



Living/Dying Project

winter 2013

Freedom

What did Christ actually mean when he said *"Truly I say unto you, unless you change and become like little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven?"* What qualities of a little child could he be talking about that we should cultivate as adults in order to find the freedom of heaven? What are these qualities that will lead to freedom in this present moment?

There are three qualities that define a completely open mind, a mind that is experiencing freedom: spaciousness, clarity, and compassion.

By spaciousness we mean a mind that is not grasping at separateness, at the feeling that you and I are separate, that *you* are reading something that *I* have written. In spaciousness there is only the direct experience of reading. Clarity is the quality of clearly knowing what is happening right now, not being lost in thoughts about the past or future. Compassion is the open heart meeting all we experience in life with a desire to alleviate suffering. It has been said the heart is the depth of the mind and the mind is the surface of the heart.

Small children often live in the state of freedom with a mind that is spontaneously clear, compassionate, and spacious. As this child grows, she or he



learns to label objects and states of mind – good/bad, me/you. Gradually an ego forms to protect what the child has come to believe is its separate self. Certainly we do have separate bodies and personalities, but small children aren't identified with this separateness, they experience life whole – seeing the world around them with awe and wonder of continued freshness, feeling heartbroken at the suffering of others.

All mystical traditions say that the ego doesn't exist, but is merely a constantly changing collection of ideas, beliefs, feelings and

opinions, not an object. Try to find ego as something solid and you can't. Ego manifests as resistance to loving things exactly as they are. Its primary goal is to protect and perpetuate itself. The power of our subconscious conditioning is so strong that despite our best conscious intentions, we again and again come back to identification with ego-based separateness. Recent brain studies show that over 95% of our brain activity is subconscious rather than conscious.

Grief was born in those moments that our separate self-image came into being. Spiritual practice is essentially a process of learning to transmute the grief of separateness into clarity, spaciousness, and

compassion; learning to trust the wholeness that is our true nature, the pure Presence that is at the heart of each moment. The Hassids say there is nothing more whole than the broken heart. Can our very brokenness be the inspiration to again and again plunge into the compassionate heart, the clear and spacious mind?

As Sri Nisargadatta so beautifully puts it, "*The mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it.*" In other words, we let go of our story and surrender to the divine will, not just moving our attention from one thing to another in order to find self improvement. Freedom is not merely a better or more advanced state of mind, but who we are in that fresh, childlike state. This freedom is not far away, available only to mystics living in caves. Many times during the day we are meeting life directly, in a childlike way, without the intrusion of thinking that I am doing this. Just seeing these words, nakedly and openly, feeling that incredible intimacy when experienter and that which is experienced merge into one... This is it!

This discussion suggests a simple practice, a way of being in the world. In this moment, are you or am I feeling spacious, clear, compassionate? In this moment are you or am I feeling separate, distracted, either pushing suffering away or lost in its grip? A very different feeling sense in the heart, in the body, arises when we rest in our childlike true nature. Can anything be more important than surrendering again and again into this freedom?

— Dale Borglum
Executive Director



Kuan Yin May 12 2008 Sichuan

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*In Chinese the word for benevolence
is two people*

*The innate knowing between two
that includes all
that excludes no one.*

*Even the hungry ghosts,
born without love
have stopped
in their tracks
no longer alone
in their thin breath.*

*In Sichuan the sky is falling,
the earth is turning its bowels
and one hand reaches down
for another reaching up.*

*Two hundred rescuers buried
in a mud flow
their last breath followed
by the next,
entombed like terracotta
warriors, waiting.*

*The children are sitting
in the laps
of weeping dragons.
Blood is flowing
toward the heart
from distant provinces.*

Stephen Levine

Wrestling with Mortality

Mary Beth is a curious person. The discovery after many years of medical uncertainty that she does in fact suffer from a variant of ALS hardly answered her questions. In fact, it became the occasion for even deeper exploration. This was not how she imagined her life would unfold as she cared for her young son Nico while producing films from her home base in Los Angeles as a visual anthropologist. She'd traveled the world, always exploring, always asking questions. Hers has been a wonderful life of adventure, a life filled with friends and creative opportunities. But now she confronts a fundamental question about life. What is she to make of this latest chapter? What does coming to terms with this debilitating disease mean for her?

The phrase "wrestling with mortality" came very early in my conversation with Mary Beth. She'd known of the Living/Dying Project for some time and contacted us over a year ago when it remained unclear what exactly was contributing to her unrelenting physical challenges. The journey had begun some years before with a fall on the trail when her ankle suddenly gave out on her. Although the symptoms manifested would later be recognized as suggestive of ALS, the first doctor who treated Mary

Beth did not consider that possibility in her differential diagnosis.

Searching for the elusive cause of her difficulties Mary Beth endured two surgeries on her spine as well



as a bone marrow transplant, but neither the pain she experienced nor the weakness that seemed to envelope her body were relieved.

Eventually, her fatigue made it impossible for her to continue the life she'd tried to maintain in Los Angeles and she moved with her son to the home of a dear friend she'd known since the first grade. It was in that home where I met her in my role as Client Services Coordinator for the Project.

Earlier this year Mary Beth began working with a new doctor who confirmed the diagnosis of a rare variant of ALS that involves growing debility of her lower extremities but allows her to continue to speak. At the time the doctor suggested Mary Beth might have only months to live but later tests of her lung capacity indicated this journey will be a longer one, perhaps as much as a year or more.

I brought to our meeting the two

year journey I'd shared with a man named Denlow who also confronted ALS. I understand just enough of this territory that I can listen with an attentive ear and offer support

in the face of this unrelenting disease. Of course, Mary Beth is immersed in her own journey, measuring her capacity and willingness to meet the challenges that lie ahead. What she learns about others who've confronted

this disease will not answer all the questions she encounters.

The one given is her love for her son who sleeps in the same room where her hospital bed sits. Artifacts of childhood are scattered around the room and mounted on the walls. This is at once a boy's bedroom and a sanctuary in which the deepest questions about living and dying are examined.

When I suggested to Mary Beth that I'd be interested in writing about her journey, the part of her that has for so long been committed to the creative process was intrigued and we had a conversation about how we might collaborate to tell a story that would both speak to readers of our newsletter and offer some insights that might prove useful for her son. She brought out her digital recorder and we began, despite her natural reticence about being the focus of attention herself. She is more comfortable asking

questions than answering them and much prefers being behind the camera instead of in the limelight.

In these early months of getting to know one another it has become clear that first and foremost on Mary Beth's mind is how her illness and death will impact her son. It saddens her that she will not be present in his life to offer guidance as he grows up. The question is how best to prepare him for what lies ahead as well as how best to provide for him when she is not longer able to care for him in person. But she is also concerned how the physical deterioration associated with this disease will affect Nico. There are no easy answers here.

It was many months into our work when Nico asked his mother forthright questions about her illness and her death. The conversation was very matter of fact. Nico was comforted when Mary Beth responded to his question about where she would be buried. She offered the possibility she might be buried in nearby Olema. Some months before she and I had visited a small cemetery on Highway 1, nestled against adjacent hills. She appreciated the informality of the place, the simplicity.

As Mary Beth approaches the time when she will need additional care her questions made me think of Denlow's wife Melissa who handled the logistics of his care. I asked Mary Beth whether she would wish to talk with Melissa and when she said yes, I contacted her. Melissa agreed. That will surely be a fruitful and possibly emotion laden conversation. In the meantime the reality of where this journey inexorably leads is present both in the hospital bed and the powered wheelchair that now sits in the garage. Soon that chair will be necessary to offer the physical support her weakening body needs. Yet understanding where the journey leads makes no easier the fact of coming to terms with its reality. The wrestling continues.

— Curtis Grindahl
Client Services Coordinator

*It's dark because you are trying
too hard.
Lightly child, lightly.
Learn to do everything lightly.
Even though you're feeling deeply,
lightly
let things happen, and
lightly
cope with them on tiptoes
and with no luggage,
completely
unencumbered.*

Aldous Huxley



Orphan

When we think of the word orphan the image of a child without parents comes to mind. As we get older it is likely that we'll experience orphanhood ourselves, the disequilibrium of living without our parents to anchor us to a shared past. Having lived without a parental anchor for many years, I now face the challenge of a different kind of orphanhood, one with even more disequilibrium.

I'm 50 years old and find myself with an orphan disease. These diseases affect so few individuals that there is little incentive for the pharmaceutical industry to pursue research or develop treatment. A disease qualifies as an orphan in the United States if it affects fewer than 200,000 individuals. There are more than 6,000 diseases that meet that criteria; diseases ranging from rare cancers to poorly understood viruses. There are millions of people in the world in my predicament. Many of these diseases severely impact quality of life while others simply terminate life, some quickly, some slowly. Unfortunately, I have a terminating orphan disease, a disease known as "the beast".

My search for a diagnosis has been a four-year battle, intensified by my need to find any disease as a preferable alternative to the one proposed by the fourth doctor I saw... ALS. Random, no known cause, no treatments, always fatal. Give me a tumor that can be seen. Give me a blood disorder that can be measured. Give me something to fight, but please don't give me this.

I was told by a doctor I met once for 30-minutes that I would die within 12-18 months. I was alone in his office when he gave me this news. Literally one minute we were discussing ice cream shops our kids like, the next he said, "Get your affairs in order right away." He shook my hand and told me he was sorry. To this day I am stunned that a person who works with illness, a doctor, could be so cold.

I rushed from his office to a toy store to buy a train set for my son, whom I then picked up from preschool. We returned to our home where I proceeded to enter a rabbit's hole of darkness. I remember lying in bed with my beautiful child in despair so deep I could neither speak nor cry. It was the day after my birthday, a week before Christmas, 2008.

Now, as my abilities diminish I continue to face the beast that will ultimately orphan my child. I struggle to understand and accept death so that my child can gain whatever is positive from this bleak prognosis. I do have the gift of a slow death and a clear mind. These are qualities described as the "curse" of ALS, but I am learning that they can be an opportunity. I stand at a portal of existential clarity: life, death, love, loss, past, future. I move in and out of this portal dozens of times in a day. I feel profound happiness juxtaposed with terrifying physical limitations and fear. My greatest challenge is to continue living fully as my body dies gradually, a complex lesson in practice to leave my motherless child.

—Mary Beth Bresolin



It may be that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey. The mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Wendell Berry

Project News

- We are in the process of creating an Adjunct Volunteer Program. Many from around the world who do not live in the Bay Area have expressed interest in taking our volunteer training program and working with clients or loved ones. Our training program will be videoed and put online with live interaction with Dale and then regular Skype support sessions made available. Details will be posted on our website when this program is ready to go.
- The one-to-one, free-of-charge spiritual/emotional support program for people with life-threatening illnesses called Open Circle has volunteers in four Bay Area counties—Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin and Sonoma. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer, go to our website and join the digital mailing list. You will then be informed by email of our next training. If you know of anyone who could benefit from this service, please have them contact our office, **415 456-3915**. We also have been offering support at Fairmont and Highland Hospitals in Oakland.
- Dale will be facilitating weekend workshops/training programs in Berkeley, Santa Rosa,, San Anselmo, and San Francisco in January and February of 2014. Please see the following page of this newsletter for details.
- If you are on our physical mailing list and not on our digital mailing list, please go to our website and signup on our digital mailing list. We print and mail only one newsletter per year, but every few months have been sending out email updates about the Project as well as emailing a digital copy of the annual newsletter. These shorter email messages contain updates on events and activities, articles on the services that the Project offers, and thoughtful and inspiring pieces on the spiritual path. Also if you are willing to unsubscribe from our physical mailing list and thus forego a physical copy of the newsletter and receive only the email version, we would save money.
- More useful material continues to be added to our website. We are endeavoring to be the go-to website for anyone wanting information about the spiritual opportunities that life-threatening illness and caregiving can offer. Meditations, practices, audio and video files, and descriptions of the services that the Project provides are all available.
- Healing at the Edge ongoing small groups are being facilitated by Dale. These groups meet Monday night in Oakland, Tuesday afternoon and Tuesday night in Santa Rosa and Wednesday night in Mill Valley. These groups are not focused on end-of-life issues, but on spiritual transformation with an emphasis on meditation and on healing the psychological/physical imbalances that limit this transformation. More information is available at the Ongoing Groups link in the Services menu on our website. If you are interested in talking to Dale about these groups, call him at **415 456-3915**.

*I don't want to end up
simply having visited
this world.*

Mary Oliver

CONSCIOUS LIVING/CONSCIOUS DYING

A WORKSHOP FOR CAREGIVERS, THERAPISTS AND
ANYONE WANTING TO DEEPLY EXPLORE HEALING



Physical healing, emotional healing, spiritual healing, collective healing — the journey to wholeness takes many forms and has as many starting points as there are people who embark upon the journey. Each of us is at a particular point on our healing path, confronting our next challenge, often without clearly knowing whether attitudes or practices we have been using to facilitate growth in ourselves or in our clients are becoming stale, without knowing which direction we should now turn to create meaningful transformation.

In this workshop, we will draw upon the wisdom of Buddhism, the diagnostic message coming from the connection between stages of early childhood development and energetic patterns in the adult body, as well as the softening and the passion of heartfelt devotion. Having applied these wisdom traditions during thirty years of being a guide to the dying, a very clear and practical paradigm for the healing path has become apparent to me. Healing occurs through direct contact with the Sacred, through realization of our true nature. There are no shortcuts, but certainly neither taking unnecessary detours nor spending time spinning our wheels can inspire us along what is often a difficult journey to a life consciously lived.

During this workshop we will explore together a clear, concise and usable model of the healing process that can specifically diagnose and identify the next step that is transformational for each of us, even during crisis. Short, intensive, guided meditations and other practices will be presented in order to create a healing experience that will lead to a life consciously and compassionately lived and eventually to a conscious death. We are all caregivers and are all seekers of healing. These deeply uncertain times offer an incredible opportunity.

This training workshop will be offered in early 2014 at four locations; Berkeley (1/18), Santa Rosa (1/25 & 26), San Anselmo (2/1) and San Francisco (2/15 & 16). One day workshops offer 8 hours of Continuing Education Units available to nurses, as well as M.F.T. and L.C.S.W. license holders. Workshops in Santa Rosa and San Francisco offer two days of training though registrants may attend the first day only if they wish. Two day trainings offer 16 C.E.U. hours and will cost \$240. Single day trainings will cost \$140.

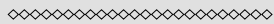
For precise locations please visit our website at livingdying.org/events/



Workshops will be conducted by Dale Borglum, Ph.D., who, with Stephen Levine and Ram Dass, established the Hanuman Foundation Dying Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, the first center supporting conscious dying in the U.S. Dale directed the center until moving to the San Francisco Bay Area. He is the founder and Executive Director of the Living/Dying Project and co-author of *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook* (Bantam Books).

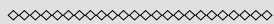
Board of Behavioral Sciences Provider Approval Number 4367. Board of Registered Nursing Provider Number 9621. Course meets qualifications for 10 hours of continuing credit for MFCCs and/or LCSWs as required by the CA Board of Behavioral Sciences. Refunds will be made only with notice given two days in advance of the workshop by calling or e-mailing the Living/Dying Project. A \$15 processing fee will be deducted from refunds issued.

Imagine facing death without fear. Imagine using a life-threatening illness as an opportunity for spiritual awakening. Imagine approaching the unknown with an open heart. We often resist change as a natural part of life. Strength and healing can be found in life's most difficult situations.



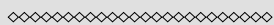
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The Living/Dying Project

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Mission Statement

The Living/Dying Project offers conscious and compassionate support in the spirit of mutual exploration to those facing life-threatening illness and their caregivers. We also offer education and training in the practices of spiritual healing to those confronting life's most difficult situations and to anyone committed to spiritual transformation.

Supporting Us

We offer spiritual support free of charge to those with a life-threatening illness in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as to their caregivers. As the first organization in the Western world whose mission is to cultivate conscious dying, we've offered these services for over thirty years. In addition to spiritual support, we offer training and educational services through our website and by telephone, Skype or in person. The mission of our work is healing, both the healing of that which blocks us from full aliveness and the healing of our collective and individual relationships with death. Fear of death separates us from each other and from our own essential selves. Now as always it is vital to keep what is most meaningful and inspiring to us at the motivating center of our actions.

Our operation is simple and our overhead is minimal. A significant proportion of our revenue comes from individual donations. We ask for your support, both financially and with your blessings and your prayers. This support allows us to continue the vital work of the Project. Please make a donation in the enclosed envelope (if you received the printed newsletter). You also can make a donation online using PayPal by visiting our website www.livingdying.org, and clicking the Supporting Us link at the top of the page.

We encourage those of you receiving our printed physical newsletter who could be just as happy with an emailed version to go to the Mailing List link on our website, sign up for the mailing list and then send us an email asking to be taken off our physical mailing list.

Our heartfelt thanks to all of you who have supported us in any way. May this holiday season and the year to come be filled with wisdom and blessing for you and for those you love.

—Dale Borglum



Credits

Layout and design of this newsletter was done by Curtis Grindahl, who also contributed two photos, *Cruising Olema Cemetery* on page 3 and *Filtered Sky* on page 4. Curtis is Client Services Coordinator for the Project. George Ward, a professional photographer and longtime friend of Dale's whose work is regularly published has shared two photos, *Indian Paintbrush* on page 1 and *Lee Vining Creek in Fall* on page 5. George's portfolio may be seen at www.georgeward.com. Special thanks to Stephen Levine for sharing his poem *Kuan Yin May 12, 2008 Sichuan* that appears on page 2.

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