



# Joan Symington

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Over the years I got to know Joan quite well in many capacities, but in particular I accompanied her closely through her many illnesses. My medical background probably helped, but our communications on those journeys were extremely wide in their compass. On one occasion, she introduced me to Walt Whitman's 'A Clear Midnight'

*"This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,  
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,  
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,  
Night, sleep, death and the stars."*

Maybe it was her way of telling me that at this stage of her life, it was time to shake off the mundanity of books, art, and all earth-bound pursuits. Her soul now felt free to ponder the themes it loved best, "Night, sleep, death and the stars". The night sky for her included her love of poetry and spirituality as she understood it. But all of this is talking about Joan from the outside and I wanted so say something about her from the inside. That is not easy, for it was not always possible to understand her drift. On one occasion she said to me rather mysteriously "I am jumping." It turned out that she was aware of parallel and distinct states of mind she was experiencing at that moment and she actually observed herself jumping from one state to another. I think she retained that awareness of her mind throughout.

To describe the inner Joan, I will say something that might seem surprising. Joan never grew old. Anyone that has talked to us older people, will notice how we tend to reminisce and remember with fondness days long past. Sometimes we talk of the days of our youth and glory or of our achievements. We talk wistfully of things that we were once able to do but now can't. We tend to perseverate and get a bit sentimental at times. This never happened with Joan. She never once talked about her achievements or what she had lost and now pined for. She never talked about her increasing incapacities. She was never sentimental. She never perseverated. If she ever reminisced, it was usually about her boys when they were little and sometimes about her earlier life with her family. There was never a hint of self pity, regret or moroseness.

What I found most striking about her was how present she always was to everything that was happening to her and around her and how unflinchingly she experienced and faced it. She absolutely accepted every insult, every pain, every disability that her illnesses flung at her. She noted the hallucinations she had post operatively after her back operation, and she tried her best to understand them as she did everything else. She never complained or protested about anything. Whatever came her way, she just accepted it and lived it, in a most remarkable way.

When I was collecting material for her photo album, she wrote to me "These two statements from two mystics, Dogen and Eckhart, refer to the same situation: that there is, at every moment, life expressing itself." I won't give the statements from the mystics, for to my mind, they would distract from the significance and power of Joan's words "**there is, at every moment, life expressing itself.**" I have never known any person who lived the meaning of these words, so truthfully and so fully as Joan did, through every real living moment of her life.

Joan loved Henry Reed's poem, "The Chateaux" which she painstakingly typed and sent me. This is a poem that draws heavily on the twenty-third Psalm that held much appeal for Joan. I would like to conclude with the closing lines of the poem, but before I do I wanted to mention that when I last visited her, a few days before her death, she mentioned she'd been visited by an angel -

*"I must rise and with firm footsteps tread  
Across the enormous flagstone, to reach, find and know  
My own and veritable door:  
I shall open it, enter and learn  
That in all this hungry time I have never wanted,  
But have, elsewhere, on honey and milk been fed,  
Have in green pastures somewhere lain, and in the mornings,  
Somewhere besides still waters have  
Mysteriously, ecstatically been led."*

Joan, all of us that knew you, felt you lay on a bed of thorns, but you never complained. Did that angel come to help you cross those enormous flagstones, to reach and find what you recognised as your own final door amongst us? I will never know from where you drew the honey and milk on which you fed, which so nourished and sustained you. I don't know where you are, but I hope it is indeed in green pastures that you lie. Only silence and stillness can now communicate something about you. It is in that same all pervading silence that I join you from the depths of my heart. The silence of still waters to which you have at last been quietly, mysteriously and ecstatically led.

