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Photo: K.J. Holmes

Walking Into Heartbreak: Remembering Nancy Stark Smith

by K.J. Holmes

Why is it when someone I love dies, I spend the next many hours, days, having to squelch the desire to call them, to call them to tell them they had died, to call them to say do you know this? To call them to feel it together. To call them to say, how is it possible you have died. I just want to hear your voice. I want to look into your eyes. I want to dance with you, I want to hear you talk about love and life and dance and flight… Ah, Nancy. . .

I hear her voice. I see her eyes. I see her body in motion, in flight, in writing, in looking, in seeing me, in hearing me, in believing in me, in believing in this dance we do because of her, really… because of her we dance the way we dance. Even if you don't know it, know it.

Bereft. It was a word that floated by on my screen saver on my laptop yesterday morning, May 2nd, 2020. This was before I heard that Nancy Stark Smith had left her earthly body and totally escaped gravity the night before, Friday, May 1, 2020, at 7 p.m.

At that time I was leaning out my back window in Brooklyn, clapping for all the front liners, health practitioners, essential workers, EMT's, cops, firemen, janitors, garbage men, cashiers . . . all those that have kept working while we isolate, while we don't dance or touch each other intimately or in contact improvisation or even with our bodies in the same room. I felt a lot stirring in me as I clapped and hooted and called out to the void. Calling unknowingly to Nancy leaving.

Nancy danced in her body and in her words. That is what I have to do now. Here. And now. She loved words and how they could be so exact, and the struggle to shape them was there at times. She taught me about this, and how it translates into how we play with resistance of forces, how to feel more alive with it all, the dance of it all. Her gems of words were as eloquent as the way she lofted onto someone's shoulders or carried the weight of so much on hers. With seeming effortlessness and always grace.

Yesterday morning I prepared and taught my Saturday Movement Research improvisation class on Zoom. I still did not know Nancy had passed having not looked at any social media in the morning. I taught about the non-static nature of our structures, through the lens of the living skeleton, as I have learned from Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, exploring the three layers of our bones, our acoustic bodies. The skin, the resilience, that which fills the hollow spaces of our bones. Marrow, where we manufacture blood, inside our bones, where we hold our chi, our vitality, our life force. It is said our history is held in our bones and how marrow is our spirit that flies when we die, moves us through our lives and helps shape our structures as we live.

I began the class reading an excerpt from Rebecca Solnit's book *Wander Lust: A History of Walking*. It begins "Where does it start?" . . .this mechanic of walking. . ."the most obvious and obscure thing in the world, this walking that wanders so readily into religion, philosophy, landscape, urban policy, anatomy, allegory and heartbreak. . ." Heartbreak. That always catches me when I read this excerpt. All the ways we can walk and no matter what, we walk into heartbreak, like a threshold, like the most liminal of spaces that we think we can avoid and cannot. I think it might have been Nancy who told me years ago when I was grieving a relationship that ended that "The heart is inside the heart that is broken." Yesterday, speaking those words Heartbreak felt resonant, felt current. I did not yet know how so.

Marrow is said to be the energetic connection between bones. Linda Hartley writes "In marrow, here everything seems to flow without structure or boundary…" Within our structures there is a deep connection to heart, to timelessness, to spirit, and yes – love.

Nancy is deeply in my bones. She is in my story, she helped shape so much of who I am. I never expected to be living how I live, loving what I do, dancing how I dance, with those in my life who are forever part of me even if I don't see them all the time. And death? The energetic connection between structures? I listen, I hear, I taste, I touch, I see. You are still here, Nancy. BEyond the elements you still loved to explore.

I am only one of thousands of people who love Nancy. And I am only me at this crossroad of our lives, social distancing, alone yet hearing others and seeing them on screens, and holding all the dances I had with Nancy, her teaching, her writings, her confidence, her wisdom, her humanity, her innocence, her spirit, all in my bones spiraling to earth to meet her there and spiraling to the sky to set her free.

Nancy is a friend, a mentor, a teacher, an adviser, an inspiration, a calling for me to always be better and dance the truth. I learned from Nancy how I can be all of the things I love in life. We are not just one thing. We know what we don't know. In the gap, the glimpse, the space in between. We hover there, we suspend, we come, we go.

Nancy is a vital part of my extended family, and I think of you all with love and sympathy for what we have and what we have lost. I send Mike and her family love and light.

I am here if anyone needs to be in touch.

Rest in deep peace Nancy. You are not alone where you are headed. The spirits wait for you. Take your time.

With love,

K.J.

Two subsequent sets of reflections (Part 1 and Part 2) on Nancy Stark Smith also appear in thINKing DANCE.

For more background on the work of Nancy Stark Smith see:
Stark Smith website: www.nancystarksmith.com

Contact Quarterly: www.contactquarterly.com
Global Underscore: www.globalunderscore.com

For video of Stark Smith performing, and in workshops and talks see:

Poetics of Touch (video by Sara Pozzoli & Germana Sicilliani, Casina Settarte, Italy, 2007) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6Pt0OXK7es)

Global Underscore, 2014 Warsaw flow, Intern'l Dance Contact Improvisation Festival (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOGLMZdm2uA)

"An emerging underscore—A conversation with Nancy Stark Smith," (interview in London, 2012) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzG609NWp1Y)

Performance with Mike Vargas, Andrew Harwood, Ray Chung and Nancy Stark Smith (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaCZvIbl860)

Nancy Stark Smith Introduction to *Fall After Newton* (1987 film) (https://www.somatics2019.com/somaticfilms)

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