

We're All Going to Die

Harold Rail

We're all going to die.

I know that conceptually, but do I really comprehend it? Until death comes to us face to face, it remains just an idea. Eventually, it does come to face us directly . . . and then what? Through sincere Zen meditation practice, an understanding of death—or, better, impermanence—becomes more than just an idea.

I want to write about three things—cancer, Zen and photography—because at this moment they define my life. Relationships form a fourth element, more of a sweet result of these three.

One perfectly average March day I had a colonoscopy at my local hospital. After the procedure the doctor walked into the room and said “You have colorectal cancer and

needed to be done. For most of my working life I owned an independent photography and video production company. A year ago, at the ripe age of 65, I jettisoned all that and went back to my college delusion of just making photographs. I called it “letting go.”

I started practicing Zen around 1990 with Ron Kidd, a senior dharma teacher from Chicago. Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Bobby Rhodes) was my guiding teacher for many of these years. Eventually some understanding about the practice took root. I admire our teachers for the challenges they face trying to teach the experiential by using the conceptual. So few of those who first come to practice can make this transition, and it is probably one reason why so few stay with Zen.



Photo: Harold Rail

you'll be wearing a colostomy bag the rest of your life.” Just. Like. That! My partner, Jacky, and I were stunned. My first reaction was “No, I won't do that. I'd rather be dead.” This was followed by recognizing the selfishness of that for the people in my life. Plus, I didn't want to be dead just yet.

I went home and searched for the best hospital in the area dealing with this malady. I found Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago and immediately called them.

I found that their bedside manner was much more sympathetic and a treatment plan was quickly created. This plan included six weeks of radiation and chemotherapy, every day in downtown Chicago, 61 miles away. The train rides were 90 minutes each way, the bus rides 30 minutes each way, add a few blocks of walking, and I had over four and a half hours of travel for my twenty-minute radiation treatments.

In college I delusionally majored in fine art photography. The wakeup call came after bills piled up and real work

For me, photography is closely aligned with Zen practice. There is the act of being in attendance when seriously making images. It has been said that the difference between a good photograph and a great photograph is a single centimeter. In that space lies attention presence. When we hit the floor in an interview, for just a minuscule moment before thinking there is only that sound. Likewise, in pure photography, before thinking there is the instantaneous recognition of the scene—a visceral connection between true self and the process of taking a photograph.

After my cancer diagnosis and the accompanying six-week daily travel schedule to the hospital in Chicago, I decided to photograph the experience. I photographed from the bus and train, on the street, in the hospital . . . just about everywhere. On days when I had extra time to catch the train back, I'd walk to the station taking different and interesting routes each time.

I captured the images as a way of seeing and documenting how the treatment and pain drugs were affecting me. As a Zen practitioner for so many years, my mind's moment-by-moment state was an important gauge of seeing how I was changing—and the process of photographing seemed the best way to comprehend and communicate that.

These three elements—cancer, Zen and photography—created my new world. Cancer is the situation. Zen is the relationship. And photography is the function. These three worked together in finding my momentary true self and in finding a way of helping the world. I then created a short video from these photographs and posted it on social media.

Throughout this experience manifested two lessons learned from years of sitting and my many teachers' support: letting go and don't know. I often think of letting go like standing in the middle of a rushing creek, unable to move forward or stand still. The only thing to do is to trust, lie back in the water and let the current carry me.

Don't know is reality now. When I was twelve some friends and I crawled through new sewer pipes, knowing that eventually they would empty into a creek. As we lay prone and crawling through inch-deep water we left birthday candles lit behind us. (Remember, we were dumb kids.) The pipes continued to close in on us as we crawled—until I reached a point where I could barely breathe and my bones turned to claustrophobic stone. In total darkness and in deep distress I finally managed to crawl out backward.

Similarly, at one point in my treatment I found myself in an MRI tube. I was shackled to the sides of the bed, rolled into the chamber and the imaging device came to just a fraction of an inch above my face. I felt the same shortness of breath as in the sewer so many years ago, but this time I was able to observe and oversee the workings of my mind. Without thought or any wish to change the situation, "Kwan Seum Bosal" began to repeat from the recesses. I was simply there, listening to the MRI's banging sounds intertwining with Kwan Seum Bosal, and all with no desire or need for anything to be different. It was just an occurrence—nothing more.

One more experience that has given me some insight into life and death was when I finally went into surgery. The night before and the morning of prep work was awfully uncomfortable. Because of practice, a fight between good or bad never really appeared, but I nevertheless hated the reality of it.



Photo: Harold Rail

I was fully aware as they pushed me down the many hallways toward the operating room. It still plays in my mind like a slow-motion movie—walls floating by, voices and sounds coming in and out, turning into new hallways, descending deeper into the hospital until finally two large doors opened into a room full of blue-clothed doctors, nurses, students, specialists. I still can see the three or four large surgery lights hanging from the ceiling as if they were set for me going on stage to act—which in many ways I was.

The blue people were bustling all around me, actually not paying me much attention. At that moment I understood—this is my primary point—soon they will anesthetize me, and following that I will go out. And from there I would either come back with a different body or I'd be dead. This was the

moment to lie back in the creek; this was my manifestation of complete don't know. And this is where all that talking about Zen, all the conceptualization and ideas, all those clichés hit the wall and either stuck, or they slid down empty of reality.

It all turned out fine. I woke in recovery with the people I love and who love me, watching apprehensively to see how I might reappear. I trusted their love, I trusted my teachers, I trusted my doctors, I trusted Zen practice, but most of all I trust life and death.

Most of my experiences with this life-threatening disease and treatment aren't negative at all, but amazingly they include so much humor, love and grace. These photographs, in a very small way, try to communicate this adventure with cancer as experienced through my deep relationship with Zen practice.

The video made from my photographs can be seen on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIPVII3uPVA>. ♦

Harold Rail is a senior dharma teacher and the abbot of Dharma Flower Zen. Born in Germany, he emigrated to the United States at seven. His fierce lifelong opposition to any form of discrimination was molded by early prejudices he encountered. When he was drafted into the military during the 1970s, he became an Army photographer in Alaska. After he left the military he attended Columbia College Chicago to major in art photography. Married with three sons at that time, he began to work as a photographer, soon starting his own independent video and photography business, working mostly for nonprofit social service organizations. He met senior dharma teacher Ron Kidd in the 1990s and has practiced with the Kwan Um School since then. He continues his photography business and now concentrates primarily on art photography.