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## Sundays with Diane: bringing writers' words to life

BY ANDREW HIDAS

My job every Sunday is to give voice. Not to the voiceless or politically disenfranchised, for they have their advocates far more skilled and dogged than I. No, my calling since last fall has been to give voice to people I consider already among the most powerful voices in the world. To writers—poets, memoirists and essayists, mostly—who can't speak directly to my friend Diane because she can't pick up a book, or turn a page, or shoo a fly off her nose or speak a coherent word.

Diane has Lou Gehrig's disease—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—which has robbed her of nearly every physical ability that defines us as humans, save for the beating (and I am speaking metaphorically here) of her incredibly huge heart and the graciousness that flows from it like the lightest of honeys. She's had the disease for a couple of years now, with her movement restricted to just enough head control to indicate yes or no when you frame a question for her, or to occasionally point a special headband at a light-sensitive computer keyboard so she can spell out, one laborious letter at a time, her wishes, frustrations and needs.

I read to Diane for an hour or two every Sunday, feeding her words that vary from stark beauty to outlandish mirth to ravishing perspectives on the wildness of nature and the tenderness of the human heart.

It's odd, this mouthing of marvelous writers. I act as a go-between, an emissary, bringing the words, the feelings and the forcefulness of writers I've never met and interpreting them via the inflections and timbres of my own voice. I find myself adopting tones, moods, poses, urgencies, altering my rhythm and pitch as I sidle up to the words and help carry them the eight or nine inches that separate me from Diane as I hover close, the open book resting on the arm of her easy chair.

We start with Anne Lamott's *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*. Talk about

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with the book is a juicy mambo of hilarity, punctuated by just enough hard truth on the ravages and trials of child-rearing to keep

Diane, mother of two grown daughters, chortling and sighing with nearly every page.

Diane can no longer swallow, so she gets quite a saliva build-up in her throat that awaits occasional suctioning by a nurse. But with *Operating Instructions*, we beat the nurse to the task.

The two of us often erupt in laughter, me holding the book in one hand while simultaneously mopping with an ever-present towel the mini-geysers of saliva that gush from Diane with each raucous Lamottian riff. As I hold out the towel and pat her chin, I feel a moment of the most curious intimacy. Diane, long past self-consciousness of her condition, beams and gathers herself for the next paragraph.

The poet Theodore Roethke is a few notches up the scale of gravitas from Lamott. While Anne often felt like she was going crazy, Roethke actually did. His poetry alternates between elegies to the nature mystic's deepest stirrings and the stark terror of walls closing in on his psyche. I read the former to Diane. She has plenty enough walls around her now.

And so it goes—Rainier Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. The stunning poetry of Mary Oliver, introduced to me by Diane's sister-in-law on one of her own visits.

I think you'd like her, the sister-in-law says as I read Roethke to Diane.

I think I do.

As the seasons change and Diane greets me every Sunday with a smile and welcoming murmur, I can't help thinking what a privilege it is to spend time this way. Reading great writers. Hearing the



creatures that is in stark contrast to the diminished capacity Diane lives with moment by moment. Near the end of the book, Beston offers a hymn to the human body in the person of a beautifully muscled, naked and bronzed surfer catching waves just offshore:

Watching this picture of a fine human being free for the moment of everything save his own humanity and framed in a scene of nature, I could not help musing on the mystery of the human body and of how nothing can equal its rich and rhythmic beauty when it is beautiful or approach its forlorn and pathetic ugliness when beauty has not been mingled in or has withdrawn.

Reading these words, I am concerned Diane will become haunted and distraught by the reference to the body's potential for pathetic ugliness. But I needn't worry. She merely nods, in the way she always does when indicating full understanding and involvement with the subject matter. Diane has made peace with the forlornness of her body, even as her eyes dance and bob in rhythm with our beautiful young surfer whom she is visibly pleased to accompany on this altogether pleasant Sunday afternoon.

*Andrew Hidas lives in Santa Rosa and is vice president of a local advertising agency.*