

MacPherson Pens Vigil: The Poetry of Presence

Thursday, February 04, 2016

Some books have their way with you. Even before they are written. Such is the case of the slim, dove gray tome titled *Vigil: The Poetry of Presence*. Author Pamela Heinrich MacPherson, a community advocate for end-of-life care for over three decades, had no intention of writing, let alone publishing, a book of poetry. But it turns out to be a blessing that her words and experiences were much larger than that intention. The poetry within her book's 155 pages hum like a meditation to the soul and were meant to be passed among us for solace and sustenance.

Vigil is a Collection of 65 poems written from the author's perspective, a seasoned hospice volunteer who sat vigil with individuals in the last days and moments of their life. Poetry is the medium MacPherson used to process her many varied experiences while being present and bearing witness to the sacred moments of dying. Lest that seem a somber exercise in bereavement, MacPherson's work is anything but. Filled with moments of love, respect and tender nuance, the poems speak to the eternalness of presence.

MacPherson's involvement with end-of-life care and advocacy began in 1964 when she graduated from the Jeanne Mance School of Nursing. She later received training as a hospice volunteer and served as Hospice Volunteer Coordinator for the Visiting Nurse Association of Chittenden and Grand Isle Counties (VNA) from



2004, a position to which she brought passion and dedication. Retirement followed and it allowed MacPherson more time and energy to give to community resources dealing with quality end-of-life care. She has been a hospice volunteer for over thirty

years, as well as a volunteer at the UVM Medical center in their No One Dies Alone program. She reports that the hospital, described in one of her poems as "hallowed hallway and rabbit warren chambers," is where she does most of her vigil sitting, as "the need seems to be greater there." Whether at the hospital, the Vermont Respite House or in someone's home, MacPherson says, "Sitting vigil with dying individuals holds life's deepest meaning for me." She adds, "No matter how busy I am, when I take the time to say 'yes' to a vigil request, I am rewarded with exposure to some of the most sacred spaces in life.

It was during and after these vigils that MacPherson handwrote each poem in her private journal, describing it as "my safe place for processing; my haven for unfiltered, unedited writing." The author says she has written in journals all of her adult life and describes poetry as her favored form of writing. "The economy of words keeps me focused," she says, adding, "The words flow smoothly and without hesitation toward the poem's conclusion."

Reading MacPherson's work, it is difficult not to be moved by her experiences, as they are both authentic and accessible. This perhaps comes from the author's ability to capture the essence of each vigil without later needing to revise and correct. She shares that there is almost no editing involved in her poetry, and that the poems are "pure, from the moment and honest." Each poem relates a unique journey, but they all have MacPherson's presence in common. And, as the author writes in her poem titles "Mediocre," "Presence is more than the opposite of absence." She explains, "The opportunity to enter a room and consciously empty myself of all that is outside the room – to be fully present to the solemn and profound final moments in the lifetime of another – is a sacred gift."

MacPherson's collection of poetry went from journal to publisher when the author said she was thinking about what to preserve for her children. In reviewing her journals, the poetry felt worthy. It was later when she shared some of the poems with close friends and received a "passionate" response that she decided to share them with a wider audience. *Vigil* is published by Red Barn Books of Vermont, an independent, curatorial, literary publishing house in Shelburne committed to enhancing the state's cultural life by connecting the voices of Vermonters.

Currently MacPherson, who handily redefines the word retirement, is working on a writing project that will preserve the history of the local hospice volunteer program. The project is in collaboration with Champlain College Associate Professor Tim Brookes and Champlain Senior Molly Abrahamson. Brookes' publishing class has laid out a plan for publishing hardcover copies of what will be a limited edition history and eventually the project will be gifted to the VNA. MacPherson expects the publication to occur within the next two months.

When asked what passions she has other than writing, MacPherson instantly answers in one word, "people." This is a perfect response for a woman who is genuinely there for others at their

most pure and vulnerable moments. The author continues, "I love people... their stories, meaningful friendships, and enjoying community connections together."

MacPherson resides in South Burlington with her husband Bruce, a retired pathologist and professor at the UVM College of Medicine. They have three grown children so some of their 'retirement' includes visiting them. MacPherson adds, "Bruce and I enjoy being present to their lives."

When not busy with family, MacPherson volunteers at the Vermont Respite House as a "rover." She describes the role as, "doing whatever is needed in the moment, whether it is responding to the call bells of residents, making supper, doing laundry, answering the phone or sitting with a resident." Inside the pages of *Vigil*, one can find references to the place throughout, as the author writes, "a peaceful, still, lowly-lit room" or "the love and commitment of many is evident throughout this room." An enthusiastic supporter of the Vermont Respite House, MacPherson notes that when it was built 25 years ago, it was one of the first of its type in the nation. She is excited about the new expanded facility in the works, saying, "It is a very special resource in our community. We are so fortunate to have it."

Over the years that MacPherson has been an advocate for end-of-life care, there have been substantive changes in our society. She notes in particular, there is more community education, support for end-of-life conversations, expansion of end-of-life curriculum in medical schools and an increased presence of palliative care programs in hospitals and home care settings. MacPherson says, "Although Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and other pioneers of the movement would be pleased with the changes, they would join me in wishing that acceptance of death as an organic and natural part of the life cycle was more prevalent than it is. If so, clarity about one's wishes and pro-active planning for the 'what-ifs' in life would allow for more natural and meaningful transitions during times of illness and dying."

Meanwhile, continuing the much-needed conversation, MacPherson shares *Vigil* with others. She says, "I feel the book is making a difference." A simple statement that is also true of the author herself, a witness in watchful attention to the sacred process of dying. Her poem "Still Point," describes it best: "To not die alone, To bear witness to this sacred transition, To stand in for all who ever loved you – A privilege beyond description."

Vigil: The Poetry of Presence by Pamela Heinrich MacPherson, Published by Red Barn Books. Available at Phoenix Books, Flying Pig Bookstore, Hopkins Bookshop, Amazon, and from the author at pmacphe@aol.com.

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