

# MIDNIGHT WATER

## Selected excerpts and powerful quotes

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My heart pounded as I walked through the whipping wind across the street to the hospital. I knew at a rational level that it was my sister who was dying, but at a deeper level, it felt like I was going to die too. I remembered this feeling from my Zen retreat, and from so many psychedelic trips. The Katherine who walks into that room will not be the same Katherine who walks out. And I also wondered about the woman I was about to encounter. My sister, Rebecca. But also, a woman who had suddenly remembered she needed Tibetan death instructions. Maybe also a deity. I was so inexperienced; I had just been stumbling along, looking for answers, hoping for some relief from the endless parade of death anxiety and psychotic fantasies. How could I help her get through this final threshold? Could it really be as easy as they said? Maybe there was nothing any of us needed to do. Just be with her. Bear witness. Trust that something greater, and more mysterious, was coming.

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A big part of my weekly sessions with Dana involved trying to process my anger toward my dad. For most of my life before my sister died, my dad and I mostly got along and gave each other space to do our own thing. We had a lot of fun the couple times a year we would get together. We skied, we traveled, we told sarcastic jokes. He was known for having angry outbursts that I never understood as a kid but kind of grew to tolerate and even find endearing as an adult. I honestly believed I had already forgiven him for whatever mistakes he had made when I was growing up. One morning during the silent Zen retreat, before my sister went into the hospital, I held my dad in my mind and witnessed some of the hardest interactions between us, including things that happened when I was too little to understand what was really going on. I looked at it all from a neutral vantage point, and I simply forgave him. No big deal. What a relief! Now I could get on with my adult life without therapy! Ha ha ha. But when my sister's cancer came back and she died, something broke in me. It's like a big, friendly, amusement park facade had been constructed in front of a long, dark, twisting, super terrifying wormhole, and my sister being alive was the last thing holding up the facade. As I got pulled into that wormhole, I careened straight back into both our childhoods, without the Adult Rationalization Filter of what I wanted to believe had happened. Straight to the heart of the matter. And the heart of the matter was hate.

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What I remember, most of all, is sitting with regular people in that tiny room, watching new possibilities blossom with the help of psilocybin. I remember a young Trinidadian woman who almost went to the ER after her blood pressure skyrocketed during her first psilocybin

session; in the midst of her cardiac crisis, she proclaimed how much she loved us and that she didn't even care if she died because she was One with the Universe. (She was OK by the way.) I remember the young father who brought his guitar to the session out of concern he might be bored with the music, but instead starting chanting in tongues along with one particular Indian raga. And the young man who had grown up in a cult and chose to face every one of his worst fears during his high dose session, and eventually was inspired by his experience to reconcile with his estranged father. And the young woman writer who had bad anxiety and two small children who kept her up at night and had lost her sister in a tragic accident at a young age. I remember these people because they remind me of myself. I realize now that they were holding up a mirror—a sacred mirror, not unlike the mushroom altar—so that I could learn better how to love others and, ultimately, myself.

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I have my sister's ashes in my hand and as I am passing the Sugar Shack, I release them out the window. The Sugar Shack was her refuge because she always hated the cold. The ashes are flying through the wind, across space and time, and they are taking my heart with them, and I am flying. Her ashes are my cosmic calling card. This practice of releasing ashes at sacred sites was the thing that always helped me deal with my grief. It kept me connected with her. It was a way for me to entrust the world with my grief. Here! Take it! I can't hold it alone. But it had been a long time since I had released them like this. I had been stingy with those ashes. What was I afraid of? That I would run out? Yes, I would run out. Eventually, every single thing that made Rebecca would be gone. This is exactly what I was afraid of.

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