumed that their Christian faith solved the problem of death for them in a kind of easy way, and that they would simply "transition" to Heaven.

Both Susan and I paused at this, and I remember her commenting, "You know, it just isn't that easy. They're so young, and they really don't know what they're saying yet." I do not know if she had yet been diagnosed with cancer on that day in November when we spoke, but it was a moment I won't forget. We both had the sense that the problem of death was not so easily solved. For one thing, none of those students seemed to have any notion that death was not just about them, but about the others they would leave behind in dying.

In the weeks that followed, we all became aware that Susan was ill. She announced in an email that she would be undergoing chemotherapy treatments, but that this form of cancer had a reasonable chance of cure. And so things went, for several months. Busy with our own lives, we all missed her but expected

that she would be back soon. After all, she was young and strong, a devoted wife and mother, with a great will to live. Someone like Susan just wouldn't *die*, of all things.

But by April and May it had become too quiet. Around the office we had respected the family's privacy, knowing that their church was taking good care of them; and yet none of us knew how Susan was doing. We all had a creeping sense that things were not going well. Eventually some of us contacted her husband, Carlos, and managed to visit her at a hospital in Dallas. When we saw her she was very ill, but nevertheless able to carry on a conversation with us and to welcome with great enthusiasm a gift from one of her colleagues—the complete first season of *Downton Abbey*.

During the last weeks of her life I found myself established in her office in the Honors College, advising nervous new freshmen who were coming to Baylor for the first time. It's hard to describe the emotions I felt the first day I opened her office door, simultaneously aware of her grave condition and of my own hope that she would somehow return. I saw the family photos on her bulletin board and desk, one in a picture frame with a quotation from Jeremiah: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord."

On her bookshelves were books by Dickens, George Eliot, Disraeli. On her desk was a stack of business cards, a list of journals where (I imagine) she hoped to publish a future essay, folders with topics to be written about—parable, Victorian religion, and so on. A water bottle sat next to the phone, whose message light was blinking, and next to the phone a tape dispenser that had begun to gather dust. The calendar was open to November 2011.

Most poignant of all was a cutout heart tacked on her bulletin board, the kind of item all parents treasure, with "I Love You Mommy," written in sprawling blue crayon. It was almost too much to bear—the absolute ordinariness of the scene, which would remind any of us of our own desks and unfinished projects—combined with a fear that she might not be back to finish things up, to clean up the dust on the tape dispenser and wash out the water bottle for another use. I wondered: what would people think of my office if I were suddenly to leave it, never to return? What would I have left unfinished?

Throughout my weeks of advising in her office I became somewhat more accustomed to the surroundings, though never less aware of the strange situation of helping students start exciting new lives at college even as their parents were, in a sense, mourning the loss of their children to adulthood, and as I was more and more coming to realize that we all were going to mourn the loss of Susan.

Her decline happened quickly, with a flurry of emails announcing that she was returning to Waco, that there was no hope of recovery—and then another email that retracted that statement, then some inquiries and attempts at clarification. At last, late on a Friday night, came an urgent message announcing that her daughter Elise would be baptized the next day, Saturday, at noon.

Susan and her family have been longtime members of a Baptist church in Waco where full immersion baptisms are the norm. I arrived with my five-year-old son just after the service had begun. It took place outside in the grass around the large baptismal pool, a rectangular concrete structure that resembled nothing so much as a Roman sarcophagus. The heat that day was absolutely blistering, as it often is in Waco in the summer; and the sun shone with the kind of intensity that will burn a fair-skinned person in

less than ten minutes. The crowd was made up of church members and Susan's colleagues from Baylor, and there was not a dry eye among us, as everyone understood all too well what was taking place. Susan was able, I later learned, to watch from her hospital bed via live streaming.

I wonder now if any of us had ever before experienced anything like what took place there that day. As churchgoing people, we had all seen many baptisms; and we all understood intellectually that baptism symbolizes both death and life. But here, on this day, the death and life were all bound up together, and we realized that as Elise was entering a new Christian life, Susan, her mother, was leaving hers. As the pastor observed, preparing to immerse Elise in the water, *this* is what the Christian faith is all about: dying, and life again, and the faith that believes that it is all true. It's almost impossible to convey the intensity of the scene: the vivid blue sky, the daughter's baptism as her mother lay dying, the towel that was placed around Elise as she emerged from the water, the combination of dread, sadness, hope and even joy that we all felt as witnesses to the event.

Susan passed away peacefully the next morning.