

Where the Angels Live | Lullaby for a Friend

Lucy Mathews Heegaard

Every song has a story. But sometimes you don't know the full story until the song itself shows you. Even if you wrote the song yourself.

Long plagued by stage fright when it comes to singing, I was preparing to do so for the first time in front of an audience for an evening of my own songs and stories. Don't get me wrong, I'm not afraid of *speaking* to an audience; I love that part. It's the singing that makes me feel vulnerable.

As I practiced and prepared, I kept picturing myself as the American Idol contestant who warbles embarrassingly off-key as the judges fidget. Every vulnerability I'd ever felt seemed to be right on the surface of my skin. Yet, as I was fending off my inner demons, I found a song forming in my mind that became a lifeline out of the turmoil. Actually, it felt more like a secret mantra; a mere five lines that gave me enormous comfort and calm.

As one of my closest friends, Elizabeth knew me well enough to realize how challenging this first public singing performance would feel for me, and asked if she could fly out from her home in Boston to mine in Minneapolis to attend. "If it makes you more nervous, I won't come," she said. "Please come," I replied.

The morning of the performance, I sang this new song for her. Simple, a capella. It was much too new to add to my set list, but I truly believed it had come to me so that I'd feel the confidence and courage I needed in order to sing for people that evening. What I didn't know yet was that it would be several more years before I would realize the song's true purpose: it was meant to be a lullaby for Elizabeth.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer for a second time, we all assumed she would undergo treatment and put the disease behind her again. The day after she learned the diagnosis was terminal, she told me she'd had a sleepless night. She lay awake, she said, and envisioned every possible outcome— from the one where she would defy the odds and live to be 100 to the one where I would sing "Where the Angels Live" at her memorial service.

I came to see her when she returned home from the hospital for the last time and began hospice care. The time between her diagnosis and this visit was shorter than any of us would have liked. And that's the biggest understatement I've ever made. But the time was also filled with heart-rending moments of grace, of touching poignancy, of riotous laughter, of honesty and, most of all, love.

She told me a few months before she died that she was “banking memories” for herself and for everyone she loved, consciously making time for moments together that would sustain her and the rest of us through her passing. She was filling the well, she said.

I did sing for her at her memorial service. And I brought my oldest child, her goddaughter, to sing with me. The song deserved harmonies. My ukulele was the simple accompaniment, though I was fairly certain that the people in the back of the church might not even hear it. The important part, I knew, was the voices.

I told the overflowing crowd of her family, friends and colleagues that we all had a job to do together. And then I shared the promise that I had made to her. The night before I left her for the last time, she had wanted to discuss her memorial service. I promised her again that I would sing, but told her that I also planned to ask everyone sing with me. In singing together, I’d said, we’d not only help ourselves begin to heal but our voices in unison would lift the song to the high heavens as a lullaby for her.

On a fall day that began with rain and ended with the sun peeking out from the clouds, in a quaint New England church, I kept my promise to my friend. And, in doing so, I realized the true purpose of my song. I felt it in my bones. I knew it in my heart. I heard it in all the voices that joined together to sing with my daughter and me. The well is deep; there is no limit to love.

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Where the Angels Live

Can you feel the space between heartbeat and breath?

Can you hear the pause between dying and death?

In the gentle silence between blessing and prayer

In the whispered sound between wind and air

That’s where the angels live

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