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APPROACHING DEATH

Some years ago at our first conscious living/dying retreat, in the introductory circle, a handsome gray-haired woman, unself-consciously wearing a colorful T-shirt which revealed that both breasts had been removed, introduced herself saying, "Two years ago I was gifted with cancer." She was the first person to tell me that she wouldn't exchange the clarity and depth she felt for a healthy body. The light in her eyes indicated how precious had been her confrontation with death and the power of the teaching it offered.

Few meet their perfect spiritual teacher or find a technique completely suitable to their needs. Few discover a vehicle for their liberation: a being or a teaching that they are so attuned to that it acts as a mirror of their holdings held up before them. Yet for some of the terminally ill patients we have worked with, their illness has become just that. They have discovered the hard-found perfect teacher which brings them to themselves. And experience the same difficulties and grace which might be expected from any such teaching which uncovers the holdings and fears that block us from the experience of our original nature.

No longer making their sickness a disability, they have found a

teaching which they sensed would not have been forthcoming in any other way. They honor their predicament with a strength and clarity which displays the depth of their insight.

To open to our original nature, to the truth of being, we must stop postponing death. To take death within allows us to go beyond death, beyond what we imagine dies. To come to that vastness of being that many speak of as the deathless. Using death as a way of confronting ourselves with the places we hide, the places we disallow the heart.

How many, right now, could let themselves die? All of us could die, but could we die fully, just expanding beyond ourselves, not trying to change it. Not trying to make our death something else, not making it the famous last words of a grade B movie, but just "Ahh," melting out of the body, not holding anywhere.

We are each in a process of awakening. Becoming fully born so that we may die each moment past our fear and isolation. The illusion of separateness dies to reveal the deathlessness of our essential nature.

During a workshop in California, in the midst of a discourse, the room was shaken by an earthquake. Having been sharing about death for the past few days, one might imagine that the group would be as prepared to let go as they ever would be. But as I looked into the startled faces of some of the hundred people sitting there, the fear and holding, the difficulty with death, was clearly evident. When the waves of gulps and sighs subsided, I asked the group, "What if that moment had been the last of your life? What if that was it? Whatever thought was in your mind right then, that was your last thought. That thought, 'Oh my gracious!' That was it, you are all dead. No refunds. All the work done to open until that time was all the work of a lifetime. To whatever degree you had the truth in your heart, able to let go of your name, your idea of yourself, your family, that would be the degree of love and wisdom that would accompany you into whatever came next."

How many people driving home one evening see the flash of lights in their rearview mirror, hear the screech of brakes, feel the impact of steel on steel and think, "Oh, shit!" as the darkness descends. How many people die with "Oh, shit!" on their lips in-

stead of the name of God? How many people have cultivated "Oh, shit!" as their death chant?

The Tibetan Buddhists living with the recognition that each moment could be the last emphasized the use of death as a means of awakening. Many monks drink from skull caps, the top portion of skulls taken from the cremation grounds. Many use prayer beads carved of human bone to constantly reawaken to death. Because they recognize we could all be dead a moment from now and then there would be no more words, no more resolution to do better tomorrow. Life becomes immense when we start recognizing that there is no assurance that we will live out this day. Our fantasies and presumptions that we will live forever confuse us as we enter death. In reality, all the time we have is right now. The past and the future are dreams. Only this moment is real. If we come newborn to each moment, we will experience life directly, not dream it. Born each moment, we let ourselves die to the mind's habitual commentary, its judging and merciless self-protection.

There aren't many moments in our life when we are fully awake. That may be why we find death so difficult: because we keep dreaming our lives, we dream our death.

Many have told me how illness has awakened them from the dream. How their models have been seen as a limitation rather than as a goal. How though the body has gotten weaker, their spirit has gotten stronger. Some have said that the degeneration of their body has taught them that they are not that. They wear the body lightly. Their voices are soft and full of love.

The following are excerpts from a journal kept by Paul, whom I met in spring just after he took to his bed following a "couple of years running battle with Hodgkin's disease." Each entry reflects the ups and downs of his ability to work with the intensity of this situation. He is a good example that in any kind of growth there are peaks and plateaus. That sometimes we can open to it and sometimes we can't but that it is our willingness which allows us to expand. Paul was a thirty-one-year-old audio engineer who had led an active and interesting life. His main difficulty was an extreme restlessness that arose from seeing one model after another of himself as a "man," as a "person who could take care of himself," as an "up and comer," torn away by the intensity of grow-

ing disability and the clear approach of death. He said his restlessness made him feel like "jumping out of my skin." We suggested he work with balancing the restlessness by the technique of counting breaths. Counting each exhale up until ten, then beginning again. If one loses count, and can't recall if it's breath six or seven, one begins again at one. He worked with this practice for twenty minutes a few times a day or whenever he felt an energy imbalance. As his mind quieted his heart began to open.

As he worked more and more with the givens of his predicament, his insight grew and he said, "The melodrama's not too different but the stage is a hell of a lot bigger." As his resistance began to melt he was surprised at his new-found peace. "Acceptance is magic," he smiled one day incredulously. Indeed, a few days before he died, looking about him as one person irrigated his catheter tube, and another emptied his bedpan, while a third made carrot juice in the kitchen, he remarked, "You know, this all looks a bit like a Marx brothers movie!"

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Some excerpts from Paul's journals over the last months of his life—

It's important to learn that you never really need to jump for a pain pill. So instead of taking it without thinking, try moving around, refocusing your awareness. Remember: relief won't be instant anyway, even if that pill works. So give your own head a chance first!

Sometimes, it's amazing how little it really takes to be able to accept "unacceptable" discomfort.

In general,

Don't use pain pills against "discomforts." The latter are dealt with much better by meditation.

I AM NOT MY DISCOMFITURE!

And this too shall pass.

(1) Acknowledgment—*naming*

Ah! fear . . .

Ah! restlessness . . .

(passing soon, states of mind)

it's just conditioned response

(2) Opening—letting go
not holding on
Whatever seemed so solid before
is really just a cloud passing by

* * *

It's pretty scary to have periods when you don't remember where you're at, etc., even though we actually have these periods hundreds of times in one day. But when you're bedridden you have time to notice them much more.

It's interesting how I instinctively fight it with writing in this book or otherwise "keeping occupied."

* * *

This constant restlessness is driving me crazy. I have sensations in the back and stomach that keep me "bothered" and make it hard to relax. Well, maybe it's better than the dizziness I had previously.

I think my best move now is to practice
TOTAL LOVING ACCEPTANCE—

* * *

The afternoon slowly trundles along like a 3rd class Spanish passenger train. I have to accept the boredom, the apparent meaninglessness, which is actually a great teacher.

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Phoned my parents. The security of the known. Well, why not? Why not treat myself to a little security after all the strange stuff I've been going through? It's starting to be fun again, watching my mind try to close around ideas.

IT'S BEAUTIFUL!

TO SEE THIS THING POSITIVELY, AS AN
ADVENTURE, AS A LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

* * *

I feel very enthusiastic, like an apprentice monk.

The greatest challenge is that we must go through this alone. It would be much easier with a companion.

As the sunlight gets dimmer, the end of day is apparent, and I start to feel that aloneness. It might be very helpful and comforting to find someone who can stay overnight, who could provide

simple human contact, help bridge that separation that sometimes comes.

Meanwhile, I can stay aware of the tricks my mind plays as it gets fooled by one carrot after another.

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Seem to be going through very strong crises about sleep and surrender. I'm confused, but I try to keep my heart open and find a way out.

I seem to be fearing being trapped. I just lie here in bed, resting my exhausted body, fighting for its ego sense, its sense of self.

What illusions! But they sure seem real!

It's just so strange to be so afraid in the body, and yet be able to endure it with calm patience, waiting. As if "I" don't want to panic so I let my body do it instead, and "I" just watch.

* * *

When you got your sense of humor, you got everything. Humor leads to love. So keep on laughing.

Just work with what you have at any moment. Because that's all you're getting. It's all relative. What makes you think no one else is trapped? We're all trapped. You're just lucky enough to be reminded more often.

* * *

Time passes slowly when you're suffering. It would be O.K. if I didn't feel so lousy. The only way out is through and it's hell in here. The best defense seems to be to stay still and to focus on writing. Perhaps I can forget or lose myself temporarily, that way. But I need a more permanent forgetting. A decision not to be that person I thought I was. Not to be the bored, tormented sufferer. To be someone just hanging out, nobody special.

Already after 5 minutes my bedsores are hurting. Bad . . .

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Again, woken up from a sleep of exhaustion . . . I felt somewhat rested, but I immediately started to feel the gut fear, too. It's so strange because I am able to stand back and to see the fear, and intellectualize about it; but I feel trapped or forced into *feeling* the fear in my body, whatever I do.

You see, it's confusing because I would like to think that I

don't have anything to fear. I thought I was "too advanced" to fear and yet here I am and here this fear is. (Well . . . here we all are.)

For a while I sensed love and beauty in my predicament. I am uncertain, *completely* uncertain, about tomorrow or even one hour from now. I am afraid of pain, especially excruciating pain that won't let go. I am afraid of the feelings of unreality I get. I am afraid of waking up with amnesia. I am afraid of never being able to completely wake up. I am afraid of total helplessness. I am afraid of my next bowel movement. I am afraid of what will happen to me. I am afraid because I don't know what will happen. I am afraid of hospital trips, operations, medicine. I am afraid because I am no longer in control of my life. I am now powerless and unable to do anything except trying to love, to keep my heart open.

* * *

Who would have ever thought that eating and sleeping would become such adventures. I feel love for life.

Because life will always be an adventure, no matter how tortuous!

I really believed, yesterday, that that state of restlessness would last forever. And now how laughable that seems.

I'm grateful for this opportunity, but I mustn't blow it.

The best thing for me now is to

CULTIVATE A CALM AWARENESS AND ACCEPTANCE OF THE SHOW. IT'S NOT AS BAD AS YOU THINK!
(In fact, it's only as bad as you think.)

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During his last weeks, as Paul's body became more emaciated, our work together became the shared recognition that who he was was clearly not this body which was obviously slowly disposing him. Each time I would say to him that he was not his body, I could feel the words penetrate to a certain depth and then come up against some denseness, some bit of conditioning, some fear or doubt that couldn't let go.

After a week of rapid deterioration and deeper silent meditations, one morning as I gently rolled Paul onto his side to wash his back, I was once again struck by the frailty and deterioration

of his body and said to him, "Paul, just look at how this old body is falling away, just see how you are not this body. How could you imagine for a moment that you are this worn-out old thing?" But this time I felt no resistance, I could sense the words go right through and Paul just went with them; no resistance, letting go into empty space. A friend cradling Paul's head in her arms said, "I think he's left." His restlessness and fear fell away with his identification with the body. His long teaching from cancer had opened him to life, to death. [See Appendix I.]

QUESTION: You speak about those who are terminally ill approaching death; what about those who find themselves in old age?

ANSWER: A dear friend in her late seventies told me that each morning she looks into her mirror and can't believe the old face that peers back at her. "I never liked old people and now I am one." She speaks of how things have changed. Of friends who are no longer around. She worries about who will take care of her if she should become ill. She is concerned that she might at some point have to go to a nursing home, which she despises. "There are pills for sickness but no pill for old age. My whole life has changed. I sleep differently, I eat differently. I even go to the bathroom differently; everything has slowed down. Nothing is the way I thought it would be. Whoever would have thought!"

For most in old age there is the feeling that the body has outlasted them. Few outgrow the body. Many want to get out of it before it dies. The mind's image of the body changes more slowly than the body. The body goes to ash while still a strong flame burns in the heart. Many are unable to walk with any ease though they still carry the image of athletic youth in the underdream.

"My batteries are running down." The energy of the life-force is no longer found in body exteriors; muscles become soft, the skin spots, the eyelids droop. For those who think of themselves as the body it is hell. But I hear others say that all that has happened is that their life-force has withdrawn into their heart and that it is in their heart that happiness has at last been found. "Like the sap going back to the roots in fall and winter."

For some the world is so rapidly changing that they feel out of

tune, misfits, foreigners in a culture they had once participated in. Watching television much of the time to fill vacant space, they are confronted with the "cult of youth," where 80 per cent of the television actors are between twenty-five and forty though only 20 per cent of the public is between those ages. It seems like a strange land where one is punished for being old. Some feel like a victim.

In India the first twenty years of life is considered the time of being a student, of maturation. In the second twenty years you are a householder supporting your family. For the third twenty years you are perfecting your spiritual practice while watching your children mature and providing for your parents' well-being. By sixty it is presumed that most of your responsibilities to family and society have been fulfilled, and many spend the rest of their lives as "sanyasin," as free-roaming renunciates. It is a time of pilgrimage, quiet contemplation, and devout song.

Many societies honor their elderly for the wisdom accumulated during a long life. Our society does not approach old age with that reverence but rather with revulsion, so it becomes necessary for each to give themselves the respect they deserve. It is in the last years that many touch on a sense of being but few trust themselves sufficiently to let go fully into it, to let themselves be who they suspect they really might be. Though many come to learn the real meaning of service: volunteering in hospitals, visiting people in nursing homes, sharing as big brothers and sisters, baby-sitting, in remedial reading groups, in grief counseling, they shine with wisdom and compassion.

It doesn't seem to matter whether one has lived twenty years or seventy years, at its end that life seems to have been exhausted in a single moment. The past is irretrievably gone but the sense of being is ever present. Indeed, if one asks someone right at the edge of death if they feel any less alive at that moment than they have at any other time in their life, they will say no. Those who follow life to where it resides in the heart live life fully.

In the workshops we have been conducting around the country in the past few years, we have met many people in their late sixties and seventies and some in their eighties who wished to turn inward. Who sensed some deeper experience to life than the tran-

sitory holdings and losses of the past. They trust the youthful heart that seeks to go beyond the body's increasing limitation. Looking out across a room of meditators, here and there an older, deeply wrinkled face will smooth as the breath slows and the eyes quiet behind closed lids. The love that radiates from them is vintage love.

The old who live in their body are bent under the strain. The old who live in their hearts are aglow.

*Friend, hope for the truth while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think . . . and think . . . while you are alive.
What you call "salvation" belongs to the time before
death.*

*If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,
do you think
ghosts will do it after?*

*The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic
just because the body is rotten—
that is all fantasy.*

What is found now is found then.

*If you find nothing now,
you will simply end up with an apartment in the City
of Death.*

*If you make love with the divine now, in the next life
you will have the face of satisfied desire.*

*So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,
Believe in the Great Sound!*

*Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for,
it is the intensity of the longing for the Guest that
does all the work.*

Look at me, and you will see a slave of that intensity.

Kabir, via Bly

12 WORKING WITH THE DYING

The other day, I received a phone call from a old friend saying that her brother had just returned from a general checkup where it was discovered that he had tumors in his lungs. A biopsy was in process. What should she do? How could she help a loved one who it seemed might be about to go through a very difficult time?

The answer to that question is, of course—you relate to one who is ill the same way you relate to any being. With openness. With an honoring of the truth we all share. Work to dissolve the separateness that keeps one lost in duality. Become one with the other. No help, just being. See the conditioned illusion of separateness. Break that ancient clinging. Allow both of you to die. Go beyond the imaginings of separate bodies and separate minds. Come to the common ground of being.

You are with one who is dying in the same way you are with yourself. Open, honest, and caring. You are simply there, listening with a heart that is willing to hold the joy or pain of another with equal capacity and compassion. With a mind that does not separate death from life, that does not live in concepts and shadows, but in the direct experience of the unfolding.

If it hurts, it hurts. If it makes you happy, it makes you happy.