

Let Life Live Through You
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“I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth, and though this body be destroyed, yet shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger.” For generations, hundreds of years, Episcopal priests have stood at the graves of their friends and parishioners and recited these words from Job. By long association they are burned into my working memory and are as resonant for me as any words of scripture. Several weeks ago these words began the burial office for my friend John Johnson, emeritus professor of medicine here at Vanderbilt. John was seventy-one when he died of ALS, his body and speech greatly compromised, but his mind and heart up to the end so very, very alive.

At John's memorial service at Christ Church Cathedral, I read a poem that John loved. It's entitled, "Hokusai Says," by Roger Keyes. Hokusai was a master Japanese artist and printmaker of the nineteenth century who at eighty-nine on his own deathbed said, "If I had another five years, I could have become a real painter." Here's the poem:

Hokusai says Look carefully.

He says pay attention, notice.

He says keep looking, stay curious.

He says there is no end to seeing.

He says Look Forward to getting old.

He says keep changing, you just get more who you really are.

He says get stuck, accept it, repeat yourself as long as it's interesting.

He says keep doing what you love....

He says every one of us is a child, every one of us is ancient, every one of us has a body.

He says every one of us is frightened.

He says every one of us has to find a way to live with fear.

He says everything is alive – shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees.

Wood is alive.

Water is alive.

Everything has its own life.

Everything lives inside us....

He says it doesn't matter if you draw, or write books.

It doesn't matter if you saw wood, or catch fish....

It matters that you care.

It matters that you feel.

It matters that you notice....

He says don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid.

Look, feel, let life take you by the hand.

Let life live through you.

For the last several years, as John had greater difficulty getting about, his many friends and family would make the pilgrimage over to his home, climb the back stairs to his study, and see how John was letting life live through him that day. If you looked carefully around John's study you'd see what he was curious about, what one of our friends called "the promiscuity of John's interests." There were Sufi poets alongside medical texts and opera and organ CD's and talks on superstring theory and spiritual

practice and videogames for playing with the grandchildren and photographs of the wilderness and of hard working people's faces, eloquent, and soulful.

I loved being with John in his study because the space embodied the mind of the man – he wanted to know about and understand everything. It was just his nature to keep looking, to stay curious. For John, like Hokusai, there was no end to seeing. And like the old artist, he'd have liked more time to keep looking, to keep learning.

John was not so much a believer as a questioner. After growing up here in Nashville and attending Vanderbilt for college and medical school, he went away from Nashville to the NIH and the Scripps Institute in La Jolla. He left the religiously traditional and politically conservative air he had breathed growing up. He became a liberal and was proud of the “L” word. Leaving here changed him, and he kept changing. As a scientist and as a grandfather he was passionate about the environment. He saw with Hokusai that “Everything is alive: shells, buildings, people, fish, mountains, trees. Wood is alive, water is alive. Everything lives inside us.”

Now it's this line “everything lives inside us” that I want you to remember today. From the conventional, dualistic point of view, everything most certainly does not live inside us. Here is a pulpit, there is an altar, there is a cross, and none of it lives inside of me. I'm here and it's over there. And you are there and I am over here, and we are all “skin encapsulated egos,” as the sometime Anglican priest and Zen teacher Alan Watts used to say. And God, if anywhere, is *out there*.

But from a non-dual point of view, in the mystic's unitive vision, everything lives inside us. There is, in fact, no separation. The wall of separation is an illusion, albeit a powerful one, to be seen through, whether by contemplative practice or artistic

inspiration. When Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” and “Before Abraham was, I am” and prayed “that I may be in them and they in me” he was speaking from this non-dual perspective.

From the dualistic perspective (right/wrong, good/bad, you/me, us/them), you get the sort of question the Sadducees put to Jesus in the gospel for today. “So Teacher, if there are seven brothers, and each is married to the same woman in succession, at the so-called resurrection, which we don’t believe in by the way, just which brother will the woman be married to?” On its own terms, from the dualistic perspective, the question cannot be answered. But Jesus is operating from a different, and non-dual mind, and he says to them that God is not God of the dead but of the living, and to God all the brothers and the woman are alive. Everything lives inside God.

My friend John used to send some of his family and friends around the bend when he would question the “me in heaven with my dog and playing golf” picture of the afterlife that he grew up with. It just didn’t work for him, and much as he wanted to be re-united with his family and friends in some next life, he just couldn’t pull any comfort from thinking it would happen like that. He and I used to laugh that I was sending him out as an advance spiritual scout to let me know what, if anything, was on the other side. He said he’d be sure to be in touch if he could.

The way John saw it when he felt hopeful, he thought it more likely he might return to the Source from which he had come, though he had a hard time seeing this as a personal continuation. A wave, for instance, manifests for a moment in time and space as a distinct form, but it is always one with the ocean, the source from which it arises. As the wave washes up on the shoreline, it doesn’t say, “Oh no, it’s the end of me!” The

wave knows that it *is* the ocean, that it is *in* the ocean, and the ocean is *in it*. There is no separation, no duality. The wave has no fear at its ending.

But John, and we mortal human beings, have to find a way to live with fear, as Hokusai says. The phrase that recurs most often in the Bible is “Be not afraid.” It’s what Hokusai says, “Don’t be afraid.” These days I hear this not so much as an imperative, “Don’t have fear,” for we *do* have events that trigger fear, and none more so than death. But these days I hear “Be not afraid” as an invitation to drop fear into a larger perspective. The Zen people call this Big Mind or Buddha Mind, Christians call it the mind of Christ. From this contemplative, non-dual perspective, fear and non-fear are both caught up in a larger unity that includes and transcends them both.

My friend John would invite me over to his study, where on his first class sound system he would play Bach and Rachmaninoff and increasingly in his last months, Gustav Mahler. I remember sitting with John in his study one late December afternoon. He told me he was afraid of what was coming, not so much in the life beyond as in what remained to him of this life. Then he selected Bach’s organ chorale prelude, *Wir glauben all in einen Gott*, “We All Believe in One God.” The angle of the winter sun that afternoon lit up John’s body in a thin outline of gold. Together we just sat in that larger unity, which included fear and non-fear, Bach and Big Mind. I like to remember him that way, listening, thoughtful, so honest about his inner experience, his loves and his fears, lit up with the life living through him.

One of John’s favorite authors was Wendell Berry, especially his novels *The Memory of Old Jack* and *Jayber Crow*. Jayber Crow is a barber, a gravedigger, and church janitor who knew with Hokusai that “it doesn’t matter if you draw or write books

or saw wood or catch fish. It matters that you care. It matters that you feel. It matters that you notice. It matters that life lives through you.”

One day Jayber goes into the country church where he works, and sleepiness overcomes him and he lies down on the floor behind the back pew to take a nap. He wakes from his nap, and this is what he sees. John loved this passage for he, too, had seen all this in his life’s work as a physician, and the little chapel to which we will process after this service has seen all this:

“I saw all the people gathered there who had ever been there.... I saw them in all the times past and to come: ... the weary, the troubled in spirit, the sick, the lame, the desperate, the dying, the little children tucked into the pews beside their elders, the young married couples full of visions, the old men with their dreams ... the proud, the humble ... the distracted – I saw them all. I saw the creases crisscrossed on the backs of the men’s necks, their work thickened hands, the Sunday dresses faded with washing. They were just there. They said nothing, and I said nothing. I seemed to love them all with a love that was mine merely because it included me. When I came to myself again, my face was wet with tears.” (164-5)

This is the unitive, mystic, non-dual vision. Everything, everyone is in God, and if we really see deeply, *is* God. Richard Rohr, the Franciscan teacher and writer, tells of a time when he was staying in a hermitage at Gethsemani Abbey, Thomas Merton’s monastery up in Kentucky. On the path to his hermitage he came across a former abbot of the monastery, now a recluse in his final years, alone with God, coming to the monastery only for Christmas and Easter. Richard didn’t want to disturb the man’s silence and so lowered his gaze as they passed, but the abbot stopped him and said,

“Richard, it’s good to see you. Now I am not preaching and teaching like you are. But when you preach and teach, be sure to tell people just one thing, God is not *out there*.”

And then the abbot continued on his solitary way.

Everything, everyone lives inside us. Everyone, everything is in the Divine. Not out there. In here. John Johnson showed me this. I don’t need a message from him beyond the grave. I know it.

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