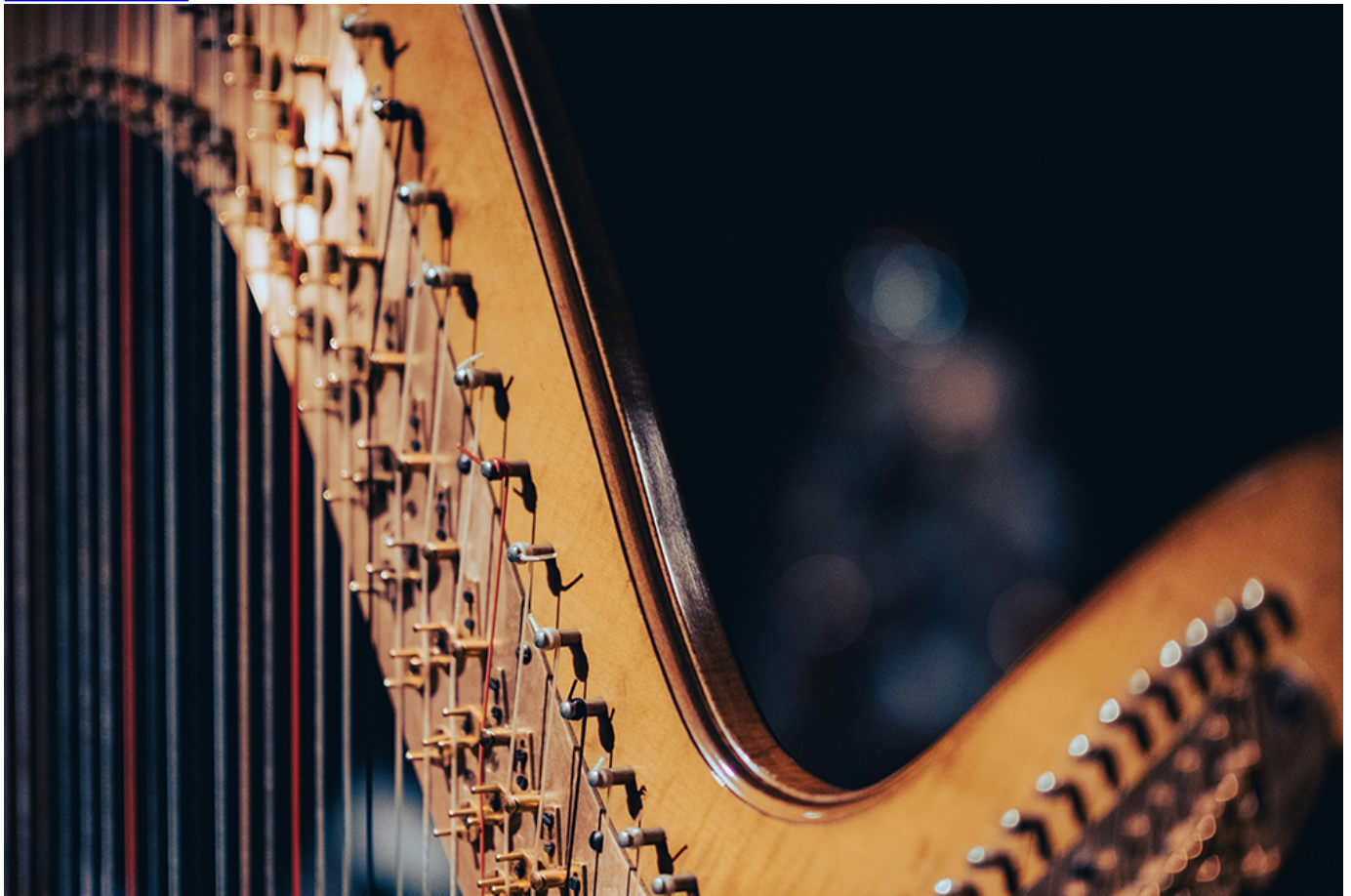


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The ringing phone pierced the night. My brother Brad's words pierced my heart. Mom had fallen, unconscious. Died twice on the operating table. Late-stage pancreatic cancer discovered. She was put on a ventilator and might not wake up. I flew from Tucson, Arizona, to Ft. Meyers, Florida, the next morning.

Brad and I sat on opposite sides of her hospital bed, singing softly in harmony like we did as kids while washing the dishes after dinner, "You Are My Sunshine" and "You and me, we're gonna be partners."

Two weeks later, Mom was taken off the ventilator and whispered, "I heard you singing." Then, in typical Mom-fashion, insisted that we bring oranges from the orange tree for the "nurses who are so kind!"

We finally got her home, where she lived two more weeks with hospice care. She said, "These are the best days!" Asked why, she replied, "Because my family is here with me." She thanked each hospice nurse or caregiver who came to the house. She comforted the chaplain, saying, "It's OK, honey. I've had a wonderful life."

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Daily we observed her pleasure in a simple foot rub, a cup of cappuccino, her blooming Bird of Paradise, and we recognized a God of resilient joy. We heard her point out to me in her weakening voice that my slip was showing and tell my brother not to put under her foot a cushion that would later need dry cleaning, and we smiled over a God of simple caring.

We bathed Mom's frail body, anointing her with fragrant lotion, saw her constant smile and believed in a God of humility.

We watched hospice workers come and go, gracefully preparing us for Mom's death, and we experienced God's compassion.

We held Mom dying in our arms, felt her relax into the arms of a loving God and saw firsthand faithful surrender.

We had seen in her eyes the love she had for us from before we were born and knew it was a love that would last forever, and we stood face to face with a God of resurrected glory.

Back in Tucson, grief descended. Relentless. Numbing. Breath-stealing. I looked for the face of my mother everywhere, in the faces of elderly women I passed in the grocery store, in my dreams. I cried at unpredictable times. One late afternoon, walking the Rillito River path (it's a dry river except in monsoon season) I took a moment to rest on a low rock wall. The tears came. Again. There seemed to be no bottom to my grief.

Gradually, I became aware of a flock of birds that came to circle above me, then disappear, then return. Over and over again. Mom had always delighted in the beautiful birds that inhabited her trailer park on Sanibel Island. I don't know why, but I began counting the reappearances of the birds that circled above me. When I reached 17, I kid you not, I burst out laughing, and actually said aloud, "OK! I get it!" The birds flew off in glorious formation and did not return.

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Slowly then, the memories of the weeks of Mom's dying began to return. The gratitude. The lessons learned. The deep awareness of unselfish love I had observed and experienced, the graces shared. I saw my next move, and knew that God and Mom were already directing it.

I was a harpist, playing for church services, weddings, parties. Now I enrolled as a student in the [Music for Healing and Transition Program](#) to become a Certified Music Practitioner, to bring prescriptive, healing music to patients in hospice care. Two years later, I began my internship with Casa de la Luz in-patient hospice unit in Tucson. As an employee, I played sometimes five days a week for over 15 years. It felt like church; each patient, each family member a beloved parishioner. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of stories I wish I could tell:

- My very first internship patient, who died as I was playing for him, and with whom I sat for 20 more minutes, thanking him for letting me play.
- The fellow who bellowed, "I'm not ready for the harp music yet!" then swung an imaginary beer mug in the air as I played saying "Drink! Drink!" and proceeded to sleep peacefully for the first time in weeks.

- The blind concert pianist who directed my playing with her alternating movements and stillness. She danced, I followed.
- The young Hispanic woman who invited me to chant the rosary for her and her family. I created a simple repetitive chant, and soon the woman was resting in the gentle cradling sound of the voices of those who loved her.
- The woman who said, "I heard you chanting in Room 7. Could you chant for my husband?" I asked about her husband's spiritual path. "We are Baha'i," she said as she handed me a Baha'i prayer book.
- The wife who asked, "Can you play traditional Jewish music for my husband? Tonight will be the first time in his life he is missing his holy days."
- The supposedly unresponsive man who I'd been asked to sit with and play for because he was dying alone with no friends or family. I played "You'll Never Walk Alone." In the silence that followed, he whispered, "Do it again." I did.

Mom, you and God have removed the sting of death from before my eyes and in the depth of my heart. You have enabled me to love in the same way you have loved me. Unconditionally. You have helped me to see your face in the faces of others, my eyes wide open to your sacred presence there. You fill me with joy. *Deo gratias!*