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# What Canst Thou Say?

**Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice**

*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*

## Death and Dying: Gifts

### Coming Close to Death

William H. Mueller

I have come close to death five times during my life. In every case, I ascribe my continuing ability to breathe to a deep wisdom of the body and something spiritual. Medical science was heavily involved in two of the events. Without it, in one case I would undoubtedly have died; in the other, very possibly. But medical science is given us by God. Didn't God put Adam into a deep sleep, draw out a rib and shape it into the helpful presence that completes the faithful and welcoming community (*Genesis 2:18-22*)? And after this first recorded surgical operation in Western history, was not Adam required (in order to recover and heal) to return to his rib and *they became one flesh* (*Genesis 2:23-24*)?<sup>1</sup> Community is healing!

In each instance I was unaware I could have died at the time, though in one case I was so sick, I couldn't think straight, and indeed have never been sicker in my life. But I have never forgotten these events. There is also a nagging remembrance of some obscure lesson that someone is trying to tell me: *You are loved and there is work we want you to do in this life, and that is why we are watching over you. Kindly pick up your sleeping mat and walk around* [when ready and willing]. (*John 5:8*)

In recounting these experiences of coming close to death, I don't mean to imply that I am special in some way. The things that have happened to me very commonly occur for most, if not all people, during their lives. Such events bring us closer to God, or at the very least, enrich us with a gratitude and peace that *is beyond our understanding* (*Philippians 4:7*).

Three of the events occurred in my 20s. Two of them occurred at a place I adored, where I felt close to God—an ineffable joy—the Santanoni peaks of the Adirondack Mountains. It is in one of the most remote areas of New York state, and its peaks are still trail-less.

i) I was climbing Panther Peak on snowshoes on top of eight feet of snow with a friend. We had attempted to climb the preceding summer and had gotten lost in an impossible tangle of fallen trees, called a “blowdown.” My friend suggested we come back in the spring when a blanket of snow would cover the blowdown and facilitate our climb. This we did, but I was ill-prepared. I had never been on snowshoes, but no matter. I imagined that with snowshoes one simply glides magically over the top of the snow, unimpeded by any human limitations, such as inadequate winter gear and training.

I soon found out that snowshoes could slip suddenly on the uneven slope, inconveniently exposing once-dry socks to moisture and once-dry toes to ice in the near-freezing temperatures. As we came off the mountain I began to sense everything was not right. No matter how much I exerted myself, I could not get warm. When we reached our vehicle, miles hence, we both instantly fell exhausted into a deep sleep. I was awakened later (how much later?) by excruciating pain in toes and fingers—frostbite! Only years later would the term “hypothermia” become common in explaining what had happened to me and my friend that spring.

ii) At another time on the same mountain it was early fall, and I began to get pains in my stomach while trying to

### From the Editor:

*The following stories speak not only about death, but about how death can touch lives. We are fortunate that so many people were willing to share so deeply.*

God Bless, Michael Resman

<sup>1</sup>Biblical quotes are in italics and are from the *New Jerusalem Bible*, 1985, unless otherwise noted.

fall asleep at our campsite. I denied the queerness of this pain, and dismissed it as indigestion. I distinctly remember telling myself, "This is gas pain," and something answered back, "But there's no gas." Denial is not a river in Egypt, and it can be life-saving!

Feeling better in the morning, my companions and I climbed Santanoni peak and successfully returned to our home-town, Syracuse. To make a long story short, the pain returned and was diagnosed as appendicitis. After a week in the hospital in which I was near-starved (they gave me only a drip pending a possible operation), my symptoms disappeared, whereupon I was sent home. I ate everything in sight but especially good things like hot dogs and ice cream. (Where are the dietitians when you need them?)

The symptoms soon returned in more ominous form. I was rushed to the hospital, shaking uncontrollably. When I woke up from the operation, the attending physician explained the bloody drain in my side by saying my appendix was "quite tied down." Decades later, a family physician explained to me what he had meant: I had had a ruptured appendix and a 50/50 chance of survival, even with Alexander Fleming's antibiotics!

iii) My favorite scientist saved my life later as well, when I came down with typhoid fever while serving in the Peace Corps. I was in a little village five hours by uncomfortable bus ride from the city of Bogota, Colombia. A thought plunked into my head some months after I had begun my service, that I had worked hard to get my project going and I now deserved a small vacation. It urged me to go to Bogota for the weekend and enjoy the sinful pleasures of a movie, and bacon and eggs at the fancy gringo hotel.

I got to the movie. I should say that in Bogota it is cold and one dresses formally, always in suit and tie, and with sweater underneath for the cold. As I

watched the film I became aware that things were heating up. I removed my jacket. That was insufficient. Then I removed my sweater. That didn't work; then I removed my tie. Finally, I said to myself, "You have got to get out of here; something is terribly wrong." I returned to my room. I got sicker by the minute. High fever, nausea. It subsided and I slept.

I went to the Peace Corps doctor next day. He said it was probably typhoid. I protested I had been inoculated. "Yes, but it doesn't work very well," he explained helpfully. I was sent to the Military Hospital, the best in the country. I got sicker. High fevers got higher. They started the antibiotics; the fever went away; immediately I felt better. Phew, glad that's over! No way, fever came back, higher fever, no sweating, followed by plummeting body temperatures, cold, and then, and only then, did pores open up and let out all the water in my body at once. I woke up with the bed drenched as if someone had poured a gallon of water on it. Vomiting without cease!

Gradually the fever/chill cycle lessened as the antibiotics took hold. After my release I had to remain for a week or more to make sure the antibiotics were not destroying my red cells,

and that I was not a typhoid carrier (I imagined 'Typhoid Bill').

My weekend in the capital city had turned into three weeks! The villagers were beginning to wonder. When I returned, I explained I had come down with typhoid fever. They were amazed because everyone around here, they said, usually got typhoid when they were youngsters, like to us, measles or mumps. Why had I waited so long? Why, indeed?

Who told me to go up to Bogota when I did? If the fever had already started in the village, how could I have made it in that bus for five vomiting hours? I could not imagine.

iv) At age 50 I was back-packing in the mountains of New Mexico. This was a ten-mile-a-day 50-mile hike with the Sierra Club. On the third day we encountered an area of fallen trees (I should have been forewarned by this sign!). The leader of our group wisely led my companions down a ravine and around the fallen-tree area. Me? I took one look at the mess ahead and told myself, "I can climb over that." The fact was, we had been climbing all day and I was tired, and I didn't want to have to go down into the ravine, only to have to climb up again on the other side.

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So over I went. I got to the top-most tree and with one last exertion, I pushed myself over; except I forgot I had a 40-pound pack on my back. The “oomph” I had “oomphed” to get myself over the top was insufficient, because the weight of the pack hadn’t been factored in. I began to fall backwards. Then began a marvelous and timeless ballet. Time stood still; I rammed my walking stick in between the timbers to stop my fall; it broke and I duly noted that, letting it go; I felt myself turn 90 degrees in the direction of the logs lengthwise. I reached for my ankles and balled-up fetal-style; backwards I began to roll down the top log toward the bottom of the ravine, the same ravine I had thought earlier to avoid.

During my fall I lost all consciousness of the usual sort. There were no sounds, no thoughts, I simply rolled and do not remember anything about the fall. My feet landed on terra firma at the bottom. Sound and light suddenly reappeared. I became aware of the repeated, frantic shouting of my companions, “Are you all right?” Unlike myself, they had had to witness this ridiculous fall!

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said, shaken. I noticed a bleeding gash on my right elbow for which I could not account. For the rest of the day I was all energy and delightedness, whereas my companions seemed sluggish. In my survived-it arrogance I looked forward to showing off the ugly gash, my red badge of courage, to my kids when I got home. But there I was destined to be disappointed. My horrible gash healed itself in record time. Two days later it had all but disappeared!

It was then I began to be aware of the wisdom of the body. My body had flooded itself with healing chemicals after the emergency chemicals (adrenaline) had subsided.

This experience, coupled with my anthropological training, eventually

led me to realize the first story of man and woman in the Bible is about the wisdom of the body (*Genesis 2 and 3*).

Though often taken to be a story of a “fall” and of disobedience to God’s advice, I began to realize it is instead, the story of a “call” and a gift from God.

God is calling us in this story to a conversation with him about life and death. He is opening to us, through an encouraging reptile and brave woman, the tragedy with which the human race is faced as it has come to overpopulate the earth. Ecological disaster due to overpopulation is the subject of the first 11 chapters of *Genesis*, biblical scholars tell us.<sup>2</sup>

God says we must be sent out of the Garden of Eden and into a world in which our eyes are opened to suffering, that is a part of life.

The Hebrew solution to suffering is that we are to join with God in overcoming it. But first we must be made aware that we are in fact nothing more than dust (without God’s breath of life in us) and some day must return to dust (*Genesis 3:19*). This is an early vision of what the Christian/Jewish reformers of the first century would call poverty of spirit (*Matthew 5:3*). We are utterly dependent on God, but will do all right, though the way will not be easy, as long as we are with God.

In this story the snake directs his attention to the woman. God has spoken to the man in *Genesis 2*, now it is woman’s turn. God encourages her to learn about what Martin Buber calls our “two-fold attitude”<sup>3</sup>. This includes the distinction between life and death. She shares the fruit with her husband, and only when it is shared, are the eyes of both of them opened to the human

<sup>2</sup>R. J. Clifford & R. E. Murphy, “Genesis”, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1990, pp. 8-18.

<sup>3</sup>M. Buber, *I and Thou*, W. Kaufmann, trans., Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970, p. 51.

condition (*Genesis 3:7*). They now are aware for the first time of the distinction between life and death, good and bad, security and insecurity. For the first time they feel something, and it is the discomfort of exposure; they feel naked (*Genesis 3:7*).

After this revelation things change; among other things, the snake is sent to the base of the tree, where he is commanded to eat dust as long as you live (*Genesis 3:14*). But dust in this story is symbolic of death. The snake will eat death, will eternally protect us in situations in which our lives are in danger and to which the higher brain, the crown of the tree of knowledge with its heady fruit (thoughts), cannot possibly respond. And this is exactly what happened to me in my “fall.”

It was the serpent that had saved me. The part of the brain that takes over in times of danger scientists to this day call “the reptilian brain,” at the base of the brain stem. Thank God for snakes on trees that spoke to our beloved ancestors, and who are still with us, and know what to do when we do not.

v) I was driving on an Interstate highway in the midst of a Texas deluge. When it deluges in Texas, it is something beyond belief. The windshield wipers could not operate fast enough to allow me to see properly. Being in my 30s, I was being less than careful, perhaps because I regarded myself as an always-careful driver, any evidence to the contrary conveniently discarded. Suddenly an eighteen-wheeler passed me, splashing a wave upon the car. Now, even I could not deny it; I was blind and racing at 50-60 miles an hour. What to do?

What happened next, when I thought about it later, astonished me. Without thinking and against all reason and logic, I tromped on the accelerator. When the car shot ahead, the windshield instantly became clear and I could see perfectly. Then I could slow down gradually to a safer speed for

## So Hard To Let Go

Dan Mudd

the conditions. The serpent had acted on my behalf in this case too; he had not let me think about it, for if I had, I probably would have hit the brake, bringing more water from the car-top (and doom) down on the windshield. The wisdom of the body again, a gift of the Great Spirit!

One of the things I have noticed about spiritual experiences, and I believe all five of the emergency events I just recounted are, at least in part, spiritual experiences, is that one does not forget them. I don't mean that they are always in our conscious mind, but their lesson eventually emerges into consciousness and teaches us when the moment is right.

When death showed itself to me, I felt that I had met my maker, at least in part. I discovered how I am awesomely, wondrously made, and that when I sit down or stand up You know it; You discern my thoughts from afar. You observe my walking and reclining, and are familiar with all my ways.... You hedge me before and behind; You lay your hand upon me. Indeed, I may ask: *Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too. If I take wing with the dawn to come to rest on the western horizon, even there Your hand will be guiding me, Your right hand will be holding me fast.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Psalm 139-TANAKH-The Jewish Bible



What Canst Thou Say?

There are so many kinds of death. Sometimes by the time a person gets to the actual point of death they are quite ready for the next experience. My brother Wally was ready. He died of cancer just before Thanksgiving in 2009. Wally would have preferred a quicker way. But he calmly and courageously accepted the last months of his life. I did not.

Wally was my kid brother. I have no memory of life without him. As children we were always together. As adults we found ourselves on opposite sides of the fence philosophically and politically. We never let that get between us. I do not think I could have moved out west if it had not been for Wally's support and encouragement. When I pulled away from my home in Louisville I looked back and saw him wiping a tear from his eye. I wondered if I could really make the move. We spoke on the phone almost daily during the weeks and months that followed.

When Wally told me about his illness the world stopped. By the time I got to Louisville he was in the hospital. They could not find where the cancer had begun. I held him in the Light. I prayed in the most affirming way I could that he would be cured. I expressed gratitude for such a good brother—all trying to keep him here. That was selfish of me, but understandable considering my deep love for him. Finally the doctors discovered that the cancer that had metastasized began in the breast and did not generally respond to treatment. Wally accepted it right away. He did not want to experience pain or humiliation nor did he want to inconvenience his family. It pretty much worked out that way.

I do not know what my brother is doing now. Eternal life is just that. I do not know what life holds for me tomorrow, except that there will be

That from which I came somewhere in the experience. Somehow, somewhere, Life goes on. The truth is, I sometimes wonder why I bother with the effort to continue. Life can be tedious for me. Then I think of the incredible fact that I can contemplate my existence. Not only that, I am aware that there is The Other. I sometimes think that is the hardest part, knowing there is The Other and I am here dealing with work, traffic, relationships of all kinds, and thinking that I am alone...but I am never alone. It is always so interesting to see the people who show up in my life. There is always the Divine within and without.

So I continue to create and experiment with living until it is time for something else. I always thought that there would be another day in which to do the things I wanted to do. Now there is... not quite a sense of urgency, but certainly a desire to live more deliberately. Writing this piece is an example of that. The exploration continues, and I am grateful.

*There is a death occurring  
In my heart  
In my head  
In my soul  
Seed is left  
Along with compost and mulch  
The tension of the dark is  
almost unbearable  
Almost  
Water softens and expands the  
Seed  
Light draws it out and up  
Life is here  
Now*

*Dan Mudd is a member of Pima Monthly Meeting in Tucson, Arizona. His spiritual practices revolve around meditation, dream work, writing, and sometimes paying attention. He considers inner work to be a form of activism and facilitates a lay dream work group.*

# Swirled Gray

Dan Mudd

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. *Genesis 1:2 KJV*

*I look ahead and see all grayness  
I look behind and grayness swirls*

*What's the difference where I'm going  
From where I've been and where I'm standing now  
Where is the sunlight and joyful living  
Where is the love that keeps me bound  
To days ahead and dreams unfound  
Is there really any reason to move from season on to season  
To move through more gray till day after day I'm finally dead  
The gray is now black instead  
Black has its peace its calm no swirl  
But lonely oh so lonely  
With only me for there to be  
Then with a little light black turns to gray  
I come around for another stay  
Now in shades of gray I see  
that there is you right here with me  
The loneliness fades then ceases  
From the blackness we do grow  
Until at last I seem to know  
That far across this great big land  
These people from all different clans  
Started the same way  
When blackness and a bit 'o light  
Stirs and becomes gray  
Then from somewhere deep within me  
Sparks do fly and warmness rises  
I see the sky is blue and red and orange  
I see there is so much more than me  
The mountains and the valleys low  
The sound when the whale does blow  
All the creatures great and small  
Forests fields and waterfall  
And you my Love I did not see  
When I was all wrapped up in me  
Now along with gray I see the splendor of the day  
Cold and warmth shine and rain  
Laughter music even pain  
God it's good to be alive  
To see and feel and think and be*

*Yet in stillness between moments  
To the darkness I must go  
Steal away to be near You  
This I need this I know  
For more than breath light or friendship  
More than earthly kings can give  
Every day I must be near You  
If I really want to live*

## **Tell Us Your Stories!**

*WCTS has a vision—we want to tell the world that God is much more various and wonderful than our skeptical culture allows. We hope to help Friends be tender and open to the Spirit. We need your experience—it may be just what someone else needs to know! Please share your stories. WCTS is here to strengthen us all on our journeys. Please let us know how your journey has been transformed by your experience.*

*When you write for WCTS, here are some things to keep in mind. Articles that best communicate to our readers generally focus on specific events and are written in the first person. There is a special richness when the writer goes beyond describing the experience and tells how it has changed his/her life. However, mystical experiences and contemplative insights may transcend editorial processes, so please consider these guidelines as gentle assistance rather than limitations. In general we shy away from articles that expound on theoretical or theological propositions. We want WCTS to be sensitive to the diversity of our communities, so we avoid any writing that would stereotype or degrade any religion or peoples. Write for us as frequently as the Spirit moves.*

*With joyous expectation we look forward to receiving your contribution to our worship-sharing group in print.*

*The Editorial Team of WCTS:  
Mariellen Gilpin, Judy Lumb, and Michael Resman*

# Struggling to Accept

Tina Coffin

It was a clear, late afternoon in March when I woke up from cancer surgery, alone in my hospital room. I was filled with peace and unexplainable joy. I knew the lump in my breast had been too large for a lumpectomy; I knew I had lost my breast, but it didn't seem to matter. A veil of happiness enveloped me. I realized with gratitude that this joy was a gift from the Spirit. I could joke with the hospital chaplain who stopped by my bed. I needed no hand-holding, no prayer for "poor Tina"; I was blessed already.

My second visitor that afternoon was Dr. R, my primary care physician. He had come with one purpose it seemed: to make sure I realized that I was not going to survive this. "Your time on earth will be short; you'll need to make your peace with Jesus; you'll soon meet your parents again." Startled, I answered I didn't believe I was at death's door. "Oh, you might dodge this bullet," he said in a tone that made it clear I shouldn't count on it. Then he left the room.

Had I been so naïve not to consider I might die from this? I don't really know. I had accepted disfigurement and chemotherapy and other possible unpleasant treatments. But not imminent death. Down the road maybe, but not just now.

A great sadness washed over me, then panic and fear of the deep, dark unknown. It felt as if I had just stepped from a sunny sidewalk into a revolving door, and there was nothing on the other side but a deep, dark hole.

The oncologist who stopped by was a bit more positive than Dr. R., but after discussing treatment options, she told me that, alas, there was no guarantee the cancer would not return.

When my husband John came, I wasn't able to share my fear and panic. I needed to work through this, at least for the time being, before I could talk about it. Luckily, I was not nauseated, needed no attention from the nurses, and after John went home, I was left alone. Alone with my grief, my fear, my darkness.

Life was so incredibly, so immensely beautiful. I was not looking forward to an afterlife, if there was one. With all its beauty, its gore, its sufferings, its joy, its music, its poetry and its glorious vistas, this life was a hard act to follow. I didn't want to give it up. I was only 51. A nurse came in to give me a shot, and somewhat blissfully I drifted into sleep.

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*With all its beauty, its gore, its sufferings, its joy, its music, its poetry and its glorious vistas, this life was a hard act to follow. I didn't want to give it up.*

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I woke up to the thought "I have to die." Someone brought me a cup of tea. The sun had just come up and still half asleep, drinking the warm liquid and with sunlight on my face, I thought: "Perhaps dying is like this, peaceful, half-conscious, a soothing liquid ...." It wasn't acceptance, just a blessed moment without dread.

In the weeks that followed I learned to pray again, mostly in the words of the Dutch poet, Geerten Gossaert, "*Laat nu in angst en pijn. Meester, mijnietalleen.*"

*Now, in fear and pain,  
I beg you not to abandon me  
Whom can I turn to but you?*

And then the imploring lines:

*Don't leave me, don't leave me  
Don't leave me oh my God!  
Don't make a mockery of your  
love and loyalty.*

Two weeks into chemotherapy, nauseated and alone at home, I was lying on the couch imploring God to hold me and keep me, saying the words of the poem over and over. Suddenly the nausea was gone. I was astounded. Was God letting me know He was glad that after all these years I was praying to Him again? Was it an encouragement to keep praying?

I needed no encouragement. Whenever I was alone, I couldn't stop praying. Was it a conversation? A monologue? I talked and pleaded.

Of course, there were also moments of gratitude for loving friends, for caring nurses in the chemo room, for the therapist-Friend who called me long distance every week for an hour.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I came to accept that there might not be a future ahead. One day in deep sadness, I told God, "It is so hard not to have a future,"

But I had yielded.

From that day on I knew I was getting better. Was it because a healing Spirit was finally able to break through the armament of my fear and of my need to fight this cancer?

Yes, I think so.

A few well-meaning friends questioned my willingness to undergo chemotherapy. "I don't mind the nausea," I would say, "I was nauseated when I was pregnant; now I am pregnant with my own life." I knew that getting better was a cooperative affair; the Spirit could do only so much. I had to do my part.

It also meant trying to stay as healthy as possible, so every day I wasn't receiving treatment I walked; during the hot days of summer in the mall; in the coolness of fall and winter, when chemotherapy had ended, in a flat part of town.

In June of the following year I called a friend in Canada, asking if I could spend some time with her. I

wanted to escape the heat and keep exercising. Hilda was happy for me to stay with her for several weeks in July.

Hilda and I had been best friends during our teens and early twenties when we lived in the Netherlands. She had immigrated to Canada when she was 25, and I had married an American a few years later. Both of us had ended up on the other side of the ocean, but for one reason or another we had had little contact during the past 25 years.

Hilda was an exuberant woman, full of fun, full of life, fond of the outdoors. She had a large camper-van and we spent many days driving around beautiful Ontario. She had lost her husband, Henk, a year earlier and she talked a lot about death and grieving. We became very close again that summer. At the end of my stay I promised I'd be back the next year with John and a tent, and we'd all go camping together.

It was not to be. In April I received a phone call from Hilda's daughter that her mother had liver cancer, and that she had only a short time to live. She gave me the phone number of Hilda's hospital room. We talked at least once a week. Hilda knew she could talk freely with me about death. She knew I'd had to struggle, as she was struggling now, to accept. When John and I drove up to Sarnia in late May, Hilda had just died.

We had an unusual vacation. We spent our days driving around the lovely countryside of Ontario, visiting all the places Hilda had shown me the year before. I told John what Hilda had shared with me about Henk's death, her moments of despair when she went camping with friends for the first time as a widow. I talked about our phone conversations.

I could not stop talking about death. I was obsessed with death: Hilda's death, Henk's, mine. John never was impatient, never showed he'd rather talk about something else.

I had not been able to talk much about my struggles when I was ill. Now all I wanted to do was talk about death and dying.

That Sunday we attended Meeting in Kitchener. Again, my thoughts were on dying. Then an image: a hand holding out a bouquet of flowers. I had seen it before. It was a painting. Chagall? I knew what it meant—I was offered life. I also knew I was not to share it with the Meeting.

Two weeks later, on our way home we stopped in St. Louis and visited the Art Museum. As usual, we each wandered in different directions, following our own pace. I was alone when I found myself in front of a Picasso, a painting of a bouquet of flowers. Were there two hands holding the bouquet? Yes, but the hands clearly belonged to different people; one was offering the flowers, the other accepting them.

Then I knew; then I knew why I hadn't been allowed to share my vision in the Kitchener Meeting. The vision had been incomplete. I needed to see this painting. I needed to see that, yes, I was offered life, but more important, I needed to accept it. I needed to accept this gift and leave death behind.

The museum store had a print of the painting for sale. I had it framed, and for 22 years now it has been on our dining room wall. It is a bit discolored now, faded. It doesn't matter. It represents God's promise of Life and my willingness to accept it.

*Tina Coffin is a member of Little Rock Meeting, Arkansas, and editor of The Carillon, a magazine for Quakers in Arkansas.*



## Sea-Breached

Alicia Adams

*Deep, slow tides,  
grit-laden,  
swirl, curl, carve  
space-holes.  
Awareness  
within black stone fortress  
of my assumed identity.  
This empty hollow at my core  
feels like all my fears,  
pooled.  
Water's ebb and flow,  
I take for nausea.  
What is wrong there,  
in my unreachable, unlit  
inside regions?  
The stone cries for mercy.  
Mercifully, its cries are ignored,  
while tidal waters swirl,  
curl, carve,  
to join inner caverns  
to formless Space.  
Ancient fortress, worn  
thin-to-breaking.  
Enclosed spaces lost  
in immensity of free Space.  
Who can call this loss  
who has tasted flow—  
who has become  
sparkling medium, sustenance,  
of fish and weed and gull?  
Fears. Where do they go  
when cavern walls  
are Sea-breached?*

Alicia Adams, from the poem of June 1996, by Alicia Adams Carter

# From Union to Hope

Donna Eder

One day in late October, my husband and I decided to stop at an apple orchard in Hope, Maine, on our way home from the Quaker Meeting in the nearby town of Damariscotta. A late season hailstorm had destroyed much of the apple crop, but I was able to locate one orchard that still had a few apples for sale in this small town of Hope. Since the afternoon was a glorious one, we decided to take a different route home, stopping by this orchard on our way.

As I looked at the map I realized we would be going through the town of Union on our way to Hope. The route between these two towns did not appear to be that long on the map. However, once we turned down Mt. Hatchet Road to slowly climb the mountain it was named after, the road became curvy as well as steep. After some time, I began to wonder just how long it would take us to find Hope. Yet, having seen a sign pointing toward it, I knew it was not a matter of if we would get there, but simply when. I realized as we were traveling that it was in fact one deep experience of union that has given me hope in the difficult times we are living.

When I was in my forties, my mother became ill with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease). At the time of my mother's illness, I was living in Bloomington, Indiana, and she in Tucson, Arizona. While I could not be at her side throughout her illness, I visited as often as I could. I was struck on one winter visit by how lively and bright her spirit seemed. Despite her illness, I sensed her eyes were now more lively and there was a glow about her. By that summer I came to see my mother as a wise and beautiful spirit needing a lot of physical care. Her acceptance and honesty allowed me to see myself more clearly. While

I was hesitant to take on certain caregiving tasks for fear of doing them wrong, I decided to do them anyway, so I could continue to stay as close to her as possible.

Mom did a painting with the guidance of her hospice social worker. She started with orange lines, then painted some lovely green and brown shapes and finally painted some blue wavy lines in the top right corner. No longer able to talk, she wrote us a note which said, "The theme is flying away, although it didn't start out that way."

I joined my mother's journey through this terminal illness due to my love for her, not realizing how it would forever change my life. As I watched her in those final months, I could see that she was living life very differently. It seemed that some things were getting stronger daily—her sense

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*There was little or no sense of time or space, so that I felt simultaneously the love of all who have ever loved me.*

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of compassion, her playfulness and sense of humor, her ability to live in the moment. What she was leaving behind were the emotional struggles and old family dynamics that had once taken so much of her energy.

My own deep experience of union came after her death. I still do not know what caused it—whether my spirit accompanied hers after she died or whether I simply continued my parallel journey toward a greater sense of Divine presence. At my first chance to be alone a week or so after her death, I went for a walk in the woods and found myself in an entirely new state of being. I was now surrounded by an immense feeling of love. I described it at the time as being the least lonely feeling you could imagine. There was little or no sense of time or space, so that I felt simultaneously the love of all

who have ever loved me. My sense of joy was equally seamless, as if every moment of happiness I had ever known was with me now.

This experience altered how I saw the world. Every person was now on some level familiar to me and easy to get to know. The concept of stranger seemed to have disappeared. As a Quaker I believe that there is that of God in every person. However, I had not previously felt such a deep abiding connection with all people as I did now through this one powerful moment.

I found it impossible to return to life as I had known it before. While I continued teaching sociology, I knew that I would not be able to do this job in the same manner. I could no longer work primarily from my head, focusing on one intellectual study after another. I began looking for a new way of working—a way to work from my heart as well as my head.

I had just completed a study of middle school students. Dismayed by the degree of bullying we had observed, I decided to do volunteer work in local schools, helping children learn new strategies for responding to these cruel comments. While I had once felt that problems of bullying were nearly unsolvable, I began to feel more hopeful as many college students joined me in this after-school program. They often spoke of how much they were gaining in their own understandings of how to deal with conflict. And the after-school staff told us about dramatic changes they had seen in some of the children.

When it came time to choose my next project, I chose one that reflected who I am as a person—not just my academic training. I decided I would focus on solutions rather than problems. Instead of studying how children behave when they are angry, I would study ways in which children are thoughtful and caring by studying the practice of telling teaching stories. As

I brought storytelling to fourth- and fifth-grade students, I was delighted to see how much they had to teach me, and each other. After the storyteller told each story I would ask them for their reactions and find out who they identified with in the story. One day the storyteller told a fable about a dispute between an eagle and a beetle in which the beetle destroyed the eagle's eggs. I was surprised when one girl said she would have been the eggs. She went on to say that if she were, she would have broken open and asked the mother eagle to move them. After she drew our attention to the eggs, other children in the group also spoke of acting in ways to protect their safety.

These children's concern for the most vulnerable characters in the stories reminded me that children are capable of addressing moral concerns with great sensitivity to the welfare of all. As they spoke about bullying, custody battles, and even racial conflicts, I could see that storytelling can be a vehicle for children to express their concerns and reach new understandings.

Immersed in these dialogues, I again experienced the deep sense of union with others that I had after my mother's death. At the same time, hearing the children's expressions of caring and compassion gave me more hope. I find myself often, as I did that day in Maine, needing to travel through Union to reach Hope, the little town in Maine that still has apples to sell in late October—a place of richness and wonder which I keep finding my way back to, even when the days grow dark.

*Donna Eder is a member of the Bloomington Meeting in Indiana and a part of the volunteer community for Mt. Gilead Friends Retreat. Her spiritual life is also nurtured by praying the psalms and by participating in a peer spiritual direction group and a long-term dream group. She is the author of Life Lessons Through Storytelling.*

## There Is Never Any Separation

Dalton Roberts

A friend was telling me a lucid dream she had about a person who was many miles away. She suddenly blurted out as if a truth was gushing through her, "You know, it made me realize there is never any separation between us and those we love."

This truth hit me like a mighty gale. I had always wanted to say at funerals that this precious friend is not dead and will never be dead. They are alive and ever-present with me, no matter what happens in my life. I have honestly felt this way all my life.

Think of someone who is very special to you. Then think of the times they have been with you when they were far away. Was it any less real than if they had been there bodily? If you are anything like me, those times are the most memorable times you have ever felt their presence.

What lives, lives. It is the reality you are searching for in life and the reality is that someone's presence can be known when they are far away.

I remember a lucid dream of my own. A doctor had been especially cold to my mother in her last 16 days of life. For many months I had dreams of killing him. One night before sleep I asked the Lord to send me a message or help me get over this horrible memory.

That night I had a dream in which I picked up my father after work and he got in the back seat. We never spoke a word on the drive home. When he got out of the car and walked around to the driver's side, mother materialized right before our eyes, wearing her favorite pink dress. Dad calmly took

her by the hand and they walked up the sidewalk to the porch. Before entering the house, they embraced and kissed, then disappeared.

I woke up crying tears of great joy and lay there in bed, praising God for answering my prayers so clearly. I was completely healed of my grief over mother's passing and at the same time, healed of all hostility for the doctor who had been the object of my nightmares.

You can tell me all you want that this was all a mind thing, normal human psychology being played out in my consciousness, and maybe it is. But if that is true, I know normal human psychology can be used as a vehicle for God to tell us what is the truth of any situation.

I know my mother was as real in this dream as she was when I sat and drank tea with her and watched the birds. I know my Dad was as real to me as any morning I went over and had breakfast with him and had sweet fellowship. If anything, the way I experienced him in the lucid dream was the most real time I ever spent with my Dad.

God and all things beautiful and enlightening are ever with us, directly as God or manifesting to us through the persons in our lives.

No one is dead. All that was real about that person before they went into a higher spiritual state lives on and will be with you forever.

*Dalton Roberts is a singer, songwriter, ex-County Executive, and newspaper columnist who lives in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He enjoys Quaker worship and Unity services. This article first appeared in his column, "My Sunday Journal," on December 5, 2010. Reprinted with his permission. (Editor Mariellen Gilpin recently wrote him, "You are so full of wisdom that it leaks out through your pores." Dalton replied, "So that's what that is!")*

# A Child's Heaven

Don Chenoweth

*Have you ever wondered what Heaven is like—  
What it looks like, what it sounds like, what it feels like?*

*Imagine what it would be like to feel quietly content—  
playing, listening to music, slipping into sleep  
and being carried by mom or dad—  
dreaming of the slow-moving clouds and stars  
that light the way beyond the rainbow.*

*And waking up, rubbing your eyes, in a new place  
without your toys and games and favorite clothes,  
but feeling you are at home.*

*It's quiet—sh!—but you're not bored,  
you lie there and the only sound comes  
from a breeze in the trees outside your window*

*Here is the Light that Friends, your mom and dad speak of—  
Friends say, "Hold them in the Light,"  
God be with them when they are hurting or need help.  
This is not really a place, like you think of a room,  
your home, your school or the meeting house—  
and morning and bedtime and time itself are forgotten.*

*You won't be just a boy or a girl anymore,  
you will be perfect, you won't need your toys,  
or favorite shoes, or games.  
you won't remember feeling bad or acting up  
and you will be surrounded by love.  
You won't have familiar things or people with you,  
but you'll never be alone ever again*

# I Am

Don Chenoweth

*Early morning dew  
A roaring river  
Wind blowing autumn leaves  
The fragrance of lilacs  
Warm afternoon sunlight  
The feel of a eucalyptus leaf  
Thunder and lightning rending the sky  
An emerging blade of grass  
A chickadee's song  
Wintry blasts  
Echoes across a canyon  
A Spring storm  
A pastel rainbow  
A century-old redwood  
An unhurried sunset  
A shiny new penny found  
A lover's kiss  
A newborn's birthing cry  
An old man's sign  
A miracle of healing  
A favorite pair of well-worn slippers  
A Monet bridge at dusk  
A Pollock collage of colors  
Christ, Buddha, Allah, Vishnu  
A requiem for the living and the dead*

**Don Chenoweth** is a member of Oklahoma City meeting, but currently worships in Urbana-Champaign meeting, Illinois, with occasional visits to Rochester Friends, Minnesota, where he met Mike Resman. Don feels closest to God when he's observing and participating in the natural world. He once sat on a rock, alone, focusing on a single blade of grass. He saw "into" the grass; it was no longer solid. "It opened my mind to God's world."

## ***Discovering God as Companion: Real Life Stories from What Canst Thou Say?***

Mariellen Gilpin, Editor

"*DISCOVERING GOD AS COMPANION* underlines the power of 'we' sustained by the Religious Society of Friends for more than 350 years. Contributing Friends and companions of God have drawn so close to the Source of Love that Light streams through their written words into the world. Through the testimonies of these writers, readers can glimpse contemplative witness as one mark of the whole Quaker community." —Judith Favor's review in *Friends Journal*

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# Dying In The Light

Peg Morton

I want to share some of my persistent reflections concerning my own possible death and dying process. I am reconsidering my values on this subject, and am certain that many Friends and others are also. I am now 80 years old, and am not speaking for others, especially others who are younger. We each need to find our own path and make our own choices.

It is my prayer that I live through my dying in a sacred way. I hope to feel the companionship of my community, and also a divine companionship, to feel the Spirit alive in me. It's a two-way thing. With divine help, I will follow my path with wisdom and strength, and in doing so, my living and dying will become a Life-giving contribution. God, or Spirit, is Nature, heaving with the pain of a mortally ill planet. God is a parent, weeping, lonely, watching the atrocities, the violence, the wars, the poverty, the greed, yearning for the support that can be offered through the human spirit and human acts. And God is a Lover of us all. I want to offer God my support, my companionship, my love. If we prepare for our dying thoughtfully, prayerfully and openly, it can, even with the suffering that may be involved, be a rich and fulfilling experience for all. It can, that is, barring natural or unnatural catastrophe. I know that any decision I make, I want to have come from a Holy Place. I want divine instruction, guidance and wisdom.

I have been asking myself, "What are the values that may define my choices?"

"In particular, what will my medical and political choices be?"

"Will my choices carry a spiritual and/or a political message, and if so what would I want that to be?"

As I have watched others make their way through this period in their

lives. I have found myself asking if I would make the same choices. It seems as if when medical tests or solutions are offered or advised that will keep us alive as long as possible, even when a person is quite old or has a terminal illness, people go ahead and follow through with them. I want to take medical and also the opinions of families and other supporters very seriously, but then to turn into myself in reflection and prayer, and ask, "What does Spirit tell me to do?" I may choose to not accept medical interventions that are offered, and to die more simply and quickly. I can't know now what decisions I will make later. I do believe that my choices, and the choices of others, might become beacons towards a more compassionate, less greedy society.

Activism has been a strand throughout my adult life, a major, deep yearning for an end to worldwide systemic suffering. I strive to be a deep part of creative change for a better world. There are other life-long patterns and values that to some extent define how I am now and influence the choices I may make. The Religious Society of Friends has been my spiritual home, not only because of deep satisfaction with our worship, but because of the Christian values that I was brought up with. I learned the teachings and parables of Jesus: *Consider the lilies; the camel that could not go through the eye of the needle; the rich young lawyer; I was hungered and you fed me, naked and you gave me clothing...* They are messages of love, service, justice and simplicity. And they have bonded me with our Quaker testimonies of simplicity, peace and equality.

The pull to stay alive can be extremely strong. Right now, my life is satisfying. I feel loved and needed by my family and many friends. I believe that I am still making positive contributions to the world. I have watched old friends, significant leading Quakers, as they moved through their 80's, do

all they could to stay alive. And they did keep on contributing in invaluable ways. That was clearly their spiritual path.

However, looking at this from a different perspective, in the last 20 or so years I have traveled to Central and South America in a number of delegations. I have accompanied and learned from people who live in real poverty, the victims of international economic and military policies that feed greed and over-use of natural resources in my own country. I have been inspired by human rights leaders there who act courageously, risking and sometimes losing their lives. I have been only too aware of the lack of medical care for the poor, in these countries and at home, and for the unmet needs of shelter and nutritious food. During these years, I have been challenged and influenced by many radical Catholics who I have known, people who have engaged in lengthy fasts, who have served for years in prisons as prisoners of conscience, the Catholic worker movement.

And I have had friends, also Quakers, who have chosen to die rather than engage in the medical path. One was Teresina Havens, who, in her 80's, was told that she had a heart blockage that could be easily repaired. She said, "No," and about a month later she died. Joe Havens, in his 70's, was suffering from Parkinson's disease, becoming physically weaker and noticing effects on his mind. After much reflection and work with a clearness committee, he chose to take his life by starvation, in solidarity with people who are starving. Both of these Friends had followed life paths of real simplicity. I do not want to be an unnecessary burden on others. I want to be spiritually led to stay alive—or to choose otherwise.

A few years ago, I woke up shaking and weeping from a vision that came from a deep place. I was sitting on the steps of the federal building in Eugene,

fasting, praying and dying. Reflecting on this vision, I believe that my fast would be a fast of yearning for national repentance, a national transformation, for peace, for the planet. Fasting is a traditional and significant spiritual discipline. I have found fasting a deeply spiritual experience. My body feels cleansed and open. Gandhian nonviolent traditions call upon us to take suffering on ourselves rather than perpetrating it on others. I believe that I might be led to take my own life by fasting in the face of the atrocities that are occurring. I cannot know if my action would have an influence, and I don't need to know. I only need to know if I am truly spiritually led to do this.

During the Vietnam War, a number of Buddhist monks immolated themselves in response to the atrocities that were happening. Some in the United States followed their example. One was a 30-some year old Friend, Norman Morrison, who immolated himself outside of the office of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon, on November 2, 1965. He was holding his young child, who was not physically injured. My response at the time mixed questions about the rightness of this act with awe at this person's courage. The knowledge of his act lodged itself somewhere deep inside me. An article in the Friends Journal recently informed us that when his widow visited Vietnam, she was received with love and honor. Her husband is revered there and streets have been named after him.

I feel no need to live to a ripe old age, especially a feeble one. What about the overwhelming majority of people in the world who do not live to age 40? We are so amazingly privileged to even have the choices we do. And we have them because of exploitation of other peoples and of the natural world. The thoughts and questions I have raised come from a heart

filled with experience. I welcome the thoughts of others who are engaged in similar reflections.

*Peg Morton is an active member of Eugene (Oregon) Friends Meeting. Besides cherishing her family, she is active in the SOA Watch movement, stands doggedly in vigils for peace, and loves to camp out in the forests of Oregon.*

## WCTS Date Changes

WCTS readers/writers will notice a slight change in dates for the next two issues, an earlier deadline for the February issue, and a later one for the May (June) issue. This is to accommodate WCTS team member Judy Lumb's leading to go to Africa, as described at <[judylumb.com/africa-2012/africa-2012.html](http://judylumb.com/africa-2012/africa-2012.html)>.

## WCTS Editors Meet

On Labor Day, the three volunteer staff editors of WCTS had a conference call meeting and we would like to share our conclusions. Feel free to write us to discuss these or anything else.

We noted that we are publishing most of the submissions by using supplemental web versions that are on the "Extras" page of our website <[whatcanstthousay.org/extras](http://whatcanstthousay.org/extras)>. We wondered if that meant a relaxation of our editorial policies, but we agreed that we are still keeping to our editorial policies. We expanded the current "Tell us your stories" section (p. 5) to reflect them. We also added a concern for sensitivity to religious, racial, and cultural diversity.

We talked about the possibility of going "all-electronic," but we were concerned about our readers who are not online and that subscriptions might decrease if we were too accessible. We decided we would put the back issues on our website, except the current year. Those from 2005 through 2010 are already there <[whatcanstthousay.org/history.html](http://whatcanstthousay.org/history.html)>. We will add the earlier ones as they become available.

A couple of years ago we established a listserv for WCTS, but we haven't been using it. There are currently 16 subscribers. We intend to send out notices to that listserv when items are added to the website. We encourage readers, if you haven't already, to go to <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/whatcanstthousay/>> and join the listserv.

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# Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*

(See instructions for authors on page 5)



**February 2012**

## **Shame**

**Guest Editor: Lois Pomeroy with Mariellen Gilpin**

*The expense of spirit in a waste of shame...*(Shakespeare, Sonnet 129). Some of us ate shame for breakfast when we were very little, and have spent a lifetime learning to invest our spirit in healthier ways. Can you remember a time before you were shamed? How has baby-shame manifested in adulthood? How did you realize shame crippled you? What made you decide to change? What spiritual practices have helped you let go of ancient shame? Has Spirit helped you move beyond it? Share your story of healing from inappropriate shame.

Deadline: November 1, 2011

**June 2012**

## **Disability**

**Guest Editor: Faith Paulsen with Mike Resman**

Has your spiritual journey been affected by having a disability or loving someone who has a disability? Have your struggles and pain altered your relationship with God? Have you sought healing? In your experience, have you seen a difference between healing and curing? What has been necessary for healing? How do you see Divine love being expressed through your experiences? Do you resent what you've lost and/or are you grateful for what you've gained? What would you like to share that might help others?

Deadline: March 15, 2012

**August 2012**

## **Unity**

**Editor: Judy Lumb**

*The glory which thou gavest me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and thou in me, may they be perfectly one.* John 17:22-23. Whether it is a sense of unity during Friends business process, unity with all of life, a sense of the emails during a committee's deliberations, or the experience of God's presence and power, unity is a concept important to Friends. When, where, how, and with whom or what, were you filled with a sense of unity? Share your stories of unity with our readers.

Deadline: May 15, 2012

## **What Canst Thou Say?**

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**Death and  
Dying: Gifts**