

Ultimate Reality Cannot Be Spoken, But We Keep Trying to Converse about It Anyway

Excerpts from a manuscript on cancer, by Anne Rudloe JDPSN

Any major illness means one really must live in the present moment rather than being lost in the past or in fearful or desire-ridden fantasies of the future. It makes all the difference in the world in experiencing life as the gift that it is. If there is health and energy in a given moment, one can live it fully and not take it for granted or destroy it by fear of what may lie in the future. There's no need to turn healthy moments into sickness with mental stress.

Until we go into the fire of a crisis we cannot know if whatever insight we may think we have is really solid. Welcome crises as opportunities to move insights from theory to experiential reality.

There will be an internal restructuring as well as an external restructuring of daily life. Keeping daily life simple means that we don't drag a bunch of personal problems into a period of still reflection.

Following surgery, I spent weeks recovering at home. Sitting under huge old trees next to the Gulf of Mexico, in the company of fall wildflowers and butterflies, I slowly began to come to terms with the changed reality of a life with cancer in it. If the cancer had been caught before it spread and I could just recover from surgery and go back to business as usual, that would not be the personal mental Olympics that this prolonged life-threatening situation promised to be. Trying to make any long-term plans was now impossible, so all the endless efforts to define the next phase of life were suddenly irrelevant. I had to really learn to live in the present moment because the present was now quite literally all there was. What I might or might not do in the future would have to simply appear in each day. The situation could no longer be forced by any effort of will and hard work. I had always measured life's significance in terms of external achievements. Published books, scientific research papers, new exhibits at the aquarium were my job. Now, however, learning what this health crisis would teach was the most important work. My only goal would now be to make whatever time was left a time of growth in love and awareness—even as I hoped for a cure.

Cancer can appear out of nowhere and sweep someone away in a few months, or it can be a slow-moving process of alternating sickness and stability, unfolding over several years. For those with a possibility of either a cure or a fatal recurrence, there is living with perpetual uncertainty. The knowledge that time may be limited creates a new sense of urgency about finally doing what has been put on hold year after year.

Any personal crisis like a potentially fatal cancer diagnosis or a heart attack may trigger a lot of fundamental questions about meaning as well as reflection and a review of one's life. For many of us, the mind wanders, trying to make sense of this life. What am I? What is life and death all about? When we die, what happens? Is there some ultimate purpose or meaning to our lives, to being conscious? Is there some ultimate reason for the existence of complex organisms and consciousness and what could it be? How can I do better? These are the most important questions in life, but most of the time we stay lost in the endless affairs of daily life. It is primarily in times of crisis that we stop and struggle with the big questions. If we are open to exploring, they can be the great gift of such challenges.

The most defining characteristic of an individual life is that it is a short, finite experience proceeding inexorably through all its stages from infancy to old age and then out. The individual personality is literally as fleeting as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom and a dream, in the poetic words of one old text. It seems remote in youth but as we age, this truth becomes more and more immediate. Midges dancing in the afternoon sunlight, totally focused on their affairs, are not so different from people buzzing about taking care of business.

As the Buddha pointed out thousands of years ago, we create tragedy and loss by being attached to things or beings that are intrinsically impermanent, including our health, our wealth and each other. Thinking that we are

[11



Photo: Johanna Kopp

limited to our physical bodies and brains, we fear death and the separation from that which we love. We see death as an extinction of being that we strive to postpone as long as possible because we fear that consciousness is created only by the physical brain and must therefore cease when the brain dies. Contemporary medicine often prolongs life too long because of that fear.

Even though an impermanent, brief life is a defining characteristic of the human experience, most of us are in denial of this and shut it out as long as possible rather than asking what is the point of a life that will soon stop. Nobody really believes that it will happen to them until it does. Why do we want some part of personal consciousness to survive? Who is it that wants survival so badly? What exactly is it that is wanted? Nobody has yet succeeded in settling these questions once and for all despite everyone's efforts for thousands of generations.

In debates about science and religion, most of the discussion amounts to little more than the throwing of sticks and stones by the most extreme proponents of both the science-has-all-the-answers camp and the scriptural-fundamentalist camp. Incessant religious arguments arise between those who base their faith on a literal reading of ancient texts and those who believe that the material reality we perceive with our ordinary senses is all there is, that science as it exists today provides an adequate picture of reality, and that existence has no meaning other than what we can invent. Both the noisy armies of fundamentalist and materialistic extremists ignore the more subtle and open-ended approaches to these questions that are also a major part of the human religious tradition. Scriptural fundamentalism is not the only form of religion, however. Unlike the various religious fundamentalisms that admit no new insight and endlessly attack each other, religion can be an experiential exploration of meaning.

When religious people deny and ignore the enormous insights into the nature of physical reality that science has provided, they risk acting like a frog in a well, claiming that there is no ocean. Religion should be inspired by scientific discoveries rather than threatened by them. The scientific exploration of both the earth and the larger universe has revealed a vastness far beyond any human ego, an emergent universe that self organizes and unfolds from itself, a universe that has become conscious of itself in human thought. The big theories of science—the Big Bang, plate tectonics, evolution, complexity theory—they all explore details of the nature of creation that earlier mythological origin statements never imagined. Whatever rational, experiential, mystical, intuitive knowledge each of us may consciously or unconsciously use in crafting a sense of personal meaning in life, we owe it to ourselves to become familiar with the best factual knowledge that the



Photo: Johanna Kopp

sciences can offer.

But when scientists equate all religion with the most aggressive, belligerent forms of fundamentalism, remaining unaware of the diversity, complexity and more nuanced approaches contained within other forms of religion, this contributes to an arid worldview of a meaningless existence and a lack of any deep-seated peace or joy in life.

Despite oft-repeated lofty pronouncements by scientists about statistical randomness accounting for all sorts of odd events, many reject science in favor of more comforting ideas that give their personal life meaning. Most people are not prepared to accept that life is all meaningless random chance that ends in personal extinction. As humans, we try to find or assign meaning to life, not only individually with meditation and prayer, but also collectively by sharing ideas, insights and experiences to help each other along in the process. That is the business of the world's religions.

Attempts to make science into a religion by reference to the elements in our body having been created in stars or the creativity of evolution don't work for most people because they are too abstract and impersonal. It's easy to be momentarily diverted by odd and amazing science, like the bizarre Ediacaran life forms of the early fossil record, but what does that have to do with our own personal lives? Despite the efforts of authors such as Ursula Goodenough and Michael Dowd, these arguments tell us nothing about what will happen to us individually at death or why life is the way it is or how we should be living it. It isn't enough just to know the stories of science. We must also know how we individually fit into the whole, and that is the subject matter of religion.

Science cannot ever replace religion because there are deep-seated human needs that are met through religion. Human spiritual exploration and religious insights have been the source of personal meaning and social norms for mil-

lennia. The monotheistic religions have been the sources of Western ideas of justice and law and of love, attempting to mitigate and manage the rapacious predatory side of human nature. Buddhism provides a precise and insightful analysis of human suffering and a practical way to alleviate it.

The core of religion is the belief that there is a transcendent dimension and we can access it in some way. Prayer, chanting or meditation are attempts to be in resonance with an ultimate source, to be still in its presence. In prayer, we speak to something Vast and in meditation, we wait and listen for a response.

Religion provides a personal sense of meaning and some way to address the fact that we must eventually die. Religion is mostly about questions that science cannot answer, questions of ultimate meaning, of suffering and evil, of the role of love and morality, the nature of life and death. All the scientific facts in the world won't resolve these philosophical questions.

Religion is a conversation that people have with each other over centuries about the Big Questions as well as a conversation they have with themselves in introspection, prayer and meditation. On rare occasions it can seem to become a two-way conversation with something that transcends the individual, personal, ego-based identity. Many label that experience with the word God, but we cannot ever fully know what we mean by that word, so who is having a conversation with what? At this point conversation simply becomes experience, often an experience that cannot be expressed in words. That is why Lao-tze, the author of the Tao Te Ching, began by admitting that the ultimate reality cannot be spoken and what can be spoken is not that reality. But even knowing that, we keep trying to converse about it anyway.

When dealing with a problem that cannot be fixed

or made to go away, we have to change how we react to the situation mentally, find ways to break it up when the mind starts obsessing. Simple mental techniques can make a huge difference in being able to be happy regardless of whether things work out as we hope they will.



The mind makes exhaustion and sorrow, but it also makes energy and joy. Keeping the mind centered and focused on what is actually happening moment to moment is the keel that keeps the boat stable in smooth or rough water. Make your best effort in each moment, but then be open to whatever arises in the next moment. This can be done only if we are not trying to get some particular result and if we know how to simply watch the mind and recognize when it engages in a painful thought process. Take care of the present moment and the future will take care of itself. Cultivating this state of mind is the one and only thing that we will never lose. Clearly see the processes of the ego-mind when it is acting so that it is our servant and not our master, and live in a way that is conducive to the arising of the alternative moment-to-moment mental state of Being. Life is hard, but also fine and beautiful. It is unpredictable and short, but it is also wonderful. Mind makes everything. If you make hell with your thinking, you get hell, but if you make heaven with thinking, you get heaven. Only cease to cherish your opinions and then you will get everything someday—or maybe right now in this moment.

Live life as a Great Question, as an endless open-ended exploration of an evolving event. Have the Great Courage to not lock down life's meaning into some rigid idea but to continue the open-ended exploration. And keep Great Faith that a resolution is possible. Moments of altered mental states are traditionally emphasized as a major goal of a spiritual practice, but the fruits of those moments as they inform daily life are more important than waiting for another such moment.

The most important mental habit to cultivate is “enough mind,” the sense that all is truly well in this moment. Having an awake and actualized life is not only the memory of some special moment when the mind opened to some degree. It also consists of how we are moment to moment, right now, of being fully awake and aware and of being responsive in each moment one after the other and of a mind that is informed by compassion to help and of knowing the sources of suffering in the specific situation at hand. ♦



Photo: Johanna Kopp