

**Exactly Foundation – Residency #14 – *Holding Space* by Tan Ngiap Heng
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**Artist's Statement
27th April 2019**

In 2010, while traveling overland from Singapore to London, I got a phone call from my father who was on holiday in London and I was in Helsinki: he told me that he had a stroke. I had to fly to London and look after him and my mother for six weeks. After which we flew him back to Singapore. I have been his care giver ever since then. Since then, my mother also had a stroke in 2015 and my father had a heart attack in 2017. I have set up my parents' house as a care centre. It has not been an easy journey for me. And it has never been the same from moment to moment, incident to incident. Several times both my parents have been close to death, and I had to face a load of intractable questions. My family and friends gave me support. I had to slowly find good help to look after my parents. I had to also look after myself, I had to pace my life and I got myself a counsellor.

So this is my starting point, how do people care-give for chronic or terminal family or friends? Looking at the location of the Exactly Foundation, where there are religious institutions from all the major religions, I wondered how people find the strength to continue through the challenges of the care giving process. Coming from a non-religious but spiritual family, I had to work my own way through the grief and acceptance with the philosophy left to me by my father who was a meditation teacher. I did not so much go back to his lecture notes, but all the lessons that he had imparted to me before his stroke, and his rationale for them, had given me a framework to understand and accept that death is inevitable. I had also learned that one had to be grateful for all the good times in life, to accept that it's painful with bitter challenges. When I was younger, my father said that he did not want a funeral when he died, he wanted a celebration. I could not understand that then, but now I can. I can understand how he has profoundly given me and many of his students the tools to navigate this harsh reality of life.

So I was curious how other people cope. This started making me question: what is the relationship between family or close friends who are confronted with the fragility of their lives? Modern medicine sometimes distracts us from the loss and the grieving within with courses of actions that we can take. There are so many practical decisions to be made, all seemingly in an effort to prolong life, but without asking about the quality of life of the patient. And as a care giver, it is also important to understand what the patient would have wanted if they had been able to speak for themselves. Caregivers sometimes can only make the best decision that they can with what they know, and live with the consequences. In the midst of the emergencies, there is no time to work out the emotional challenges. There is really no correct answer. How do care givers cope? How do friends and loved ones support caregivers? There are never really the words to say that actually gives comfort. What then can someone do? They can hold space for the caregiver, acknowledging their situation, listening to the caregivers and witnessing their emotions. Aging and death can only be put off so long. At some point of time, we all have to transition from caregivers to people who hold space for people coming to terms with their mortality. Sometimes we have to hold space for ourselves, as we grapple with the fragility of our own bodies.

Holding Space is about being a conscious, supportive, non-judgemental witness to a person facing the incomprehensible end of someone they love or even themselves. Humans are complex, thinking, storytelling beings. There is no truly logical way to understand how a life is strung between birth and the inevitable ensuing death. For once we are born, we only know living. How do we measure the worth of a life well-lived? Can we really not go gently into the good night? Can we be consoled with family and friends sending us off with love? Do our religious beliefs give us hope of a heaven

after life? After being part of a family or community for a long time, how does one person's journey end in the physical plane? How does it continue in the memories of those who remain?

Added to the complex emotions are difficult practical and medical questions. What decisions can and should a caregiver make when a patient is no longer able to represent themselves? When does a family defer to a doctor's advice? When should medical practitioners override the decisions of the family? How strict a framework can the government set on people who have chronic diseases or are facing complex end of life situations? How can one define their wishes before they are not able to speak for themselves? What is the tension between a doctor's imperative to prolong a life and a patient's comfort at the end of life?

Holding Space is a photographic project, which attempts to be a practice of holding space for families who are in the middle of dealing with mortality, chronic illness and the fragility of life. The project does not attempt to look for answers as there is no prescriptive answer for what individuals and families face. And yet, how families navigate such a personal, challenging time, can be informative for the greater community. Using photography, found materials and interviews to consciously bear witness, I hope that the collected material will spark conversations in a larger audience. The contemplation of death and how we support those approaching death can teach us a lot about what is important in life. It can teach us to live life in a more meaningful way.

In this project, I have been very fortunate to meet people who were willing to share their stories with me. Some were patients and other were caregivers. Some patients face terminal illnesses while others face chronic illnesses, and I had a range of different ages. Although this is a photographic project, the most important process was to listen to the people involved to hold space for them. At least a couple of times, I was told that it was cathartic to open up to me. To be able to share their stories with someone else. On my part, I found the stories heart-wrenching at times, and also inspiring, that people have found ways to continue living and functioning in spite of their circumstances. And I think that to me, I learned that resistance is futile in the long run, and acceptance of the reality of life enables one to cope with the challenges. I also learned that if one lives life fully, without regrets, then death does not hold one in a grip of fear.

The stories I have from eight different families are all complex. As much as photographs can capture emotions, they are hardly suffice to tell the complex and layered stories of each family. And so I layered the portraits that I took, with images from my subjects and layered it with excerpts of the interviews I had with them. I was trying to extract the most salient passages, but the amount of text shows how truly difficult it is to summarize the stories. In some ways it shows the limitations of photographic images to reveal the context of its making.

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