FOR THE MOMENT

CAROLYN MOORE NEWBERGER

JANUARY, 2006

On May 29, 2005 I awakened in the middle of the night. As I lay quietly in bed, I felt my heart beating strangely: Thump-a-thump; Thump-a-thump, Thump-a-thump, Thump-a-thump. I lay very quietly, hoping it would go away. It continued: Thump-a-thump, Thump-a-thump. Scared, I shook Eli's arm. "Eli, wake up. Something funny is going on with my heart." Eli rolled over and felt my pulse.
"You have extra heart beats. How long has this been going on?"
"I woke up with it about ten minutes ago."
"Has this happened to you before?"
"No."
"Do you have any pain?"
"No."
"Are you having any trouble breathing?"
"No."
"Any tightness in your chest?"
"No."

Eli continued to feel my pulse, and I continued to feel my heart pushing out its extra beat. Thump-a-thump. Thump-a-thump. After a while we both drifted back to sleep.

We were awakened to the phone ringing at 6 am. It was my mother's nursing home. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but your mother passed away during the night" the nursing home attendant told me. "She died peacefully in her sleep." I listened to my heart. Thump-thump. Thump-thump. No more extra beats. Not then. Not now. Never since.
Eli and I packed hurriedly and rushed back to Boston and the many tasks that awaited us.

In some African traditions, when an elder dies, his or her spirit is transferred to a descendent, who is addressed as that ancestor was addressed and who carries on that ancestor's role in the family. The ancestors are thus always with them in both a living and a remembered way. When a bit of beer or wine spills on the ground, an African tradition is to say," That's for the ancestors." During every special event, say a naming ceremony or a wedding, a small libation is poured on the ground, "For the ancestors." After two years in West Africa with the Peace Corps and an extended African family, these traditions have become embedded in our own family. We remember the ancestors with every spill (which is frequent with two young grandchildren), and on every occasion.

One member of our extended family, whom I will call Zachary, tells a story about his grandfather's death, when he was about twelve. Following a conference of the family elders, they informed Zachary that he had inherited his Grandfather's spirit. He recounts how he fled into the forest, not ready to face the responsibility this placed upon him and what he knew was the end of his childhood. But he also knew that there was no turning from this responsibility. Once Zachary returned from the forest to his village, he shouldered the welfare of a vast network of siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts who descend from his grandfather. Even as a child of twelve, Zachary was addressed with the honorific of his grandfather. With geographic distance in this modern age, email and telephone lines buzz with family decisions, problems, and disputes that Zachary, as the inheritor of his grandfather's spirit, is expected to guide and resolve.

My introduction to the power of spirit in an African culture occurred during a visit to an African village many years ago. As I was preparing to sleep in the simple bed my host's mother had vacated for me, my host instructed me to lock my window and door tightly, and not to go out until day. I knew that a panther was threatening the village, because men armed with spears and machetes surrounded us when we walked between nearby houses to visit relatives. While a little boy went searching for a pot for me to pee in, I asked my host about the panther.
"He's being hunted at night," he replied, "And when he's killed, he will be burned. Every hair on his body has to be burned up."
"But why," I asked? "This is no ordinary panther," my friend responded. "It's the spirit of an enemy, and if even one hair is left, the spirit can escape into another body and come back to hurt us."

The idea of spirits occupying bodies, human or otherwise, is not limited to Africa. Transmigration of souls is found in many cultures. One of my favorite authors in college was Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote brilliant stories about life in the shtetls in Eastern Europe. Several of his short stories concerned spirits of the dead taking possession of unsuspecting souls, for better or, making a better story, for worse. His spirits were "dybbuks," disembodied souls that enter unsuspecting individuals to seek revenge they were unable to complete in life, or to escape angelic punishment, or even to help a person in need. There are other forms of spirits in the Jewish tradition as well. The Gilgul, which means rolling in Hebrew, is a spirit that enters the baby at birth, and at that person's death "rolls" from that life into the next infant until the spirit has entered enough lives to learn the lessons it needs to unite with God. The third form of spirit is the "Ibbur," which is when a righteous soul enters a living person's body to complete a good deed or to fulfil a promise. A living reminder of the spirit world occurs every Passover during the moment of the Seder when we open the door so that the prophet Elijah can enter and drink from the cup of wine that has been poured for him.

My knowledge of spirit in Christianity is more limited, but it certainly seems to exist in the communion service when the wafer and the wine turn into the body and blood of Christ, not to mention the holy ghost and Catholic exorcism of demonic possession.

I want to remind you that I am a scientifically trained rational secularist type, so musings about the spirit world have not in the past preoccupied me. My religious observances are largely restricted to rituals involving food. But what am I to do with those extra heartbeats on the night of my mother's death? Had my mother entered my heart to beat out a goodby and then to continue her journey, whatever that might be? Or were those extra beats her spirit entering my body, becoming part of me, urging or requiring me to carry on her unfinished tasks? But what might those tasks be?

After my mother was memorialized and children and grandchildren returned to their homes, I was seized with a need to reach out to my mother's grandchildren. Perhaps the task was to continue to give them the advice my mother, a deeply involved grandmother, was so liberal in dispensing. She spoke to her five adult grandchildren at least weekly, and in one case, almost daily. She was a source of support, rationality, judgment, small amounts of money behind their parents' backs, and love to young people from complex families with often conflicted relationships. If those heartbeats were my mother's spirit beaming in, then I needed to carry that spirit forward and continue my mother's work.

My nieces and nephew were delighted when I called. We chatted about one granddaughter's new job as a veterinarian, her grandson's step-daughter and his wife's new pregnancy, another granddaughter's move to Boston, and her sister's first year as a fifth grade teacher in Honolulu. What I didn't hear were their confidences and problems, appeals for advice on finding a suitable man or preparing for a new baby. I remained Aunt Carolyn and not Grandma. Phone calls and emails drifted further and further apart, and are now back to about what they were before, which isn't much. My mother's death left a void in her grandchildren's lives, but young adults all, they are moving on.

The heartbeats, I have concluded, were for me alone. Just as my African relative is and is not his grandfather, I am and am not my mother. Even without the heartbeats, she would have always been within me, the critical eye determining whether my haircut is too short, the voice of conscience that won't let me tell a lie unless it's about my weight or age, and the seeker of imperfections in myself and others. With the heartbeats my mother is with me in a different way: I'm left with the mystery of how we are connected and with the certainty that we are. Then. Now. Forever.