

### **D3-- "MY JOURNEY THROUGH DEATH: HORROR, DENIAL AND THE PATH TO MYSTERY", SNR, 3/11/99**

A hideous feeling, suffusing every cell of my body with a nauseating, sickening pain, a profound experience of horror that is an entirely different tie of consciousness than my waking state, a profound dread at the prospect of facing billions of years of oblivion, after my remaining years on earth have quickly passed.

Experiencing the pain of knowing that there is no meaning to my life, of knowing that there will be no record I even lived a few decades or centuries from now, of perceiving that my life will mean absolutely nothing to the tens and hundreds of billions of people who will live in the millennia to come. Deep contractions of agony at the prospect of simply not existing for years, decades, centuries, millennia, millions and billions of years.

And at the same time, an awareness of what I am experiencing. Seeing that this encounter with my feelings toward my own death is a rare experience. Watching my inability to stay with the pain, feeling myself consciously pulling back from the edge.

This was the experience I had upon awakening from a nap, midway through an academic course on death awareness, after having had lunch with my dying friend Jackie McEntee, and having fallen asleep reading Victor Frankl's description of life and death in a Nazi death camp.

It is difficult to describe the horror of this experience in words. I felt I had looked into the abyss. I broke through my denial of death and experienced the dread that it was covering up.

#### **SIMPLE LIES**

Though I have had a few experiences like this in the last five years, I was able to an unusual degree to observe this experience. as it was occurring. I assume this it because it happened while I was engaged in a period of intensive study of death.

The experience had the following features:

(1) I was aware that while I was feeling deep horror, I was only at the threshold of an incredibly painful experience that I did not want to have. I

consciously chose to pull back from the brink, to return to what I knew was a "false" consciousness of living as if I would never die.

(2) This feeling was not, strictly speaking, fear. I have been afraid often enough in my life, and fear to me is accompanied by a kind of contraction in which I feel very little. Here the feelings were strong. I had a strong distaste, disgust with, horror at the prospect of my death that was very different from fear as I know it.

(3) I saw clearly that my consciousness during this experience was totally different than my normal consciousness and that this consciousness was the authentic truth, while my "everyday" consciousness was a hideous lie.

**THE PROMISE OF ETERNAL LIFE, THE TEACHING THAT THE SOUL OR SPIRIT SURVIVES PHYSICAL DEATH, HAS BEEN AT THE CORE OF RELIGION'S ATTRACTION FOR HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE SINCE THE BEGINNING OF CIVILIZATION.**

(4) I reminded myself that I wanted to feel the horror as I had back in 1991, when I had tumbled into it without being able to deny it, an experience that had led me to quit Sacramento politics overnight and go on a spiritual search. I knew that as painful as it would be to go through the experience again, there would be true aliveness, surrender, and awe on the other side. But I could not will myself to do so. I experienced too much terror at remaining in this consciousness; it was simply too painful.

(5) I saw myself purposely choosing to return to a safer but false consciousness that would not open me up to the pain I felt at the prospect of facing oblivion for billions and billions of years.

(6) I was aware that this safer "everyday" consciousness was simple denial. I did not find myself turning to beliefs in God, everlasting life, the soul surviving the body, to make myself feel better. I simply could, and did, return to a bodily/emotional state in which I feel as if I will live forever, in which death is simply not a reality.

What has struck me most upon returning from "horror" to "normal" consciousness is how clearly I experienced the latter state of mind as a lie. As I write these words, my experience is that I will live forever. I am living, in other words, as though I will never die.

And this is a lie.

And I find myself wondering at two key aspects of this experience. The first is that I cannot recreate it, try as I can. For example, I will now pause, reread what I wrote, meditate for a few minutes and consciously seek to feel what I was feeling that night ...

... I cannot do it.

I do not feel any horror now. I feel as if I will live forever. I do not fear my death. I wonder at this. The "facts" of my life at this moment are no different than they were a few nights ago. So it is not that there is any significant difference in objective conditions. It has to do entirely with my internal experience of life.

What a mystery! The most intriguing explanation for this phenomenon is that my horror of death is stored in something called my "subconscious" because it is too painful for my conscious mind to deal with. It is amazing to sit here, eating my breakfast, and wonder about this "subconscious" of mine, which is said to drive so much of what I do and yet is, by definition, beyond my conscious understanding. Where exactly did the horror go that I felt so acutely the other night? Is it really true, as existential psychology suggests, that my denial of death is driving much of my life in ways that I am not aware of? And if so, what is its relationship to my search for "awareness" and "conscious living"? Does truly living in awareness or full consciousness entail experiencing, to at least some extent, one's horror at the prospect of one's non-existence for billions and billions of years to come?

And I wonder why the horror suddenly broke through the other night.

I can attribute it to the course, or the lunch with Jackie, or reading Frankl. But this is just grasping at straws. I've had equally or greater emotionally wrenching experiences during the past year, and in the days since this experience. Why this particular night, in this particular way?

## **WELCOME TO THE MYSTERY**

The second key aspect of the experience that I wonder about is whether it is true that I face oblivion for all eternity, in light of other, very different experiences I have had.

There have been occasions during my life, particularly during long meditation retreats, when I have experienced what felt like a genuine letting

go of my fear of death. That is, I experienced the horror, stayed with it and came out the other side with what felt like an authentic absence of fear. These experiences were intertwined with a disidentification with "Fred Branfman," my ego, my body, my separate self. There was an experience of touching something that survives the death of the body.

I note that I've had four basic experiences of death-anticipation in my life:

(1) "horror" consciousness, as described above.

(2) "normal" consciousness, which I experience as I write these words, and which constitutes almost all my normal waking consciousness. I experience this as unauthentic. There is deadness at its core.

(3) "transcendent" consciousness, in which there is an inner experience of the deepest possible inner peace. In this consciousness it does not feel like death is denied. It feels like it is acknowledged and gone beyond, seen as illusion.

(4) "mystery" consciousness, as I shall describe below, which incorporates the prior three states and goes beyond them. This state is both deeply peaceful and agitated, happy and sad, enfolded into an experience of rapt wonder and deep awe at what is.

Readings on others' experiences of death suggest, of course, that "transcendent consciousness" is not my personal experience alone.

After a lifetime of "normal" consciousness, and a descent into horror during his illness, Ivan Illyich (in The Death of Ivan Illyich, by Tolstoy) had an experience of transcendence in his final moments. We are told that the founders of all the great religions, with the possible exception of the Mesopotamians, had similar experiences. And it seems clear that the promise of eternal life, the teaching that the soul or spirit survives physical death, has been at the core of religion's attraction for hundreds of millions of people since the beginning of civilization. The internal subjective experience that there can be some meaning that survives physical death even existed in the most horror-filled pit of human experience: the Nazi death camps, as Victor Frankl, Elie Wiesel and many others have testified.

I am inspired by these teachings.

And I am repulsed by them.

We decry magical thinking in our children, embark on the whole enterprise of education to teach them to understand "reality," to distinguish between what can and cannot be proven. And, yet, when it comes to this idea of death, we not only practice magical thinking, but seek to introduce "evidence" to support it.

**THERE IS SOMETHING BOTH ARROGANT AND PITIFUL IN THIS HUMAN CLAIM TO KNOW THAT GOD EXISTS OR THAT GOD DOES NOT, THAT OUR SOUL SURVIVES OUR DEATH OR THAT IT DOES NOT, THAT THERE IS MEANING IN THE FACE OF DEATH OR THAT THERE IS NOT.**

And there seems something equally arrogant and pitiful about scientific-materialist claims that we can apply our knowledge of the material world to that which we cannot know. Perhaps science will one day categorically establish how the universe was created from nothing, how that eventually led to specific chemical reactions in the brain that produce mystical experiences, and how the widespread human experience of a soul and spirit that survive the body is nothing but an illusion of consciousness. Until that day, however, scientific-materialists have no more claim to know that the soul does not survive the body than spiritual thinkers have that it does.

There is something both arrogant and pitiful in this human claim to know that God exists or that God does not, that the soul survives our death or that it does not, that there is meaning in the face of death or that there is not.

So, I am left with this conclusion: I cannot know which is more authentic, "horror" or "transcendent" consciousness. I will only know if my soul survives my body when I die. Until then, any belief or claim to knowledge is just a projection of my need to either believe that death is a horror or a deliverance. I am left, in short, in Mystery, true Mystery. And my life work is to learn to accept and surrender to this Mystery.

## **SURRENDER TO IT**

I am not speaking here of the "mystery" of religious believers who claim to know all sorts of things, e.g. that there is a God, or that his name is Yahweh or Allah, or that Jesus or Mohammed was his messenger, and then take refuge in "mystery" when they reach a point at which their beliefs can be neither explained nor sustained. Nor is it the mystery of those

scientists who devote their lives to illuminating the unknown out of a belief that all eventually can be known.

This is an experience of the Mystery of everything, of the very process of being itself, and the realization that the human brain will never be able to understand it.

Yes, I sometimes experience a profound horror at the prospect of my death, that I am a separate self who faces oblivion for billions of years, and that the notion that my soul will survive my body is mere illusion. And sometimes, particularly in deep meditation, I experience that this separate self is mere illusion, that I am spirit not body, and that this spirit will survive my creature-death.

In my deepest meditation, however, I am left with a profound sense of not knowing which is the illusion and which the truth. A simple question emerges: How on earth could I know? And the answer comes back: I cannot. My job is not to claim to know, it is to accept that I cannot, to dwell in mystery and to work to accept- to surrender to it.

One day during a meditation on death, I had what I regard as the most authentic experience of all: rapt awe and wonder. I am not given to understand whether my life is the product of my protoplasm that dies at my creature-death or a consciousness that survives it. All I can know is something far more important: that I am blessed by the opportunity to participate in it without knowing anything.

And something else: The key to my participation is my willingness to open myself up to the horror. The horror is in fact an authentic path to transcendence, and horror/transcendence, life/death are one thing. True Mystery lies beyond either: Horror is a path to transcendence, which in turn is a path to Mystery.

## **MEANING AND MYSTERY**

At one point in my studies on death, we were asked to write a paper designing our memorial services. I took the exercise seriously, thinking through where I wished it to occur, the music and the readings, the role of the mourners and how I wished to dispose of my ashes. I thought about the meaning of my life that I wished conveyed at my death.

I found writing this paper an incredibly sad experience. I was filled with pain, a sense of loneliness and futility. A few days later, a revelation: The pain of designing my funeral service came not from the idea of my death, but from the attempt to ascribe meaning to it.

How pitiful! To try to find "meaning" in "my" life, one of hundreds of trillions of short fire-fly existences of a human race inhabiting a tiny planet that has yet to demonstrate that it can manage even the most elemental of tasks - preserving its own biosphere - let alone edify anyone beyond it.

No, I cannot find "meaning" in my life, not in the "personal" meanings of a Victor Frankl, the transcendent meanings of an Elie Wiesel, nor even in the more elemental meanings of Paul Tillich's simple "courage to be" or Martin Buber's "I-thou" relationship. In fact, it is the very attempt to ascribe meaning to what cannot be understood that is a major source of my pain.

From the perspective of true Mystery, the attempt to ascribe "meaning" to life, or death, is more than illusion – however understandable. It is an obscenity. For the search for meaning takes us away from the only thing that is authentic: the simple, non-verbal, non-ideational experience of the Mystery of Being, and our tearful, rapt awe, wonder, reverence and gratitude that we have been given the opportunity to participate in it.

The very act of trying to ascribe "meaning" to this Mystery is where my separation from life, and thus my unhappiness, begins. And it is also perhaps the first step to pollution of the environment, oppression of women and ethnic minorities, the open violence of war and the covert violence of child labor. Behavior that threatens the survival and well-being of the species can ultimately be traced back, as Ernest Becker suggests, to our inability to accept our creature-death, to our need to find a "meaning" that lies beyond it.

And, conversely, I find my deepest satisfaction, my most profound experience of life in moving beyond meaning to acceptance of what is, including not only my death but the simple fact that I cannot know what lies beyond it.

When I am willing to move through horror to transcendence, and through transcendence to Mystery, I am taken to other realms, to Being itself. And when I touch Being, I would no more think of polluting my environment or hurting others than I would of committing suicide or self-mutilation. For I am no longer separated from it by words, concepts, ideas or "meanings." I am It.

**ENOUGH OF BOOKS AND CONCEPTS AND WORDS THAT TAKE ME AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF PURE BEING! ENOUGH OF THE WORLD OF EGO, OF SEEKING TO LEAVE A LEGACY!**

The experience of Being is my most authentic experience: the actual experience of participating in a birth, sunset, creation or, yes, death.

At such moments I am beyond horror or transcendence, meaning or non-meaning. I am life and death itself. I experience a rapt wonder that words, concepts, beliefs and claims to know what cannot be known can only defile.

And it is in this Mystery that I experience my deepest love - precisely because it is neither good nor bad, beautiful nor ugly, meaningful nor meaningless, hopeful nor hopeless. Love for what IS, without meaning, without projections of good or evil.

I do not always remember this. I am as prone to the pathology of seeking meaning as any of my other fellow beings. And my work is to see that "what is" is enough.

I am older now, on the final leg of my journey here. My sunsets are deeper and richer, even as the pains of my body, memories and unfulfilled dreams are stronger. Enough! Enough of my childish needs for a Protector, or the need to deny that such a Protector could exist! Enough of books and concepts and words that take me away from the experience of pure Being! Enough of the world of ego, of seeking to leave a legacy, to survive my creature-death, to create meaning in a world that exists so far beyond my meanings!

Enough!

Let me simply acknowledge the Mystery, bowing my head and bending my knee before it.

It is.

No more.

No less.

Just what is.

Life. death.

Just part of the "what is," the Mystery.

What Is.

Not good, not bad, not beautiful, not ugly.

Just what is.

What Is!