

D4-- JACKIE MCENTEE INTERVIEW, "WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAD A YEAR TO LIVE?," ENLIGHTEN JOURNAL, 1/97

Learning From Jackie McEntee's Magnificent Life Against Death

by Fred Branfman

Q. Of all the world's wonders. which is the most wonderful?

A. That no man, though he sees others dying all around him, believes that he himself will die.

-- Yudishtara answers Dharma, from The Mahabarata

This is one of the most difficult articles I've ever tried to write. What's difficult is not the subject of the article. Her name is Jackie McEntee, and she has an important story to tell: how, in the face of death, she discovered a level of happiness and authenticity that she never before knew existed-so much so that she would rather live one more year the way she is now, than another 25 years in her previous comfortable way of life.

"... there isn't anything in there that I'm afraid to bring out. That's freedom."

The problem is not Jackie but finding a way to make her story *relevant* to you and me. In part, the problem is generic to stories about people who have overcome special challenges. It's hard for many of us to identify with the blind child who learns to play the violin or compete in the Special Olympics - or we'd be rushing to buy *Reader's Digest* every month.

Making Jackie's story relevant is even more difficult, however, because it involves an issue we spend a lifetime avoiding: death. As Indian sages noted long ago, there is nothing more difficult than getting it that *"I am going to die."* And, as Ernest Becker and Irvin Yalom have explained, denial of death may well be imbedded in our psyches. We can even immerse ourselves in megadeath - watch the TV

coverage of a TWA jet being blown out of the sky, see "Schindler's List" on our VCR or "Independence Day" at a movie theater, return home to catch the latest murder on our local TV news, and never think: "Hey, I could die at any moment, what is the implication for *my* life?"

In fact in a perverse way, like the sacrifice of goats in ancient times, the death of others can feed our unconscious belief that we will survive. As Dr. Yalom suggests, our belief in our "specialness" is one of our primary mechanisms for denying our own mortality.

So, as interesting as I find Jackie's story, there seems little point in just adding to the world's literature of heartwarming tales. Her experience will be most valuable if it helps us transform our lives for the better, now, before we get our own terminal diagnosis.

But how to make it relevant to readers of *Enlighten Journal*, to my own life?

This has been more difficult than I imagined. Ten years ago, as my father lay dying, I experienced for the first time what I knew intellectually but had denied emotionally: that I too would die. And I realized that I was living as if I would never die. I left that hospital room determined to no longer live a lie, to actually live the truth: that I was dying.

With uncertain results. When able to break through my denial since then, I have found my life vastly enriched. I set clearer goals for myself, live more mindfully and less on automatic, feel more alive, creative and compassionate and, above all, experience a deep inner peace and openings to dimensions of mystery and being that I never before knew existed.

Most of the time, though, I continue to live as if I will never die. Having read Ernest Becker and Irvin Yalom I understand that such denial is to some extent an existential necessity and not mere artifice. And yet I am increasingly aware of how this denial numbs, deadens,

and deenergizes me, puts me on automatic, denies my life as well as my death.

This tendency to deny death has been particularly noticeable during my many hours of conversations with Jackie. I feel both tremendously inspired and moved at what she is going through. But, even talking with her weekly, I find it difficult to really incorporate the lessons of her. life into my own.

How do we use the experience of those facing death, in our own lives? How do we break through our own denial? As a start towards this inquiry, I suggest we approach Jackie's story with a series of questions that those of us who are not. ill or bereaved might apply to our own lives.

We might then look to Jackie's answers not only to understand her, but to help us find answers for our own lives. An umbrella question, the one which Jackie faces, is this: what would I do if I had a year to live?

This question helps us set overall priorities, to think more deeply about what is truly important in our lives. We may not be able to act immediately upon our answer. But the answer can set up a dynamic between our present way of life and where we wish to be, and perhaps help us move more quickly and deliberately towards our goals over time.

In my case, for example, I plunged back into my old way of life after my father died. But four years later the seed suddenly sprouted and I found myself leaving politics and going on a spiritual journey. Many others have had similar experiences.

What follows are some basic questions Jackie's experiences evoke, and how she answered them. Her answers are primarily intended to help spark your thinking on how you would answer such questions for yourself.

WHAT WOULD I DO IF I HAD A YEAR TO LIVE?

I met Jackie at a workshop. When it was the turn of the plumpish and ordinary-looking woman dressed in casual clothes to introduce herself, she brought me up short by saying that her life was magnificent, as a result of having to learn to live with a terminal illness.

At lunch the next day she described how, faced with a few years to live, she had decided to go within and lead a mindful life from the heart - rather than, for example, losing herself in work or taking the trip of a lifetime. She gradually gave up her therapy practice, and focused on living mindfully, enjoying each moment, deepening her relationships with friends and family, and becoming what she calls a human "being" rather than a human "doing."

As a result, she said, she had entered an entirely new realm of ecstasy, deep sensibility, profound connection, love, and inner calm.

Finally, it was time to ask a tough question. If she could, only live one more year as she is now, or live 25 more years as she was, which would she choose? When she unhesitatingly answered "one year as I am now," I realized I'd found a teacher.

And a useful teacher. Jackie lives a normal life, like you and I. She admits to all sorts of human faults "bitchiness" (her word), anger, controlling behavior. She lives in a modest house in Union City, not a temple in the Himalayas. If she can be happy, one begins to suspect, perhaps so can I.

might be dying with comfort, but you can talk about it with ease. We probably have a better life now than we ever had. It just progressively gets better.

My son called on Father's Day, a few days ago. We shared that I wasn't doing as well with the pain, and he got quite upset. We had an incredible talk Both of us were just sobbing. You know, expressing our

love for each other, and what we've been to each other. We talked about ways of him not losing me. I talked about how I used my father as a consultant all through the years, and how he could use me that way after I'm gone. He's six foot four, very built and tattooed. And he's such a love, so sensitive, sweet and gentle. We talked about staying with both those sides of him, and just remembering me in them, as he was doing yesterday in thanking me. It was really powerful.

HOW WOULD I WISH TO GROW AS A PERSON, HOW MIGHT I SEE LIFE AND DEATH?

At one point in our talks, I began a question by saying, "Excuse me if this is going too far..." "No, there is no 'too far,'" Jackie responded. I then asked her how she handles the sadness of realizing she'll never see Bob or other loved ones again? She answered,

Jackie: There is a lot of sadness. I stay in it while I'm in it. And when I'm done, I come out of it. It's like with my son yesterday. I was really crying, and my face was red. And then I felt so honored that he feels that way about me.

And it brought the balance. So you go up and down, but come back to a peaceful homeostasis, to harmony.

I got up one morning and I was a little bitchy, it was a medication thing. So I decided I'd go back to bed and start over. I did, and noticed for the first time that day, "God, the sun is *shining!*" Then I got up, and said good morning to Bob as though I'd never been up before.

And I only actually noticed the sun because I'd been bitchy, experienced the darkness. If there's no darkness, how do you know light?

If I hadn't known the pain of being told I had only a few years to live, I wouldn't have fully lived. And would I trade this experience? The answer is no, I wouldn't go back. Of course, I'd like a miracle. And yet, if I had the miracle, would I sustain the way I'm living or slip back? You get back into the comfortable, the lack of mindfulness.

We need to help people discover their fears and anxieties, and not just deny or run away from them. There's a great teacher in being in discomfort. I think when we try to take away people's experience, it's wrong. It's in there, anyway. People have sat in my office over the years, and unzipped their souls, and told me stories that they've never told anyone in their lives. They don't get worse. They may be more uncomfortable temporarily, but in the long run it's healing.

Don't wipe people's experiences out. Give them a milieu in which to gently hold them, as they get it out. It's the toxicity of the fear that's the real death. And when we get rid of the toxicity of the fear, we live in love.

I told you how the oncologist told me to do what I wanted to do. It's done, Fred. It's done, uncovered, there isn't *anything in* there that I'm afraid to bring out. That's freedom. If I died as soon as I stopped talking, I'm okay. It's done.

DO I NEED A TERMINAL ILLNESS TO WAKE ME UP?

The hard truth of Jackie's story is that although she was an evolved and happy person before her illness, it took a terminal diagnosis to get her to slow down and transform her busy life. As she explained,

Jackie: I never quite got it before. But then, with the terminal diagnosis, I was pushed into it. And rather than go into it negatively, I said to myself: "Well, this is what is." And at that point I saw all the gifts in it, the gold in it.

It had to do with how it was presented to me, actually being told that I probably had no more than 3 to 5 years to live. It became concrete.

How about you and I? If we sense that we might live differently if we had a limited time to live, does this have any relevance to our lives now? Or, like Jackie, will it take something more serious as a wakeup call than simply thinking about it?

Jackie explained her own hopes about this question:

Jackie: I talked to a friend this *morning*, who had been hit in her car. And it really struck her how near she had come to death, and thus how precious life is. Will she sustain it? I don't know.

But I think we need as a society to sustain death in our consciousness. Death is a reality by virtue of life. Our society has been in such a fog, evading death and dying, that I really think we don't live as fully because of that evasion.

Well, I've learned to live fully now. And it's my deepest wish that everyone else will also-and without having to go through this kind of illness.