

BEING MORTAL RETREAT — Essays, Week III

Pir Elias Amidon © Sufi Way

Before I Die

I sat on a bench in a park with a man who had been given his final diagnosis. That long afternoon he spoke to me from his heart, his words dream-like, drifting in and out of fantasy. When we said goodbye I went home and tried to write down what I remembered he said, but most of it had vanished. These are the few lines I could recall:

*I'd like to get it right before I die live without leaving a trace
put the world in order
tidy up*

*I'd like to tell all the girls they're loveable
and all the boys they're good
so they'd smile all the way down into their bones at the simple fact of it*

I'd like to bow back to those trees swaying their crowns in the sunlight

*I'd like to say something so wonderful
that everyone would stop
for a moment
surprised by the sudden remembrance
that they already know what this is all about but forgot*

light playing on the wave of emptiness this All-Good, All-Bliss, Home

*I'd like to tell my children
there's no need to worry or be sad
and they'd believe me
except of course for the sadness we can't bear anyway of appearing and disappearing like this
so dear
with none of us able to adequately hold
or honor the precious moment of love we love*

*I'd like to tell God how thankful I am
and have that telling mark the end of time*

*Before I die I'd like to walk into
everyone's most intimate space and tell them everyone
every man woman child I've ever known
that they are my favorite, the special one, my beloved*

*I'd like to take this great carpet of the world in my two hands and give it a shake
send a wave through it that would shake free the ugliness we've done to it*

*I don't know what will happen when I die
and I'm glad for that
what I do know is that it will be more awesomely loving and beautiful than I could ever imagine
sitting here*

That's my faith I guess

Here I remember he became quiet, gazing into the sunlit foliage of the park in front of us. It felt like he wanted to say something more but didn't know how. A young mother walked by wheeling a pram, followed by a little boy trailing a stick in the gravel path. After they disappeared he spoke again.

*No
it's not my faith
I'm sure of it
I'm as sure of it as I am of this moment how it is*

*so kind
after all our worrying and hating still so kind*

Blessedness

I went to visit you before you died, do you remember? I came to your little cottage for breakfast and then we spent the day together. I brought croissants and orange juice. You made that delicious coffee. I remember how sunlight — blessed sunlight! — slanted through the window and spread across the breakfast table like a benediction. We knew you were dying, that the cancer was taking you fast, but you still had your plan to beat it with some kind of wavelength machine you had ordered. It hadn't come yet.

Our glasses of orange juice were golden in the sun. The croissants left little crumbs on our plates. All the trivial details that day felt important. You went into the back room, rummaging around and brought out a fur hat you said was your favorite. "Here," you said, "I want you to have this."

We took a long drive through the countryside and got lost twice. Do you remember that little stone bridge we stopped at? We spoke about the method they must have used to build its arch, a century or so in the past. We sat on the bank near it and tossed little twigs into the water as we talked.

I told you my vision about light and you really understood it. Not many people got it so quickly. Now that you're dead — what an odd word! — you probably understand it better than I do. I pointed out how light rays (or waves, or whatever they are) obviously go in all directions because when we move our heads from here to here there's no interruption of the light rays coming from, for example, a little white pebble at the water's edge. And what was equally amazing — all the light rays from all the things we could see were passing through each other without bumping into any other light ray. The whole place was dense with constant light! You looked down at your hands and your clothes and said, "Look! I'm that way too!"

Then we speculated about the universe, how the light from all the stars was going in all directions all at once too, so that even as the earth zooms in its orbit around the sun we still can look up and see uninterrupted light from each single star — now from here and now from here, fifty miles away from where our eyes were a moment ago.

I remember that moment. You looked at me and said, "That means the whole universe is not dark at all, or even empty — it's *filled* with light, everywhere! It's solid light!" We were quiet then, taking that in.

That was when it happened, that sense we had of perfect meeting. Up to then we had been good friends, of course, but this was different. It was like suddenly we weren't there as two people, you and I, but as one "Here" without form, transparent to ourselves. There was a sense of *clearness* right through us and right through everything, and yet the forms of the water, and the bridge, and the trees, and our bodies were all still there, specific and vibrant.

We looked at each other again and I saw the tears on your cheeks. It was unbearable, how that moment hurt. After another long silence watching the sun wavering in the water, I said to you these lines from Kerouac:

There is a blessedness surely to be believed, and that is that everything abides in eternal ecstasy, now and forever.

You didn't say anything back. We helped each other up and walked back to the car in the sun. And then when I started the car you looked over and asked, "Where shall we go?" We both smiled a little, I think, and then I remember we leaned toward each other, restricted by our seat belts, and bonked foreheads. Thanks for that day, thanks.

The Other Side of Death

Let's talk for a moment about death. It's a dark and fearsome subject for many of us, especially these days when we're all trying to hide from a fatal pandemic that's stalking the land, and every headline and news report counts the dead and reminds us we could be next. Death, usually in the background of our lives, is now in the foreground.

The desire to live, to avoid disease and death, is baked into our DNA — and it's a good thing it is. We mourn the death of those we love and do our best to save people we've never met from death. The cruel deaths of war are an abomination to us. It's understandable that death has a dark and fearsome reputation.

But what is it? What is death? Is it possible to understand it in another way, along with its dark reputation?

We may find some clues in the words of spiritual mentors, contemporary and past.

You probably know the story of the great Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, that when he was dying his disciples pleaded with him, "Master, please don't die! Don't leave us!"

Ramana replied, "Don't be silly, where could I go?"

Whenever I've repeated that story in a gathering, the reaction of nearly everyone has been an immediate smile or laugh. We get it. We get the joke.

What do we get? What do we know? After all, death is the big goodbye, the last farewell, the end of life.

Or is it? Why do we smile when we hear Ramana say he's not going anywhere?

When we look at death from the standpoint of our individual lives, it certainly looks like death makes people "go away," depart, vanish from life. But Ramana wasn't looking at death from the standpoint of his or our individual lives. Our particular lives do end; we have to accept that. Rather he was looking at it from the standpoint of our original, ever-present nature that doesn't go anywhere.

That may sound very spiritual, but what does it mean? What *is* our "original nature?" Is it alive? Is it not subject to death?

In Tibetan traditions, guidance is read aloud to those who are in the process of dying or who have just died, as in this verse by Padmasambhava:

*Thine own awareness,
shining, void, and inseparable
from the Ground of Radiance,
hath no birth,
hath no death,
and is the Immutable Light.*

As Ramana Maharshi testifies, we don't have to wait until death to recognize the Immutable Light that is our original nature. The essence of our awareness right now has *no birth, no death*. When we get a glimpse of this truth directly, an old tension that's been stretched tight in us relaxes and opens.

*A profound gladness fills the human psyche
when it knows the part of the self that does not die.”*
— Coleman Barks

And from Rumi:

*We have such fear of what comes next. Death.
These loves are like pieces of cotton.
Throw them in the fire.*

*Death will be a meeting like that flaring up,
a presence you have always wanted to be with.*

This presence is our original nature, present here and now, yet hidden from us because we're entranced with the phenomena that appear in it. The *profound gladness that fills our psyche* when we recognize what we are, comes from the realization that it's not simply "our" original nature but it's the original nature of everything, of the All, of the One. We can't fall out of it, even when we die.

Or as Thich Nhat Hanh says it:

*Enlightenment for a wave is the moment the wave realizes
it is water. At that moment, all fear of death disappears.*

And Rumi again:

*Let sadness and your fears of death
sit in the corner and sulk.*

*The sky itself reels with love.
There is one being inside all of us, one peace.*

Sufis often meditate on one of the Names of God called *Al Hayy*, the Alive. *Al Hayy* means that “God” — the pure awareness that is our original nature and the original nature of everything — is Alive. Rumi’s *one being inside all of us* is Alive. It’s an Aliveness not dependent on organic processes, and as such it is not subject to death. When our individual lives end, our original nature doesn’t. As Sufi Inayat Khan told us, “*It is death that dies, not life.*”

When you experience this directly (through spiritual practice or through a moment of grace) or if you simply accept it on faith, your attitude toward death changes. You still do everything you can to avoid death and you still grieve the loss of loved ones, but death is no longer dark or fearsome. It’s a homecoming. You understand and can say with Walt Whitman:

*The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.*

*All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.*