

What canst thou say?

You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God? — George Fox

Friends, Mystical Experience, and Contemplative Practice

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Death and Dying

THE DEATH OF A FRIEND

By Tony Prete

Eric died this evening. I arrived at the hospital some forty minutes before; he was unconscious, as I'd expected. His bed was cranked up to a semi-sitting position. Air hissed into a mask that covered his nose and mouth. He was taking short breaths, maybe every fifteen seconds, each accompanied by a quick grunt. His face, though ashen and drooped, still showed his young age—barely forty. His right hand was warm, though the nails had a bluish tint; his left hand and forearm showed blue splotches. There was a great calm in the room.

I sat quietly with him for a while, then started reading aloud some of the biblical passages I knew he liked, including the Great *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 (“Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone”). More than once in the past he arose during worship to intone those words both in Hebrew and in English. So that's how I read them to him.

Before beginning a second reading of the twenty-third psalm, I looked up, waiting for him to take his next breath. After perhaps thirty seconds, I suspected it would not come. Another minute or so and I knew he was gone. I looked at my watch. It was 9:30. Quaker midnight, I thought, time for Eric to leave.

The whole thing seemed so incredibly ordinary. Eric looked no different: His head was still slightly tilted, his right leg bent under the covers, even his eyes stayed shut. His right hand now felt cold, but no colder than my own hands have felt many times. The air continued to hiss into the mask, only now nothing disrupted its sound.

My emotions were unchanged as well; I didn't feel sad or upset or frightened or relieved. But the calm that I'd sensed when entering the room, and that stayed through the silence and the reading, now had a settled feel to it. It wasn't so much that Eric had left, he had just stopped—the way a ticking clock stops but you don't notice until you realize how quiet it has become. The quiet was what I felt, a deep and peaceful quiet, a quiet that would remain unbroken. It signaled not interruption but completion.

I stood and looked at him. He was still Eric, still the troubled, disturbing, delightful, dismaying, dreamy Eric. His life, though short in years, had been long in struggle, and now the struggle was finished. Something needed to mark this ending. I pressed both my hands against the top

of his head: *Shema Israel, Yahweh Eloheinu; Yahweh echad.*

After a few minutes I pushed the call button. The nurse arrived, the same pleasant nurse who'd told me earlier that there really wasn't much else to do except wait. I said, “I think he's died.” She looked at Eric, felt his hand, and agreed. Again, it was all so incredibly ordinary—like I'd said “I think he needs a blanket.” and she'd turned to get one.

She said there were calls she had to make, and moved to leave. “Wait,” I blurted, “isn't there some way to check?” I needed more confirmation of Eric's death than just the two of us nodding our heads. She put her stethoscope to his chest, kept it there for maybe a minute. “I don't hear anything” she said. Somehow that was more appropriate, more fitting. She left to make her calls.

It was a great privilege for me to be with Eric when he died—a privilege I didn't deserve. Other members of the meeting had done much more than I to see Eric through his struggles these past few years. They'd dragged

From the Editor:

It has been a remarkable year for me. In November I witnessed a birth for the first time (that is, for the first time when I was not a participant). Then in July, I had the privilege of being present at the moment of my mother's death. As many of the articles in this issue attest, these gateways are solemn occasions—whether or not they are accompanied by mystical insights.

When I agreed to edit this issue, it was just part of my rotation as one of the team of editors. The question of death and dying was not a burning one for me. Little did I know that in the interim my mother would die of a recurrence of cancer. Little did I know that the writers of this issue would speak so deeply to my condition.

Many of the articles are about the death of a parent or grandparent. Some recount mysterious voices or touches that provided comfort and confidence. Others tell of intuitions and knowings about a dying person. All provide insight for living with the sure knowledge that death is an experience that comes “once in every lifetime.”

Patricia McBee

him to doctors, borne with the stench of uncontrollable saliva caked to his clothes, searched for him on the streets after he'd been evicted from his apartment, and listened to his beguiling jumble of fact and fog. I'd been only an occasional adjunct.

But there I was, a stand-in perhaps, or maybe just a witness, someone to say what happened. And what happened was at once the most ordinary and extraordinary of events: a person died. I can't believe how easy it was, how right and natural. But I also can't believe that Eric is gone, that he'll no longer stand up, prophet-like, during meeting, one hand on the bench in front of him and the other raised in the air, and in a garbled voice almost beyond understanding, break the silence with a word of harsh warning, or a gentle gratitude for the chance, once again, to worship among us.

Though Eric's dying seemed ordinary, his absence will be extraordinary. I still wonder at how normal the former could be—and how odd will be the latter.

✞ *Tony Prete is a writer, editor, and teacher of the Bible. He is a member of Central Philadelphia Meeting. Eric Matthews was cared for by members of the meeting as he coped with mental and physical illness.*

PRAYING FOR THE LIVING

By Mariellen O. Gilpin

My Quaker meeting was going through a rough patch with some very dear Friends separating from meeting. A faithful remnant had been laboring hard to heal the rifts. Finally, at a business meeting we passed an important milestone in a return to unity.

I crawled into bed that night filled with gratitude, deeply aware of the hard work that still lay ahead of us. I thanked God and asked for help listening for continued guidance. I began thinking about the wonderful old Friends, some dead more than twenty years, who had loved the meeting with all their hearts. I felt sure, wherever they were, they too were full of thanksgiving over the milestone we'd passed that night.

It had long been my hope and intention that when I died, I would continue to pray for my loved ones who were still alive. I hoped that I would pray in new ways made much more helpful because of a new, deeper and wider perspective in death. And I knew without doubt our dear departed Friends had been praying for the meeting.

I addressed each of my old Friends by name, lingering over each one. My mind's eye was full of memory-pictures of each dear Friend, just as they had looked in worship: Fran's quiet joy, Marion's silent praying for the quality of worship among us, Scott's misty yearning for God, Jim and Becky's gentle conviction, Mahlon's modest loyalty and humor. I thanked them for their prayers for the meeting and asked them to keep on praying for us.

I finished my prayers and rolled over to sleep.

Suddenly, my mind's eye was filled with another vivid memory-picture: Wilbur, sitting in his corner by the window, arms folded and head bowed, looking as if he were in the presence of all Eternity—just the way he always looked. Wilbur, too, had been praying us through the hard patch, and wanted me to know it.

"Thanks, Wilbur," I said. "Keep it up. We need every one of your prayers." Comforted and supported, I fell deep asleep.

✞ *Mariellen Gilpin is a member of Champaign-Urbana (IL) Meeting. She is on the editorial team of WCTS.*

THE SECRET OF LIFE IS AS SIMPLE AS THAT

By Joan Pine

Although I do not consider myself a mystic, the deaths of my parents—both brought spiritual gifts that deepened my sense of mystery and my awareness of how close we are to "the other side."

"Amazing Grace" was my mother's favorite hymn, and we sang it at her memorial service in 1996. She and my father had been married 63 years, and he had tenderly cared for her during her last years of Parkinson's, osteoporosis, and small strokes. After all the family attending the memorial had gone home, he was sitting alone in his rocking chair in their retirement center apartment when he heard singing. The hymn was "Amazing Grace," and it sounded like the singers were a mere 30 feet away outside his door. He pulled himself to his feet and stumbled on his bowed and arthritic legs toward the entrance. When he opened the door, no one was there, but the singing continued. He decided it must be a television set or radio in the apartment next door, but he had never heard a sound from anyone else's apartment in the 12 previous years. He closed the door, went back to

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his chair, and listened until all four verses were sung and the music stopped. My father shared this story with very few people because it always brought tears to his eyes. But I know he told one of his neighbors as well as me, because on our next visit there was a tiny Christmas card picture of an angel on his door with the inscription, "Angels We Have Heard on High." It stayed there until I took it with me in his final days of this life.

Those days began in May 2001, when my 94-year-old father was in 24-hour nursing care, unlikely to recover. My twenty-five-year-old daughter went to help at his bedside until there was a turn for better or worse. In daily phone calls with my father, I would ask the same question, "Do you want me to come?" The answer always was, "No need. There's nothing you can do." On June 1, I finally heard, "That would be great." I was on a plane that afternoon.

On First Day, I turned my rented car toward the nearest Friends meeting. Misgivings flooded my mind: "Why am I doing this? This isn't my meeting. I don't know anybody there. I'm not even sure I can find it."

But I did reach the Meetinghouse. About thirty people were scattered around the room. Perhaps five minutes later, a middle-aged lady walked past the section of chairs to the right of mine, placed a small vase of flowers on the floor in the center space, and sat down. At that instant, it seemed that the Spirit entered the room. When I closed my eyes, a wave of Presence passed through me, and I felt a sense of being known to my very core—known, understood, and loved beyond measure. No message was given except that things would turn out all right. I was so touched that the tears began to flow, and I sat there and cried the entire hour. I remember a man speaking about concern for certain members of the meeting who were ill or near death, about our custom as Friends to hold them in the Light, and about the healing power of prayer. I felt that, although I was away geographically, I was at home. When the person who closed worship asked if there were joys and concerns, I felt comfortable sharing the reason for my visit and asking for my father to be held in the Light. Only later did I learn from my husband that he had asked our own meeting that day to remember me in prayer.

Other family members took over the vigil. My husband and I planned to return with my son and his girlfriend to celebrate Grandpa's 95th birthday. I already had ordered the cake for that Monday, July 16.

At 3:30 a.m. on Saturday, the 14th, the day we were to leave, the phone call came that my father was gone. I lay quietly in bed in the dark, feeling some regret that we had not exchanged any final words, only a hug and "I'll be

back for your birthday." As I pondered, the other world seemed near. I pictured my father's soul moving beyond time and space. I had a mental image of him looking younger than I ever knew him, joyously reunited with my mother and running and leaping among his tall brother and three sisters, no longer shackled by his lame legs and the fluid in his lungs. Then words came to me that I felt were from him. "Be loving. The secret of life is as simple as that." And as I thought about it, I realized that those words were a testimony to how he had lived.

✪ *Joan Pine is Vice President of Administration and Communication in a consulting firm that analyzes the clinical quality of health care. She is a member of Evanston (IL) Meeting.*

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES

By Charleen Krueger

About a year before my father died, I began to have experiences that spoke to my condition. As I was walking along slowly on a sunny sidewalk, doing last minute errands prior to flying across the country to see my father, perhaps for the last time, I was stopped mid-stride. A feeling of absolute serenity poured over me like honey from the sky. My arms opened to my sides, my face turned upward, my eyes closed, and I smiled—all of it as involuntary as being jolted to my feet by ministry in meeting. When I opened my eyes, a woman was walking toward me, smiling as if she knew. It happened again in an airport as I worried if I would make it to my father's side in time. And it happened again as I sat quietly with him during his last week of life on earth.

A second kind of experience occurred after my father died. I saw a dark shadow-person shape from the corner of my eye and felt a presence.

No one frightening, just an unannounced visitor. I did not have the feeling this was my father, nor did I receive any teaching or messages. Just someone there, observing.

Now there is a new experience. When I am walking and being still inside, sometimes I walk through a liquid sheet of light. It comes to me, not I to it. Suddenly I am on the other side. Once there were shadow figures there—a tall dark standing shape seen from the side and a kneeling red one, seen from the back. The tall one is solicitous of the kneeling one, a teacher with a pupil. But usually, there is only light and softness and peace. There has also been a concurrent gift with these experiences—acceptance without puzzlement or distress. Worship happens outside of meeting, too.

✪ *Charleen Krueger is a member of Claremont (CA) Monthly Meeting. She knits together the strands of her life as well as various fibers.*

At death's door a person was seen [by early Friends] to be firmly in God's Light...Often the whole family along with visitors and children would gather around the dying person who would preach to them.

Lucy McIver

LIGHT

By Kate Ahmadi

to Nancy
i stay to help
you fail mother
by week
day
faster
hour
stay in bed
nap
more
eat supper in bed
first time
i take away dishes
your eyes close
open
i hesitate
sit on other bed
eyes close
i close mine
hold arms up
inside
pray
yours
thank you
ready
help
light streams down
breath soft
steady

profile beautiful
as before
but new
light
plays
above your face
in repose
peace
first time
is it ever
how long
i kiss your forehead
middle
goodbye mom
see you
there
turn out lights
pull cord screeches
cover your hand
eyes open
are you putting me to
sleep
no you were asleep
i'm putting out the
lights
they made noise
you woke up
your eyes close

☞ *Kate Ahmadi lives on Woodcock Mountain in New York. She is a frequent contributor to WCTS.*

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Keep me ever aware and ever prepared for the summons. If pain comes before the end, help me not to fear it or struggle against it but to welcome it as a hastening of the process by which the strings that bind me to life are untied. Give me joy in awaiting the great change that comes after this life of many changes, grant that my self be merged in Thy self as a candle's wavering light is caught up into the sun.

Elizabeth Gray Vining

GRANDMOTHER'S DREAMS

by Judy Lumb

My grandmother, Ruth Smith, died two months after her 101st birthday. She was lucid and alert until the end. She knew who everyone was, who their children were, and all about their lives. But about six months before she died she seemed to lose the ability to distinguish between dreams and reality. She related images like, "some Gypsies built a fire and were cooking their dinner last night over in that corner."

She talked of Bert and Papa, her husband and father who had been gone for 20 and 40 years, respectively. "Papa and Bert are cutting timber to build me a house out there in the woods [woods she could see from her window]. It should be time for them to come in for dinner soon."

Then the look on her face changed and she said, sadly, "Oh, they're dead, aren't they?"

The project progressed and she spoke of the house being built. I felt that this house was in heaven. A few months later she began packing to move into the new house. Then she stopped eating and drinking. After two weeks she quietly slipped away.

☞ *Judy Lumb is a member of Atlanta Friends Meeting, but has lived in Belize for the past fifteen years. She writes, edits, and publishes environmental, spiritual, and cultural books, maps and newsletters in Belize.*

TWO SACRED EXPERIENCES

by James Baker

On a very rainy night we came upon a terrible car accident. In the darkness a shocked-looking young policeman waved us by. I had a sense that someone did not want to leave, so the four of us in our car held the whole situation in silent prayer the rest of the way home. Later, we read in the paper that a father and mother in the car had both been killed, leaving two young children, who were now in the care of relatives. Our sense of someone not wanting to leave had been true.

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I was fortunate to be with my dad when he died. He had been a quiet man who loved his Bible and playing hymns on the piano. He just wore out, for he had not been seriously ill, but was old and "full of years." On one of the days beforehand when I visited him in the hospital/nursing home I asked him who was his favorite Bible person. He immediately responded, with a smile on his face, "David." Then, after a long pause he said, "He was a man after God's own heart."

On his last day he seemed unaware of my brother and me in the room, for he was working hard at letting go. His breathing was rapid, then a pause, then rapid again—typical of a failing heart. He seemed to be seeing something or someone high in the room ahead of him,

waving his arm upward. My brother left to fetch our mother.

Wanting to be in touch with Dad during this experience, I first placed my hand lightly on his forehead. Then, remembering I had read somewhere that the soul leaves through the “third eye” and I might be interfering with what was happening for him, I moved my hand to his near shoulder.

He seemed to be more calm. The two of us rested that way for a while, then, in a few minutes I felt a light but distinct shudder go through his body, and I knew that he was gone. I closed his eyes. There remained a holy stillness in the room. In the stillness I could sense that he was still present in the room, but was not alone. There seemed an air of rejoicing—of meeting beloved friends. Afterward, at the family “viewing” in the funeral home, although his body was present, he was not. The experience is still very vivid and meaningful for me.

✠ *James is a member of Downers Grove Friends Meeting IL and a frequent contributor to WCTS.*

## **SAFETY**

**by Christine O’Brien**

When my parents were old I went to visit them several days every month. They had taken up my Quaker practice of holding hands in silence before meals. Every meal as I held my father's hand in one hand and my mother's hand in the other, I felt intense gratitude that in this moment, at least, I was able to hold their hands. Each time, I remembered the flow and impermanence of all things of this earth.

For her last Mother's Day I made Mama's card, beginning with Psalms 139:7,9-10:

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I take the wings of the morning  
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even there thy hand shall lead me,  
And thy right hand shall hold me,  
Happy Mother's Day dear Mama - whose hand  
will always hold me.

I held her right hand and felt the warmth leave her body as she died. I stayed there studying the precious, familiar hand for the last time until they took her.

I don't think there is lasting safety in the things of this world. If we are lucky we have moments of gratitude, wonder, joy and love, and we know that something holds us until we sleep.

✠ *Christine O'Brien is a member of the St. Petersburg, FL Meeting and a community activist who at the time of this writing was helping to organize a peace gathering at MacDill Air Force Base for January 18.*

## **SURROUNDED BY ANGELS**

**by Lynn Kirby**

In the last few hours of his life, my father said he saw angels all around him. The rest of the family explained his statements by saying that the objects he “saw” were hallucinations caused by the extent of his cancer and his lifelong fascination with airplanes. The presence of angels was not something we believed or accepted.

Many years later, I was a hospice volunteer. The end of life was harder to face for some of the patients than for others. Some of them wanted to reminisce about their lives. Some talked about what was to come, looked forward to seeing loved ones who had already died, and truly believed that they would be in a better place. One patient carefully avoided talking about anything spiritual, and she fought death up to the very end. Some of the patients slept most of the time I sat with them, being too sick or sedated for conversation.

Two people stand out in my mind. The first was a man, whom I'll call Chet, who was in the hospital. He was very close to death, and his son had to leave the room in order to have lunch and to make a business telephone call. I was asked to sit with Chet, a stranger to me, for about an hour. My job was to keep him as comfortable as possible. I was to spray his lips and tongue with water occasionally, because the heavy doses of morphine made them very dry. Chet was unconscious, and as he tried to breathe he made sounds that made me gag. I was ashamed of my reaction, but it came involuntarily.

The other patient was a woman in a nursing home, whom I will call Joyce. I saw Joyce three or four times, but each visit was short. My job was to feed her lunch, as she was too weak to feed herself. On my last visit with Joyce, she smelled bad and her skin and fingernails had turned colors that people shouldn't be. Again I struggled with the urge to gag.

Both times, as soon as I saw my reaction to their physical condition, I prayed that I would be given sympathy for them and the ability to see beyond their bodies. Both times I was immediately overcome with intense feelings of love for them, and my sense of revulsion completely disappeared. I saw the beauty of their beings. I felt like a conduit of God's love, overwhelming love, which seemed to flow through me to them. I had a sense of being loved, sending love, and loving beyond measure. The love was far more intense than I have ever felt on my own.

Both Chet and Joyce died within two or three hours after I last saw them, when love was so palpable in their room. Maybe my father really was surrounded by angels.

✠ *Lynn Kirby is a member of Stevens Point (WI) Friends Meeting. Her interest in death and dying comes from having been a hospice volunteer, books she has read, and a belief that life on earth is only a small part of our story.*

## **JASON AT 25**

**By Barb Coyle**

My son is gone to the other side  
of Spirit and vibration.

I, lacking both, sit still, inanimate  
as others feel my grief for me, imagine my sorrow,  
hold me in silence.

Longing for this first born son of mine does not  
bring him back. My chest aches with burden, my throat  
ties shut as tears flow warm as blood down my face.

My son is gone to the other side  
of Spirit and vibration.

My son Jason Martz died of a combination of sleep  
apnea and alcohol. He was 25. A parent's nightmare.

The night after I found out, I sat at the dining room  
table, and sensed a "brown vibrating" at my shoulder. I  
clearly had the sense that my son was communicating with  
me, saying he was so sorry for what had happened. The  
next day I spoke with my ex-husband, who said that he too  
had had the message of sorrow for his actions from our  
son.

I do not know what death is. I know what loss is.

And I know the power of Quakers holding me in  
prayer. For this I give thanks.

*Barb Coyle is a member of Milwaukee (WI) Meeting.*

## **STANDING ON HOLY GROUND**

**by Rita Varley**

About a year and a half ago, Barbara, my next door  
neighbor, invited me to accompany her on a visit to her  
uncle who was in a hospital dying of cancer. I had never  
met her uncle, but was glad to spend some time with  
Barbara, and to be supportive of her. When we came into  
his room at the hospital there were two other relatives who  
had not seen Barbara in a while, and they began to visit  
with her in soft voices. Since I didn't know any of the  
relatives, I didn't join the conversation. I sat silently in the  
corner, and turned my attention to the uncle who was  
lying in the bed, quietly unconscious. I prayed for him,  
and held him in the Light.

After the hospital visit, Barbara and I returned to our  
homes. I went to bed around 10:00 and fell asleep. Then I  
was awakened suddenly, feeling like I was beside  
Barbara's uncle, feeling him wiggling back and forth,  
trying to get loose from his body. I sent him love, and  
prayed for him. He came loose and I could feel him get  
free of the body, and all was well. I had no doubt about  
what I had just experienced, and felt honored to be  
permitted to participate in the sacrament of his crossing  
over.

I looked at my clock and saw that it was around 15  
minutes after midnight. The next day, Barbara called me

in the afternoon to tell me that her uncle had been  
pronounced dead at 12:30 that night.

It was interesting to me to discover how close a  
connection to a previously unknown person can be created  
through quiet focused prayer. My attention during prayer  
had been relaxed and receptive such as when watching a  
movie. Most of my experiences of spiritual connection  
with people close to death (either before or after) have  
been with people not close to me. When the dying person  
was close to me, like Barbara and her relatives. I was so  
caught up with the physical aspects and needs of the  
moment, that they crowded out the relaxed state required  
to be receptive to non-physical contact.

*Bio to follow.*

## **FINDING MY WAY INTO THE LIGHT**

**by Lois Pomeroy**

I believe that death is a sacred passage from here to  
elsewhere but not everyone believes as I do. Not my  
friend, for instance, who thought she believed what I did  
until she came right up to the door. Then, suddenly  
terrified, she put on the brakes. She came to think that  
death was the end—an end she did not want to know  
about or tolerate, one that needed to be denied.

Ellen has been my friend for three years. For all three  
of those years she has had cancer. Our friendship  
developed during the two-hour-long drives together to get  
her to radiation therapy. Even when she felt lousy, our  
minds connected wonderfully. She knew things I didn't.  
She'd read books I hadn't; or, if we'd read the same books,  
she saw them in new and challenging ways. We talked  
about literature, relationships, and our beliefs about life  
and death. She brought a discerning eye to everything we  
saw. On our drives we marvelled at the changing sky as  
October (diamond brilliant) gave way to November  
(steely) and then to December (opalescent).

Finally, the treatments were over and Ellen was given  
assurances that, after healing from radiation burns, she  
would be cured. When the spring sky was soft and pale,  
there was a recurrence. We drove up for more treatments  
and then once again, a third series. Finally this August  
Ellen was told that medically nothing more could be done.

For almost four months now Ellen has lain immobile  
on an inflated bed, unable to move anything but her right,  
non-dominant arm. A big, active woman, she has wasted  
away. Her closest relative, a sister who has moved in to  
care for her, kept urging me to talk to Ellen about "what  
was coming." She had selected me for this assignment  
because not only was I a therapist, I was also a religious  
person who went to meeting every Sunday. Ellen and I  
talked; but somehow the serious conversation about death  
and eternity never happened.

Then one day Ellen seemed tired. Perhaps the morphine was making her muzzy. I was content to just stand by the bed and be with her. I didn't need sparkling conversation. I was comfortable with silence and actually welcomed it. Suddenly, she opened her eyes and said, "I am trying to psych you out to see which category you fit in. To see if you believe in me or if you are one of those who have given up on me."

We talked of other things for a minute and then I asked her if she had made up her mind where I belonged. "Yes, and you don't want to know." From then on the atmosphere between us changed to cool—even icy and hostile, I thought.

I felt torn and wretched and took all those feelings to meeting with me. As I mulled over them, my attention suddenly cleared. I didn't exactly hear God's voice but it was very close to that. Death, far from being a blanking out, is a way forward. I was filled with a certainty that all was well. I felt love for Ellen. Any ideas that I had failed her and hadn't done something right disappeared. At the rise of meeting, I shared my peace and joy with the others present. Together we held my friend in the Light.

I would like to be able to report that I communicated all this to Ellen and our relationship returned to its past warmth. Not true. Instead her condition worsened until I ended up being one of four people who stood implacably around her bed until she consented to being transported to the hated hospital.

Now, after a week of hospital care, Ellen is back from the edge. Still she does not brighten up when I visit the way she used to. In fact, last time I dropped in, she told me that I "could wipe that look off my face now" as she was going to live.

That look is just the truth shining out of my eyes. Perhaps I could hide it and pretend to be interested in superficialities; but I don't want to. What I want is to share with her the certainty of an infinite future of love and joy that came to me in meeting. But Ellen does not want to hear that. At least not now.

For the present, she is in good hands. She is on a morphine drip which makes her comfortable. Visitors who love her dearly come to entertain her. They provide a welcome distraction. My best bet is just to drop in from time to time. I would like to have walked right up to that door in the passage and to have been there with her when she went through, but I think it is kinder to stay back and keep my truth-filled eyes to myself.

I'll stay available though, because life has lots of surprises and there may be more twists before the door at the end of this life opens for her and then shuts so that the earth-bound rest of us get no more than a glimpse of what lies ahead.

✪ *Lois Pomeroy is a member of New Paltz Monthly Meeting of New York Yearly Meeting. After a career of listening Lois is beginning to feel called to write.*

*Death then, being the way  
and condition of life,  
We cannot love to live,  
If we cannot bear to die...*

*William Penn*

## **LIFE OR DEATH, CHOOSE!**

**by Karen Modell**

I carry a cartoon in my daybook that shows the grim reaper knocking on a door. The fellow behind the door is asking if it is opportunity knocking. The reaper replies, "Once in every lifetime." And so it has been for me.

In 1988 my husband was diagnosed with an acute strain of leukemia and died three weeks later. One evening towards the end of his brief ordeal his doctor told me he did not think my husband would survive the night. I became outraged. It was after eleven. The next day was my birthday. I angrily told my husband if he were to die on my birthday I would never forgive him. The next morning, which was a Saturday, I came to the hospital with a large cake to share with every one who came into the intensive care unit. All day I kept up a conversation about what we would have been doing, what presents he should have bought for me, where he could have taken me for dinner and the like. When I left for the night I reminded my husband that if he were home we would still be celebrating, and I expected my birthday to last all weekend. It was not until Monday that I finally was willing to tell him the party was over. He died that night.

Everyone around me, including my own family, tried to help me "get over it." I had no one to guide me through the bereavement process. None of the people I knew at that time understood mourning to be a rite of passage to be gone through, experienced and integrated in order to move into a new life. My friends just wanted to see me be happy. There was no place for me to go with my tears. So I choked on my grief and in less than two years I too was diagnosed with a terminal cancer and given a prognosis of less than a year to live.

Terrified of the medical system where I had just witnessed my otherwise healthy husband die quickly, I searched for spiritual healing. I did not care what form it might take, a Christian faith healer, a Voodoo babaloo, or a Native American medicine man, prayers, crystals, herbs or energy-fields. I willingly explored it all, but I was still very sick. I returned to the mainstream where I quickly exhausted all treatment options without any improvement.

Along the way I did have some very profound spiritual experiences and an epiphany. It was as if the still small voice had said, "I place before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose!" At that moment I chose DEATH. I believed it would solve my problems. Death

might even be the doorway to the unfiltered God experience I had been craving for so long, and I was willing to step through it.

I let go of the search for cures or healing on any level. I set up camp at the intersection of the Road of Life and the Gateway to Eternity and waited to die. I had no idea how or when it would happen. I just waited. This turned out to be the most life-enhancing action I could have taken. I rested peacefully expecting an even deeper peace to overcome me. My body stopped destroying itself and slowly mended. Almost effortlessly, things shifted, doors opened, opportunities presented themselves and gradually health was restored.

After awhile I was no longer a lost soul who stood at the crossroad weeping. I had become someone who was able to offer assistance to other weary travelers making the pilgrimage through life-challenging illnesses. I enrolled in and graduated from a seminary, completed clinical pastoral education, changed careers and moved thousands of miles away from the city I had always lived in, relocating five times in less than three years.

My own experiences continue to lead me towards the Light, making me a purveyor of compassion and enabling me to be the guide who was missing from my journey. Working as a hospice chaplain was not what I had in mind when I chose death, but it is where that choice has taken me. On a daily basis people wait for me to recognize that of God within them and show them the Light that is within me. I may not have gotten what I thought I was asking for, but I certainly have been given what I truly prayed for.

☞ *Karen Modell works as a hospice chaplain. Over the years she has been a regular attendee of 15th Street Meeting in New York City, Seattle's University Meeting, and Miami Meeting before finally joining Palm Beach Monthly Meeting.*

## DEATH AS AN ADVENTURE

By John R. Ewbank

I feel extremely lucky to be alive and active at 86. Our ignorance about when death will come makes living more interesting. Because I was only 7 when my mother died, and two brothers died during the next 45 months, I have focused more attention upon death than some. Even in my 20s I was concerned about having documents organized in such a manner that others could readily cope if sudden death occurred. I have revised wills every few years. For fifty years I have had revisions of obituaries in the file with my will. Insofar as I am aware, I have not had any significant fear of death and have accepted such inevitability much as I accept my propensity to breathe so long as I am living.

I have been in prayer groups for individuals approaching death. Such experiences have strengthened my adventuresome approach toward death. This cosmos involves a baffling mixture of fate, randomness, love,

hate, creativity, destructiveness, etc. Cosmologically, there seems hope that the loving aspects of this evolving universe will have beneficent effects in future decades and centuries. Obviously there has been much degradation and corruption of the world in my 86 years. My perspectives on the potentialities of spiritual evolution provide me with hope for the future notwithstanding dangerous trends of centralized corruption.

Attitudes toward death inevitably undergo transformations as one ages, and if I were to live to 106 I would probably want to revise this essay. If any readers have undergone modifications of perspectives about death, they can look forward to unique modifications in future decades. Meanwhile I will try to enjoy the adventure toward death.

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*Bio to follow.*

- *Have I considered how I might love myself even in the midst of the inevitable frailties I will encounter as I die?*
- *How do I imagine death: as an ending, a beginning—or both?*

*Catherine Whitmire, Plain Living*

## OPENED TO HEALING

by Lisa Rand

I want to say a very belated thank you. Just over a year ago there was an issue of WCTS about forgiveness. A contribution in that issue triggered a powerful healing process for me. The story was about a very troubled relationship. The writer had been hurt deeply, and the person who hurt her was dying. The writer shared her story of forgiving the hurt. [Carol Roth, "As We Forgive Those..." WCTS, August 2001]

I happened to read this story at the hour my aunt died. My aunt was a heroin addict and died of AIDS. No matter how I tried, I had been unable to forgive her for the many hurts she had caused me and my family. Even focusing on her suffering, which had led her to drugs as a salve in the first place, or her suffering at seeing the pain she caused—even this did not help me forgive. I was not ready to do so.

As I read the story in WCTS, I felt a release inside of me. I cried and cried. I sighed relief, and I forgave. You can imagine my shock to learn, the following morning, about my aunt's death, her release from suffering.

☞ *Lisa Rand is assistant editor of Friends Journal. She attends Central Philadelphia (PA) Meeting.*

## LIVE AS IF YOU WILL NEVER DIE

by Wayne Swanger

It has been weeks since I went public in my opposition to the resolution to attack Iraq. Although I harbored serious misgivings from the beginning to the pre-emptive aggression that was proposed, I was reluctant to express myself. In part my reluctance was a result of a fear of being labeled unpatriotic. In part it was my fear of venomous attacks by ideologues who have supported a wide range of misogynous programs in this country and who seem to hold sway in government and media. There was too much discomfort in publicly opposing the majority. In part, I believed that this fight was not mine. I experienced the struggles of the Vietnam resistance and my time for involvement in such matters was past. In addition, I was not one whose life would be directly affected by a war in the Middle East. This was a fight for peace to be lead by another generation.

Over time the tension within me grew. I was unable to simply ignore the consequences of a foreign policy that if implemented would affect hundreds of thousands of lives; a policy that might affect my young sons more directly than I cared to imagine; a policy that would make this world a less safe and just place. I decided that I had to step out and meet those who agreed with me and those who disagreed with me. I attended a peace rally.

Two days later at meeting for worship, the following passage was illuminated during the silence:

In Nikos Kazantakis' book, *Zorba the Greek*, Zorba recounts the following story. As Zorba walked through a small village an old man was planting an almond tree on his property. Apparently, Zorba was slightly curious and amused that a man of such advanced age was planting a tree that would not bear fruit in his lifetime. The old man, noting Zorba's bemusement, remarked that he lived as if he would never die. Zorba replied with his trademark jocularly that he lived as if he would die tomorrow.

Indeed, Zorba lived his life as if there were no tomorrow. He was both passionate and sensitive. He sought immediate comfort and pleasure for himself and a few select acquaintances. His efforts towards his goals were intense and at times admirable. He was a likeable rogue. Unfortunately, he frequently brought misfortune and pain to himself and others despite his good intentions. This was due to his short-sightedness, his inability to look beyond immediate pleasures and rewards.

In the incident described by Zorba the old man looked beyond the immediate gratification of planting a tree. Certainly, he may have enjoyed the small pleasures of working the soil and planting the tree, but these were hardly his primary goals. It might even be expected that planting the tree brought a certain amount of discomfort and pain given his advanced age. The pains and pleasures of the present were inconsequential. He was concerned with the future. The fruits of the tree would be there for

him, if he should miraculously live so long, but more importantly the fruits would be there for his children and his grandchildren.

Similarly, we may choose as individuals or as a nation to live as either Zorba or the old man. We may choose to live like Zorba, as if we will die tomorrow. Our goals may be to maximize our immediate comfort and pleasures with little thought or concern for the future. Consequently, we can carelessly and dangerously neglect the effects of our actions or inaction on our children and grandchildren. On the other hand, we may choose to live like the old man. We may choose to live as if we will never die. Our goals may be to do today that which will produce peace and happiness for the future. Consequently, we consider how our actions or inaction will affect those who will follow. Our present actions may result in immediate labor and sacrifice but will bear fruit another day—a day that we may live to enjoy or perhaps not.

I choose to stand for peace at a time when it may be uncomfortable. I choose to stand on street corners where I am subject to withering looks, obscene gestures, and derisive comments. I choose to stand in the cold wind or rain to plant a tree, an olive tree of peace. My efforts may not bear fruit today, but bear fruit they will. I choose to live like the old man...as if I will never die.

☛ Wayne Swanger notes about this article: "My thoughts regarding this passage from Zorba have changed over time and I suspect that they will continue to evolve. This piece has less to do with death than it does about how we might live given our views of death." He attends both *Oshkosh Monthly Meeting* and *Winnebago Worship Group* and has found a spiritual home among Friends.

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