

WHY DO I WRITE: "Sara said . . ."

The heat was still, sitting in placed – personified - dominating the landscape, ridding it of traces of some colors, plants, owning it, making it her palette. I too complied, sitting, looking for the number, daring not to do the simple task, open the door and take a step outward, towards the door. The engine was compliant, quietly idling in place.

Not sure I was at the right location was part of my stillness; searching the phone for the number, electing to remain in place instead of going to the door, until a hand appeared, reaching outward, waiving. I readily assumed the wave was welcoming - inward not outward. It did disrupt my inaction; tossing the phone onto the passenger seat, silencing the engine and moving into Mother Nature's awaiting arms.

The day started with my driving on a moment's notice. Receiving the call, telling me the time was near; moving across the fermented landscape; listening to the unique regional noises emanating from the strangest places, rocks, crickets, heat. What we gladly do for our friends defined the drive.

I knew the greeter. I didn't know her. Mine's eye a mother-in-law's perspective, much like osmosis, transferring from Sara to me, becoming part of my history, unbeknownst to my greeter. Mostly good, sprinkled with Sara's generational dissatisfactions; disagreements played out against the backdrop of her husband and child, and Sara's role.

Familiar familia strife told with infrequent questions, and more frequently interjections of an apt - um-hmm. The same as my mother's mother did to me – listening, responding, in a utilitarian manner, permitting venting – to make sense of the world.

Psychologist/psychiatrist/therapist too had grandmothers who did likewise – so it seems didn’t they?

Fifty mile northwest of San Antonio this time, knowing this may our last visit; visiting during the daytime, instead of a night. Remaining consistent, wondering whether I was at the right location then. That time listening for signs of hope, hearing fear instead; she -Sara - was not ready to die.

I made my way out of the rehabilitation facility when she grew tired. Piercing through the darkness and fog, wondering whether Sara’s lost bravado could be found somewhere outside the reach of the headlights. I couldn’t drive fast enough. The headlights didn’t reach far enough to provide an answer. My imagination did leap far and high enough.

That time traveling from Dallas to the San Antonio area (Boerne) before proceeding back to Galveston. This drive seemed easier in my mind, directly from Galveston. This time the call came on short notice. “The time is near, I want to see you.” I asked for an address, cancelled my day and began driving.

“Am I at the right place … is Sara here?” …

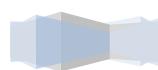
“You are Anthony, right?”

“Right, I am.”

“Sara told me about you. I’m Sara’s daughter-in-law.”

“Nice meeting.”

I didn’t say what Sara told me. She wouldn’t want me to express her parental venting. I am sure of this … or is this one a “that”. Sometimes the distinction between telling and not telling is a difficult one. Most times we can never distinguish between the two, telling when we shouldn’t. Forever, reprimanded when we remain silent, not interjecting and telling. Never,



never, never figuring out which - this time - I was sure; time and circumstances didn't permit me to test my sureness.

“Sara is the back bedroom. Let me show you.”

She looked nothing like Sara’s description, or was the description I engrained in my mind a picture of the granddaughter – her child. Yes, yes, she an aged version of the picture. I think. I think. I think.

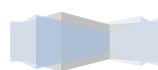
Walking a short distance to reach the bedroom, sorting a thousand thoughts, wondering whether the illness had attacked Sara the same way it had attached to her vocal cords, changing the cadence, a strong coarseness, to a meager semblance of the voice I immediately recognized when she called from the Institute of Texan Cultures, her homes in San Antonio and Austwell, Texas, the Hopi Reservation (northeastern Arizona), ... San Francisco, ... Italy. Living a full life was her promise. No more. A painful whisper substituted instead, saying what she said, wasting few words, telling me to hurry and come.

“I told my son I didn’t want a funeral. Will you come?”

“I will”

I told her I would be there – now here – sometimes during the week. I didn’t tell her I was going to get in the car immediately and start the trek her way. The same immediate response when she asked I substitute for her on the Hopi Reservation during the same summer. I immediately agreed, even though I wanted her to get well and make the trip herself. Even though I expected the Hopis wanted Sara not a selected, imperfect substitute. More importantly, I agreed to go; permitting her to check off one more item she was attempting to control. She wasn’t able to control every aspect of her life. We aren’t able to control every aspect of our lives.

Twenty feet seemed like twenty miles to say my last goodbyes.



Seeing muck and mire, stepping forward anyway; looking backward, forward – to the other sides – spotting doubtful eyes – they were not Sara’s eyes. She never considered it muck and mire. She prayed her to respect to adversity – “it is what it is” - and stepped forward. Maybe this was something she learned from parents, travels, the Hopis – perhaps it was just her nature. I never knew.

Meeting her initially as a Project Director with the [Institute of Texan Cultures](#), subjecting myself to multiple interviews and taping; traveling to San Antonio when the exhibition opened, learning sometimes I had to travel on a moment’s notice.

She was one whom I forever welcomed in my home when she was in anywhere near because I never saw those eyes. Sara conveyed a sense of certitude, telling me what I could do, without doubt, bravado, a matter of fact assessment of what she saw. This was the Sara I learned to love, a mean woman-child life qualities experiencing and seeing the world different than most, and then sharing what she saw, heard and understand in her writings, teachings, and out-reach.

Thanking my greeter, turning the corner and seeing what illness had wrought. Erasing the physical image - [Etch-A-Sketched](#) away – I remembered, erasing also any signs of physical strength. She moved from a prone position to a sitting one in more than a nanosecond, reaching outward, backward, forward; turning, grabbing, holding, clinging and crying tears of joy, sadness, getting near to the completion of the circle of life.

“I decided to come today.”

“Oh my, oh my... thank you.”

We didn’t talk about money, children, family, or politics. We didn’t revisit her being afraid – it was what it was. She didn’t tell me she was tired and wanted to go, as my mother told me, like Judge Hugh Gibson did. She didn’t because she was ready to die. No, no, no, Sara

wanted another hour, day - week; probably the struggle was simpler, struggling to make it to a point certain. She held me and I held her back, listening to the faintness of each breath. My listening was disturbed by a whisper, a whisper I shared with her before.

We had traveled to Austwell – she from San Antonio; me from Galveston - to visit Reverend Mack Williams. He was dying and the visit would be my only opportunity to interview him. I had been provided videotape and written materials on Reverend. I did additional research outside that which provided by the Institute.

Sara had recruited me to write a chapter in a book she was editing, Black Cowboys of Texas. I told her I knew little about cowboys and didn't think I brought anything to the table; as one imbued with history or as related to the written word. She ignored my protestation, telling me to step anyway. She wasn't taking no for an answer. During my interview with Mack Williams, she sat in the corner and never said a word; watching our exchange, my frustrations, veering far and wide to extract information. Mack Williams had moved on to Sara; time's audible count.

“I asked you to come in order to extract another promise.”

“What...?”

The Hopi Project was cancelled when Sara informed them of her illness/impending death. They didn't want New Coke. I understood. I didn't either. Coca Cola had no right to change it formula. Doing so meant they were talking away parts of my childhood and dreams, making unbearable summers bearable, providing a drink of choice when I was old enough to drink and something I could readily order in bars without being laughed at for not drinking (instead of milk), coupled with a practiced, additional response, “I am the designated driver.” When I knew, knew, knew the real answer was I don't drink and don't expect to start anytime soon. Part

of me was glad the Hopi Project was cancelled. Honestly, I was scared to death. Fearful I could not do justice to the project – not the same as Sara – knowing those fears would burden me for the two month period prior to traveling and for the two, three, four day trek to the reservation.

We had discussed in details other projects she had in the works and the writers/historians/friends she had bequeathed her love. She had given her car to my greeter, provided for her grandchild and son, made amends for years of estrangement from some family members and friends. She wasn't ready. She was ready.

What?, existed in a void, between two bodies, lodged between both sternums, as she whispered the unexpected, fashioned as one of Sara's expectations.

When I visited with her in Boerne months before she saw in my eyes a tiredness unrelated to the five hours of driving which preceded the visit.

“Don’t you think it’s time?”

She said little else. I don’t think I ever answered. She allowed me to sit in silence, fall asleep, awake, visit the restroom, before she proceeded to tell me about the diagnosis and prognosis. She understood what they doctors were telling her. It was then I heard for the first time of her being scared, something I didn’t expect. “I don’t want to die.”

As I write I am nearing the anniversary of my mother’s, Georgia, death. The daughter of Chester Anna wasn’t afraid of death. She pulled me close to her too, with both hand enveloping my face, she whispered; telling me she was tired.

“Can I think about it Mamma?”

No more testing. No more doctors. I’m tired and ready to leave this world. Actually, there was nothing for me to think about. There was no reason for her to ask my permission. I



needed time and space, a weekend, before returning and saying she had my permission and I was ready. She smiled. I smiled. We both knew the end was near.

Sara held on tightly. She knew my personality. She didn't want me to flee. She heard the clock clearly. She knew for whom the bell tolled.

“Quit, write and love.”

“I will.”

“Give me a date now.”

“Now...?”

My mother's mother drilled into me – a gift – to respect your elders. I considered Sara an elder and her command was met by a Chester Anna Wright childhood compliant response, giving a date in which I would resign from the bar, muck and mire be damned.

Travelling to the Island after a Hurricane, finding me in the middle of [Hades](#), removing what remained after eight feet of flood waters invaded the warehouse. She pulled up – much like I did on this/that day – without notice, saying she was going to find me no matter what. Asking what she could do to help – physically – “Nothing, I'm good. As you can see, it will take months to clear out the storm debris.”

I honestly believe she would have helped, stayed for two, three days ... a week if necessary. It wasn't necessary. Before she left me she handed me an envelope. “You are going to need money to get through this – if you need more call me?” These are some the reasons why I answered immediately, agreeing to give her a date. These are some of the reasons [Why I Write.](#)

For at least four years we met half-way between our locations to celebrate Mother's Day together. At five o'clock in the morning we visited at a diner in small-town Texas, for an hour to

talk about our mothers. She knew I was missing mine and needed someone to talk to and helped me work through my anger. I had to first admit I was angry. I then had to admit certain parts of my own personality, allowing me to forgive myself and others. I met her mom. I never met her mom – at least not physically. I don’t remember her name. She died years before. The tears on Sara’s cheeks were as fresh as the ones flowed those Mother’s Days we took time to visit, before going to pay homage to those mothers with us.

“Love...?”

“You can interpret anyway you want. To me it means have as much sex as possible, because when you get my age, something is wrong with one or the other preventing the physical act from occurring. Interpret anyway you want. Just promise me you will.”

My nod was met with the insistent Sara – “Promise me.”

‘I promise...’

I answered quickly because I felt myself crossing a line; any other response would mean I would not be able to answer. Knowing well in my heart the daughter-in-law may have difficulty understanding two friends bawling in concerted unison. She had agreed to be the caretaker for only one.

I felt a range of emotions holding on – fear, anger, humility, a love of a long-held/too short friendship. I didn’t feel regret.

“It has been ten years, I have been patient. Publish the book. You have to write.”

We separated –Sara said she was tired, pushed me away and lowered her body, curling in the fetal position. I let myself out – never said goodbye to the greeter - and moved to the car, welcomed by Mother Nature’s warmth, vitality, life to make the trip back to the Island, knowing we would never meet me half-away again. I never wiped my face or neck. I moved out of the

drive and made my way to the main road before pulling over to sit quietly, stare outward and smile at my friend, giving of herself, all the way to the end.

Four days later (August 18, 2013) I received an email from Sara's email account/address, telling me [Sara R. Massey](#)'s - a daughter of Aberdeen, South Dakota - death on Saturday, August 17, 2013, from metastatic breast cancer. The date of death was [Sara's seventy-fifth birthday](#).

I knew the writer of the email. I didn't know the writer. Sara told me of a period of estrangement with her. I assume the estrangement was no more. The gift of life terminal point oftentimes heals. So it does, so it does.

