

Over Shadowed
or: Engaging Title

by Dick Skeen and Matt Duthie

You cannot create experience. You must undergo it.
-Albert Camus

The journey in between what you once were, and who you are now becoming, is where
the dance of life really takes place.
-Barbara DeAngelis

The analogy between life and stage is quite widespread. That known, it's still an important connection to make. Within each play, there are characters that color the stage so brightly, to such a luminous degree, that one can hardly help but notice their impact upon the play as a whole. They pick at your psyche, they enlighten your ears, they become the plot. Find these players and your life will become invariably different.

And wise people have always interested me. As a kid I was happily buried in stories about sages, mystics, even regular people who show irregular insights. I found myself much less interested in the brave young knight storming the castle gate than I was in the shrewd old woman who knew the secret way into the castle. Eventually I became a professor of social psychology. Though no stranger to book learning, I do now know that life itself is the greatest teacher. In my experience, there have been two people who accompanied me to dark and brought me back.

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Walking along the Oregon coast. Spending sunset with my enchanting 7-year-old daughter Carrie. Pronounced Car-eee. We were all alone, and I'd never felt isolation to be so perfect. The water was freezing, but she insisted on wading out in the shallow waters.

Absorbing as much of the cold as she could handle, she would come running back onto the beach dancing, striving to become warm enough again to make another incursion, not shivering in cowardice but brimming bright with life. Together smiling, this was repeated cyclically. At an abruption, we came across a fish: lifeless, still, washed-up. Discolored with an abnormal alabaster, bloated. Carrie discovered the fish first with interest.

It looks like it's dead, she mused. I tried to explain to her that lots of things die.

Are we going to die? ...

I coated the question with a thin glaze. Returning, with pain and anguish in her soft voice, she continued,

I don't want you to die...

I don't want to die.

Carrie, reaching to touch/hold/grasp my hand more than I was reflecting towards her hand, proceeded,

Who's going to die first?

I said that I probably would. Probably. I solidified my grip.

That'll be the saddest day of my life, and she meant it.

Only she didn't get to experience it. I knew 48 hours later that that day would never come.

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We rarely look at stars, and it's usually because of reasons beyond our choice. City lights blind our skies. And stars are really one of those things, you never really notice them until someone points them out, defines what a beautiful night it is by tilting your head upwards with their words. Simple, but essential.

As contrived as it seems, I've looked up before and seen them all connected, a web of light that made the brightest stars nearly indistinguishable from the softest. Making connection and separation seem like an irrelevant gradation. I saw the historical constellation blueprint without any knowledge of it, and then it disappeared from in front of me as the conversation changed, a resting streetlight flickered on, I cricked my neck back down. We rarely look at stars, and it's almost always regardless of choice. City lights blind our skies.

This vision, or at least the initiative to have an upward vision, isn't found terribly often.

It was in Boulder, Colorado that I first encountered Ray. Ray Cuzzort. His last name was pronounced almost like a sort of derision (Ka-Zort), which was the kind of attitude he brought to bear against all meanness in the world, all pettiness and unkindness. He had an aura, a reputation, a name for himself that allowed me to know him before I knew him. I obviously couldn't have known then the implications our relationship would have.

Ray's fundamental interest was people. As a famous sociologist (oxymoron observed), he wrote and spoke in an academic language that was both highly intelligent yet accessible. As his friends (which were numerous), we were automatically made to feel trusted, interesting, invaluable.

It was the '70s when I was a new graduate student at CU Boulder, and I was standing outside Ray's office, waiting for him to return from a seminar he was teaching. The seminar was running late and I spent at least half an hour waiting in the hall. One of the school janitors, who was crisscrossing the hall with a mop, stopped and said, "You waiting to see Professor Cuzzort?" I nodded. "He's a great man...", and I responded with an 'oh, how so'. This man, whom I later met as Manny, continued.

"Lots of folks think he's a great sociologist. Big reputation. Some folks say he is one of the most famous professors around here. But he's different. I've been a janitor since I was a kid, I even lived in Washington DC and cleaned Senate offices. People said that place was full of all kinds of famous and great people." Slowly shaking his head, "None of 'em ever talked to me – never even looked at me – let alone asked me anything about my life. I was nothing to 'em. Professor Cuzzort, he asks me about my life. Damn, when my wife got sick with the cancer and was in the hospital for weeks, he showed up every week. He brought flowers because he knew how scared we were. You can take all that reputation stuff and shove it. Many of those big people are just plain pissy. Professor Cuzzort is great because he cares, even about people like me." Manny did not wait for me to react, having spoken his mind he moved on down the hall mopping.

Building something up, whether that thing is an idea, product, place or person, can often end differently than expected. And learning this lesson in the area of self-presentation is a tough one to grasp. Ray did not ever present himself as someone of

great importance, in spite of all of his accomplishment. Hearing Manny say that was slightly off-putting, that is, until I'd actually met and befriended Ray. Which happened quickly.

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[Thump, crunch, loud, but certainly not deafening; I'd only wished it were deafening, to kill some of my sense of it. Metal buckled and folded in on itself. My daughter was no longer standing with the rest of us. A silence. The body of my daughter lying on the side of the street.]

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i don't remember running towards her. my Carrie. the next memory was picking her up out of collected blood, trying to determine the severity of the injury. injuries. a group gathered; i vaguely remember a crowd. i yelled and begged for a blanket or an ambulance or an anything.

Carrie was still breathing. pulsating, i felt her heart pumping but her eyes were shut; as i lifted them the pupils were fully, unrealistically dilated. she made not a noise, a moan, a stir. i held her, irrationally tried to cork the blood, knee-jerkingly spilled out many, many i love yous to perhaps inaudible ears. i pleaded again for an ambulance. could she hear me? could anybody? why was it taking so long? was this happening.

i felt helpless, i unconsciously watched the sky turn pink, i tore apart at just the secondary sight of onlooker's faces. the blood drained, almost as if it came from elsewhere and not from a surreal tragic, the blood moved in rivulets around the gravel in an ever expanding modulation of shape. she was still breathing when the ambulance finally came. she still had a pulse.

as she went on the gurney, i told them she had to be alright. they said they'd do what they could. i was told to ride in the front, not in the back with her, it wasn't allowed. the agonizing trek up the oregon coast, towards newport, 40 minutes away, seemed like 40 weeks. the siren pulsing matched and then aggravated my own pulse. just outside newport, a medic casually radioed, "she has died." no one said anything to me.

literal moments after death, the hospital e.r. restored her breathing and heartbeat. just trying to be with her, both covered in blood, security guards holding me back. i was told not to stay, so they took me to a small supply room and i was left by myself. i glazed over row after row of trivial medical supplies, comprehending nothing.

i was escorted back to the e.r. and confronted the conditions. everyone was standing three feet from my daughter, instead of attentiveness there being a desperate distancing. electrodes keeping the heart beating, Carrie moving slightly from mechanical

air. in consultation with a physician, i was told that her breath and heartbeat were present but her brain was not. complete brain death. hadn't i known when i looked at her pupils that complete dilation meant brain death? i begged for another doctor, desperate for an authority, a possible out. two unnoticed men slipped forward, they confined and separated from me, told me there was no brain activity at all. i asked again and again. i looked at a mangled body and realized my daughter was no longer there. i was shown how to turn off the alarms and life support systems. everybody left. i looked over her lifeless body. breathing heartbeat yes. alive no. i turned off all the machines and she stole her last breath.

anguish, pain, despair, horror, crying, sobbing, i knew nothing. projection; i'd pulled the sole plug that connected me to this world and this breath. i remember falling, to my knees, two friends Paul and Wendy arrived and helped me up, escorted me back to the closet. a nurse kept talking to me, trying to get me out of my blood soaked clothes and into scrubs, but personal decorum was the last thing in my vacant exploding head. she didn't inhabit my hell, but ultimately she could never anyways. my friends told her to go away.

the staff told me i should wait until they had 'cleaned up' my daughter to say my final goodbyes, but i could not grasp many words at that time. i needed to see her again. when i walked into the trauma room, the still sprawled body was no longer my daughter. only an empty and reminiscent shell. i wondered where my daughter has gone.

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after a serious trauma, the traumatized often cannot understand how the rest of the world sallies forth as usual. people laugh, tell jokes, eat food, are entertained, and for the traumatized all of this seems cravenly misplaced. with the shock of a major trauma, the mind and memory become uneven. events no longer flow continuously, but instead vivid scenes are recalled with large gaps in between. i have no memory of leaving the hospital or of traveling to the mortuary.

just before leaving the hospital, someone asked me if i would donate my daughter's eyes to a young blind boy somewhere in the portland area. the idea of any good coming from this disaster was pleasing, so i willingly consented to the donation. sight and foresight are worlds apart.

i agreed to it while slightly dizzy, signing papers papers papers. sometime afterward, time now irrelevant, we were standing outside the hospital, Paul asking for directions to the mortuary. why mortuary so soon, why had i even been placed here in the first place. an evening fog crowded in from the coast, making the landscape patchy as a wailing siren and flashing red lights emerged from it. someone in scrubs immediately appeared and brushed by with a bread-box package, an ice chest, placed carefully on the front seat of a patrol car. i'd been told her eyes would be escorted by state patrol. in immediate importance, the car took off and disappeared to the mist from which it had come. as it vanished, i thought, i *knew*: there went her eyes. i can still see that scene, the last life of her living body.

a part of her body that would live on

while at the mortuary, the lighting was so dim i could hardly see. head pounding with adrenaline laced confusion. “the disposition of the deceased” was how the mortician had put it, sincerely stating how sorry he was. just two days prior while at ecola state park, Carrie had said she hated the idea of worms crawling around in her body; i opted for a cremation. he then asked if i wanted to buy a casket. i did not understand. he explained that the ‘deceased’ could be cremated in an elegant casket. this, seeming foolish to me, was replied to with a humble ‘no’, but he eagerly asked me to reconsider. “Caskets are where I make most of my profit.” i remember feeling my left arm, my strongest arm, jump slightly as i felt a bit dizzy. as i stood, Paul intervened and walked me outside, never to see that man again.

as we all know, some experiences just cannot be described in words to match what we feel. i called my wife to tell her what had transpired. as we had quarreled before this trip and she had chosen space in arizona instead of vacation, she could not allow herself to believe any of this. she called me a liar. i remember sobbing and telling and denying and lack of words, from both sides.

she said she would fly out immediately, to see Carrie. she was hesitant about cremation. i begged her not to come, to skip out on the terrible sight of mangled remains. phone call after phone call ensued. eventually she agreed to cremation, but only if she didn't know the precise time when the body was in flames.

Carrie's death ended my current life, shattered my psychic world. i disconnected, totally cut off from my world, my friends, my marriage. only the pain was real, nothing else. i found myself going through the motions of signing death certificates and talking to people on the phone, trying to make some semblance of sense. none came. even as i write this, as it's edited, as i envision reading the shiny published product, it's still surreal, as these moments always will be.

Ray called me. he asked me to explain what had happened. i talked to him for quite a while, although i have no idea what i actually said. as he began to cry, i remember thinking it was the first time i'd heard tears pour from him. he told me he could not imagine the terror i was feeling now and that he needed to call back later.

i called my parents and heard my father's primal howl; my mother said he'd curled up in a little ball on the floor. i can still hear his howling.

back at the hotel, Paul and Wendy went to their room to change clothes because they were blood-stained from hugging me. i opened my hotel room door to see all of Carrie's things, her toys and clothes and souvenirs from the trip, scattered all over the dresser. it was sometime near dawn that i decided to pry off my blood-soaked clothes and take a shower. i remember standing in the shower, sobbing hysterically as the tub filled up with her blood. i didn't even notice that the hot water had run out, cold red water cascading over me.

Ray called again the next day as i lay locked in a state of abject panic and foggy thinking. we often panic after a disaster, and my whole being at that moment was hypersensitive. outside my hotel room, somebody slammed a car truck shut and I leapt to my feet. what strangeness, what pain to experience the world like that. another odd hallmark of my new life.

Ray asked me how i was doing, and again i rambled on for quite some time. he listened patiently amongst many words, long pauses, troubling silences. crying again himself, *My dear Richard, no one will ever fully understand the terror you now have. Your whole world is different as you try to survive in the shadow of your daughter's death. While many of us will help in any way we can, ultimately it is you who will have to forge a new life for yourself.* i was not psychologically, spiritually, or existentially equipped to process that last idea.

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the chronology of events over the next few days (years) is blurred. at some point, i flew home with my daughter's ashes in a white videotape-sized plastic box. a plain white label with small print on top read, 'the remains of Ms. Carrie Rayma Skeen', nothing more. i remember looking at this small box and thinking of her vital presence in this world, how it'd been reduced to one tiny storage box, complete with insignificant label.

no dancing in waves, no laughter, no beach, just a tiny box of ashes. sitting on the flight home, i put the small white box on my lap knowing i'd arrived with a daughter and departed with ashes.

when i arrived home in arizona, i painstakingly remember seeing my wife's face for the first time since the tragedy. as she radiated anguish, we fell into each other's arms in spite of our prior quarreling. i fumbled in my briefcase for the tiny white box. tears poured as she struggled to process what her eyes were showing her. when our eyes met again, the reflected pain was intolerable, totally intolerable. looking away, i realized that whatever we had shared before, the unending pain consuming each of us was all that remained. the pain bore a world between us. my marriage was over.

my life was over. but like death without resolution, pure pain nothing more nothing less.

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ending abruptly, yet with no feelings. i cannot say with any certainty how my wife proceeded to handle or process her own severe pain due to the fact that i knew nothing beyond my own. when attending the memorial service, the event was blank, soft hits, memory spots. a friend filmed the service. years later i watched it, most of the scenes seeming brand new even though i was in every one of them. Ray could not travel to the service due to a staph infection, though he did call several hours before it began. he did not try to analyze or explain my feelings, but instead simply listened with biding compassion as i tried to articulate the dark space i now inhabited.

strange things often get said at funerals: some with intense emotional content and context, some with blind irrelevance said simply to fill space. as we do not know how to deal with death.

one friend told me that she knew how much i was suffering, she could see it in my eyes, in my bloated face, in my tearstained cheeks, in my damaged soul. she told me the only way to avoid such suffering was not to love.

i was offered an immediate compassionate leave from the university, but i feared that if i didn't stay and at least teach a few classes, i might totally succumb to despair. i decided to keep teaching as my wife and i filed for divorce.

my mind could not stop thinking about my daughter's death, no matter what i did. being trapped in obsession consumes. there were so many feelings, fractured thoughts; my mentality raced to make sense of this. i desperately wanted to know *why* this had happened. i foolishly hoped that if i understood *how* this had happened, i might understand *why*. i also wanted someone to blame and maybe even hate for this. the likely target was the woman who was erratically driving the pick-up that struck and killed Carrie. i obsessively scanned police reports about her odd behavior, including one describing her driving away from the scene of the accident. reviewing over and over the autopsy report, wanting to fully dissect how she had died, even though the documentation was terribly graphic.

i begged my friend and family physician Walt to help me fully understand the medical terminology. we spent a long afternoon discussing this, the autopsy, still leaving me mired in pain. i recall one point, looking into Walt's eyes, both of us realizing the medical analysis was going nowhere. well intentioned ill progressive. the pain was met with pain, desperation with more desperation, and my world spiraled in on itself.

four days after the accident the driver tried to take her own life, i ended up feeling her pain as well. i very much wanted to hate her, to relieve and justify some of my own pain, my own misgivings about not being more attentive in the crosswalk. But as time passed, no kind of analysis or evaluation changed the bottom line – my beloved daughter was dead. the essence of an accident is that randomized events coalesce to create disaster. meaning flounders within.

and a split second later the world is different. a week after Carrie's death, i finally had my first night with a few hours of actual sleep. i dreamt, and as i awoke i hastily used a technique used from working in the sleep lab, a technique for remembering dreams. i was standing, nothing, no breeze, looking. all my dry eyes could see were mild bland hills, and not even sand dunes. sand was too particular and interesting, i guess. just barely sloping bumps, indistinct mounds, flesh colored in fact, alien to the mind and hard to the touch. boring yet troubling; sleep.

it was deep but disturbed, and when i awoke i did so slowed and confused. it was the first moment since she died that i had forgotten about it. almost immediately, i knew it without knowing it, my hopefulness replaced by impending dread, an incredible ugliness. my mind searched to sort: my sweet Carrie was dead. before i had even opened my eyes, i realized i was about to begin another day of hell. in the land of severe depression, there are no days off. every minute is shrouded and dark and dead.

in the month after the accident, my friends and fellow professors recognized the severity of my clinical depression. my good friend and department chair Kooros became concerned that i might commit suicide. he checked in with me periodically, and when asked if i was alright, i knew what he was really asking. budgets were extra tight this particular academic year, and although graduate students were in short supply, i had one full-time. ultimately she came clean years later and admitted she'd been told to watch me and make sure i wasn't becoming suicidal. the overwhelming insight, however, which i realized then but also now upon reflection, was that i only abated thoughts of suicide because i didn't have the energy to follow through with it. the depression was so severe that i didn't even think ending it all was significant enough to do. it was a plan, it was extra movement. drifting was the only option.

and there were times that are significant enough to recount, if for no other reason than they were enough to make my conscious mind actually stop functioning. i was at the university, opening my mail and pretending to be functional and normal. as i quickly ripped through letters and packages i began to tear at one in particular, large and brown. it was filled with large glossy photos of what looked like raw meat; my mind rushed to understand. suddenly i spotted a disfigured face. i was looking at was the autopsy photos of my daughter, mailed to me by mistake. at that realization, my mind shut off. it had no other choice. i was told that i fell to my knees, howled, made noises that seemed of inhuman origin, threw the photos all over the mailroom. i have no recollection of that, no warning, no vortex. just searing pain.

and it was uncharacteristically her. she always tended to tilt her head to the right, her right, the way some people always use their dominant hand due to disposition. and her head was hauntingly to the left in death. like a reflection of what she once was. i thought of mockery, done to provoke.

Francis McCalister, a woman known locally and nationally as a generous philanthropist and a determined and willful lady, called to check up on me. our paths had crossed on a few occasions while i was working on some large grants for the university, and she was quite used to people courting her favor. i picked up the phone,

“Dick this is Francis.” i paused,

“You know who I am,” said with great determination.

“They tell me your daughter was killed in an accident. I am very sorry.”

i thanked her.

“Are you going to do something foolish like abusing drugs or alcohol now?”

thinking about the possibilities, i responded that i was not.

“Good, I did not think you were that type.” without any farewell, she hung up.

we had been in the habit of talking truthfully to each other before, so it made sense that she had the guts to talk to me about what was really going on in my life, something many others evaded at all costs. the walking wounded get so little support from most people; many simply avoid. you start feeling like your depression is a form of plague capable of striking down anyone near you, which only further alienates you.

i remember a time shortly afterward. i was sickeningly hungry and abhorred the thought of a restaurant, all the sociability they had to offer that i wanted no part of. so, wandering around the aisles of a grocery store, at the opposite end of the aisle i saw a friend of Carrie’s with her father. in a split second, seeming on instinct, they glanced in my eyes and immediately reversed away, down another aisle and into another world. i was off put, hurt, terrified, but also understanding. i didn’t want to be with me, either.

in the months that followed, the shock wore off, the pain became more vivid, and i continued to shut down. i started therapy with a kind woman named Caslin. she made the official diagnosis of “clinically depressed”, this problem seemed abstract when i studied it in graduate school, i now fully understood the serious nature of it. the topography of my life. the label and classification gave it a brutal reality; a membership into a group that i wanted no part of but knew i belonged to. images popped into my head: slight hills, slopes, bland, continuing as far as the eye could see.

she gave me strong sleeping pills to prevent total exhaustion. though they made me sleep, they didn't come close to blocking any nightmares: recurring, arduous, vivid, and caustic. all the new nightmares involved some form of unfamiliarity, not seeing ahead, vision blocked.

Dad, come find me. Help me! Where am I? I don't want to be here.

i would plow ahead in the semi-darkness, thrashing about in entangled undergrowth.

Daddy, daddy, please come rescue me! Please – I need your help!

i'd awake trembling and covered in sweat despite the powerful sedatives. Carrie's death had made me afraid of everything.

the mind in distress can do things that are functionally self-destructive. for example, in my late night turnings and twistings, i would occasionally hear something which was not real. auditory hallucinations. several times i heard my daughter's feet gingerly coming up the stairs, or the refrigerator door opening along with the sound of pouring milk. Carrie loved milk in the middle of the night. i'd leap out of bed and rush to the stairs, to the fridge, knowing i'd find nothing, but keeping blatantly irrational hope alive. i demanded that Caslin tell me why my mind was doing this. was this some form of warped guilt? was i losing touch entirely? psychosis scared me. wisely, she would only tell me that a traumatized mind is capable of many, many things: the variety of ways we can and do suffer is staggering.

beyond formal therapy, i attended the Compassionate Friends, nationally organized to support parents who suffer the death of a child. at first, i simply could not believe that anyone's pain equaled mine. arrogantly, i thought i had suffered the worst.

meetings begin with prayer and poem, then going around discussing loss or losses suffered and current feelings. in spite of my dazed state of mind, these stories alerted me to how much suffering there is in the world, shown by just this tiny niche of it. i honestly believed that no one could suffer as i had for Carrie. I was absolutely wrong.

i heard these stories as i continued my emotional and spiritual withdrawal from the world at large. one mother recalled her story: a serious jet ski injury at lake powell. still reeling, she and her other son put his bleeding body in the backseat and sped for two hours to the nearest hospital. the whole trip screaming, crying for help, living the fiction of immeasurable pain as her own manifestation of hell materialized. he died moments after they arrived. her story and many others forced new thought on Carrie's death. she was unconscious from the moment the swerving truck struck her. i hadn't heard her beg for help (aside from nightmares). i became a regular attendee of Compassionate Friends; a group so unnecessary in a fair world. my pain was integral to a much larger world of suffering.

another friend i'd met there had gone through a painful divorce, resulting in alcohol abuse and neglect of his son. he didn't want his son to see him hurting or drinking so much, so he decided it was best to stay away. he came home from work one day, drunk, to find his son dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, a nearby note reading, "Dad, I don't know why you are pushing me away, but I can't take it anymore."

knowing you're not alone in this, in anything, is a comfort essential to any life. my time with these people was a glimpse of slightly more.

i also remember Kyle, a colleague who'd seen his sister's suicide, saying to me that we both now spoke the language of pain. the silent realization that he was right. and to tell Kyle's story you'd have to know about the alcoholism, about him collapsing in his garage and crying for entire days, about losing the ability to control his body, about how his sister was the only person he'd ever loved. but telling the story still only gets you narration. experience is exponentially more real.

apart from therapy, i was still unplugged. i was consumed by my own despair. week after week it became greater.

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for a period of at least a couple of years, the horrors of Carrie's death became more agonizing in a variety of ways. one day, I remember teaching in the morning and coming home after lunchtime. still not hungry, all i wanted to do was sit down and rock in a recliner. after a while i couldn't see well, and with the reasoning and logic a truly depressed person has, i thought, 'oh great, now i'm going blind, too.' all the light around me seemed to be slowly fading, the room and the world outside the window. 'so, this is how people go blind', i mused pathetically. then a streetlight flickered on; suddenly I realized it was just nighttime, not blindness. i'd been sitting in my chair for hours and failed to notice the setting sun. a sad commentary on my inability to experience even the passage of time.

i honestly believed at one point that it was impossible to hurt more, but four to five months after the death more of the numbness and shock wore off. i was left with a deeper sense of loss. it's always unnerving to see people who've lost a loved one a month later when they say they think the worst is behind them. we all have our own ways of grieving, but it's hard to believe that major trauma starts to dissipate within a month. mine only got worse in the first two years. it felt like falling dark and endless, the abysmal turbulence of psychic survival making me conserve what little positive energy remained. in the morning, i would try to arrange and cope with the next hour or two; the thought of living all day with raw anguish was too much to bear. i lived an hour at a time, ignoring what i surely must have realized would follow.

at the university, i was still teaching a large class on society and sexuality. within it were all these young women and men, thoroughly excited about their own sexual possibilities, and there i was, living a completely asexual life. for the first time since adulthood, i simply had no sexual feelings whatsoever. as i struggled to teach this course i felt as if i was now teaching a foreign language i no longer knew.

i desperately clung to the idea that teaching would give my life some badly needed direction. my assumptions about staying active and continuing to teach were sound, but my abilities as a teacher were becoming compromised. i had trouble staying focused. i'd forget what i was talking about mid-lecture. student's obvious recognition of this undermined all i had come to expect from my job.

before the accident, teaching had always been rewarding; the most gratifying part of it being to share my passion for learning. but i had lost the sensation that working with bright young students and collegial peers was a fine way to spend one's professional life. the faculty evaluations accurately reflected my failing faculties, though i was told they'd been lost. when i asked my department chair what had happened to them, he continued pretending that they'd gotten misplaced. protection is a kind gesture, but it often shelters us from the structure of humanness, action and consequence. no one was fooled. i was barely holding on.

it became imperative on a daily basis to avoid anything that was draining emotionally and spiritually. i had a lot of friends, but i now became careful about whom i would see. i was usually the guy who'd listen and support others, but with my psychic energy so low i honestly had no energy for them. it wasn't that i didn't understand their needs, but rather that i had nothing to give.

i spent a lot of time doing virtually nothing, like spacing out or watching inane tv shows. commercials provided even more opportunities. avoiding mundane tasks that used to be routine became essential, like not washing my car. what did it matter? things get dirty. rain washes eventually. things had no interest, but were still exhausting. there were brief moments, however, that combined the calm with some invigoration and gave me a slight reason to press on. i'd take a walk in the woods, high up on the mountain. somehow just being with nature, by myself, i could briefly relax and enjoy the most basic of aesthetic pleasure; wind, beauty, forest, vast air. these walks were soothing, like a kind of balm for my raw and frayed soul. i'd often start to walk and my lack of life would weigh too heavy on me, i'd think that i couldn't even complete this one pleasurable task. but if i exerted myself and forced it for a while, the temporary reprieve would materialize. i remember a few times walking until dark, not realizing the lack of light and continuing. unlike before, i didn't think i was going blind. instead i'd see it as

a different kind of light. i'm fortunate to live in an actual 'dark sky city', where the star shine can actually illuminate paths for you on the right night. the mountain walk coalesced with the enormous expansive sky and star, and for moments i'd feel numb. which was better than raw.

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as the days, weeks and years passed, i knew i might not recover. i continued therapy, twice a week, and when my therapist recommended that i add antidepressants to my existing drug regiment, i declined. i was taking drugs to help me sleep, and i really had no rational reason for skipping antidepressants because i know they have helped a lot of people. but i still felt some need to feel my pain. plus, if they didn't work, then i'd really have no options left.

i remember being angry with Caslin, my therapist, because i would come in and share the extreme anguish i was feeling day after day, week after month, and i wanted some sort of assurance about when my psychic descent would stop. i begged to know when i would start feeling better, but as a forthright and honest therapist she wouldn't give me those kinds of assurances. i remember leaving many therapy sessions severely disappointed that i had not been promised some specific recovery date, but she did assure me that i would get better. we can put up with anything if we know the end is coming. for a long time i had no reason to believe my pain would ever decrease.

i was uninterested in food. i knew that she was not eating, so as her loving dad, why should i? i lost a lot of weight. 50 pounds. and people would tell me i looked great, only deepening the gap created by absence, the gap between appearance and mental health.

another afternoon, i decided to join two good friends who were going to a comedy club. some laughter might help. the comedian, a young woman, must have been funny because the entire audience was erupting in long winded laughter, except for me. i'd lost my sense of humor, too. on the drive home my friends curtailed their merriment after seeing how sad i was. my depression continued to spread and devour even their happiness.

it was pretty difficult to see anyone who wasn't depressed themselves. i ended up spending a lot of time alone. however, one welcome respite from this were the occasions when Ray would call. no matter how severe my depression, he was there, never turning away from the infinite grief and consuming despair. when i had moments of lucidity and the depression briefly cleared, he'd acknowledge my slow reemergence back into the world of the living. one manageable day, Ray phoned,

My dear Richard, the day will come when you will be able to appreciate life again, with the wealth of humor and joy it can bring.

i desperately wanted to believe him.

i would think i was feeling better, but then something would continue to pull me back. i remember an incident two years after the accident, a normal movie outing with a friend. this particular movie was quite violent, and i recall thinking that whomever

filmed it had definitely seen someone bleeding to death. watching someone injured and falling to the ground, i quickly was transported to that same scene of Carrie's death. the next thing i knew, i was standing in the theater with the lights coming on. they'd stopped the film to see if i was alright. apparently, i had stood up in the theater and screamed as loud as possible, something that i have no awareness of doing. my friend and the ushers walked me out of the theater.

some people never recover from great loss. one of my friends in the Compassionate Friends group killed himself. this was a regrettable but understandable loss. i cannot take personal credit emerging from my nightmare, in the midst of my darkest despair i felt no strength of character, no determination. many friends extended themselves as much as possible to help me. my loving parents did everything they could to help, yet our collective pain was so great that all we did was suffer. situationally therapeutic, but definitely not enough.

Ray reemerged then, as he would at many key moments in my life. he called, talked, but mostly and most importantly listened. Ray steadfastly did three things which ultimately proved beneficial.

first, he was always fully present when i needed him. he listened to my litany of pains, my droning depression, and always yet another painful story. second, he always acknowledged that he could not fully understand the profundity of my personal suffering. this proved amazingly soothing because it compassionately acknowledged the intricate and layered complexities of my pain. i had people tell me how much they understood my pain because they had lost their family dog recently; i imagine that's a bit different. having lost my daughter and my wife, there were days when my pain was all i had left.

Ray helped me come to understand that, spiritually, the magnitude of my loss was in direct proportion to the magnitude of my love for Carrie. this became crystal clear as we talked some fourteen months after Carrie died. i was delivering yet another multi-dimensional layer of sorrow. gently smiling, Ray reached over to cup my hands in his. in his always friendly but formal dialogue he said,

My dear Richard, I see and am touched by your profound pain. But I also know that the severity of your pain emanates from your abiding and wondrous love for your daughter. Ironically, you hurt so much because you loved so much. But the day will come when the love you have for Carrie will bring you back. To not fully love is actually far worse than death itself.

during a later visit, Ray sensed that i was in a better spot. since the accident, i'd kept Carries room shut and unvisited, left to collect dust. in addition to his usual support, he asked,

Do you think we should look at some of Carrie's things?

terribly uncertain, i responded with hesitance. i had come to fear direct exposure, avoiding it at all costs. but something about Ray triggered emotion and sense, he asking again, i eventually consenting. as we opened the door, the flood of untouched belongings became overload. his hand on my shoulder helped steady my advance, our attention quickly directed towards one specific pile of easel pictures.

Ray picked them up and began leafing through them when one in particular stood out. not long before traveling to oregon, Carrie had drawn a self-portrait depicting her days in the brownies, uniform replete with sash and patches and sun shining. she was holding the world above her head, a modern day Atlas, written below:

“I LUV MY WRLD”

Smiling at her artistic capabilities coupled with her inherited bad spelling, Ray and I realized joy alongside loss. It was the first time I'd thought about her without the whole horizon discolored, like a sliver of hope.

Ray got the picture framed. It still hangs in my house.

In the third year, the haze started to abate a bit, like a cloud gradually dissipating and burning off. The signs at first were barely perceivable. Looking back, my first inclination that I was getting better was when I consciously noticed my despair no longer deepening.

I wanted to see more of Carrie's things; pictures of her that I had habitually hidden started to reemerge. A toy or two lying around seemed comforting, as opposed to the usual dreadful flashback that accompanied them. Her pictures migrated from the kitchen and multiplied near my bedside, and deep looks at them brought small inner celebrations rather than consuming finalizations. I felt a bit more like going outside, walking, running, even washing my car. I began to actually be interested in other people's lives.

My therapist saw this happening, which gave us both relief. Also, my role at the Compassionate Friends groups changed in that I talked and cried less about Carrie's death and was more finding myself more capable of comforting the other parents who had experienced losses. This change was noted and applauded, giving everyone in the group relief as well.

Aware of these improvements, Ray conveyed his optimism,

I do have faith in you and believe that your spirit will emerge from this very dark space. You will come back.

There really is no guarantee that things will work out, that the traumatized will get better. But having others believe in my recovery when I could not was key. We need others to survive our disasters. Ironically, when we need friends the most we are often the least capable of being a friend.

A different friend and colleague asked me, months after the accident, how Carrie was doing. He obviously didn't know what had happened, and because all I knew was what he didn't, I responded with a quick, harsh quip. "She's dead. Dead as a doornail." Remembering his expression and shock, I saw the pain inflicted. The needless nails pushed deeper into the fleshy well of my existence. In order to recover, these types of interactions needed to be dealt with in a different manner, and consciously recognizing a beginning.

Instigating another moment of recovery, my friend and noted psychologist John Davis decided to visit. As mentioned, my depression left me with virtually no energy to perform even the most menial of tasks, let alone make strategic decisions about my life. John arrived amidst a moment of less depression, hence slightly more energy. Well known within psychology, he was most well-known for his ability to hypnotize. He wondered if through hypnosis we would learn anything about my current emotional state. I can now write about this experience, solely because he taped our session.

Hypnotism heavily depends upon the person being hypnotized. I learned I am an ideal subject for this kind of investigation, as I cooperated readily with his directions and slipped into a trance.

He asked me to describe the house I was living in at the time and what it felt like to be there. My home had been my family's and Carrie had lived there for all seven years of her abridged life. He had me visualize myself standing there, in the driveway, looking up towards the house. I described what I saw.

“This is not a house at all, but a hospital for the severely wounded. In the hospital for the severely wounded, there is a lot of sadness and no joy.”

I barely believe such words were spoken myself, let alone coming from my mouth and mind. He asked me to enter, describe what I saw and how I felt. I became enveloped in the family's living room,

“This is an endless waiting area. Here one waits and suffers and then.....waits and suffers some more.”

What do the patients wait for? My unconsciousness replying,

“This hospital has only one patient and this patient does not know what he is waiting for.”

The next room visited was the kitchen.

“This is the hospital cafeteria. No real food here. No nourishment here. No tasty food. Only a brown lumpy gruel made out of cardboard is served here. It's force-fed. It is all that is available.”

Continuing, I reached the family room.

“This area is abandoned. Long ago this room was full of life, joy, and laughter. But now the one lonely patient in the hospital for the severely wounded never comes here.”

The mental journey was quick in my perceptible time, but terribly long and strenuous as I listened to the drawn and droning voice. Next, the formal dining room,

“This is a place where many people used to come to talk, to eat and to enjoy each other’s company. No one has been in this room for years. No one wants to come here anymore.” The sentences I heard were short and child-like.

I went into the foyer and up the stairs towards the master bedroom, describing the stairs as very steep and very tiring.

“Upstairs there are dangerous demons.”

Finally, reaching the upstairs, I described the master bedroom as,
“the spot where the hospital’s only patient tries to get well. He tries to sleep here. He tries to find renewal here, but this is just where he tosses and turns and faces the demons. Yes, this hospital has too many demons to ever really sleep.”

I went down the hall towards Carrie’s bedroom. Ever since she’d died, I had just shut the door, leaving all of her possessions in the room, just as she had left it when we departed for Oregon. They remained still and same, for an owner who would never return. Despite the fact that I wasn’t actually physically present in this scenario, I found it incalculably painful to go into her room. Just inside the door, against the windowed wall, was a giant easel on which Carrie had taken a marker and written, ‘Things to do after Oregon’. She had written about a dozen things she wanted to do in misspelled words as soon as we returned from our trip to the peaceful Pacific Northwest.

Though I refused to hypnotically go into the room, John encouraged me to open the door and look inside. I did, describing,

“This is the surgery wing in the hospital for the severely wounded. This is where the demons cut you up and leave you. There is a giant silver surgery table glowing in the bright light. On the table is a hairy, black and blue heart trying to beat. It should be red, but it has been beaten, turned inside out. It is abandoned. The demons have cut it out and left it here to rot. This heart is trying to grow hair to protect itself but hearts are not supposed to have hair. This heart is big, bloody, and only intermittently beating. It’s pathetic.”

He asked whose heart this,

“Mine.”

* * * * *

John asked me to remember what I had experienced at the hospital for the severely wounded when I regained consciousness. I looked at him dumbfounded, not even knowing where he came up with that terminology. Two days later when he played the tape, I didn’t recognize my own voice, emotionless and distant. Listening, I understood how much pain was embodied in the actual house itself. The next day I moved out.

Though my depression was lessening, I would often regress knowing I didn't have the energy to undertake even simple tasks. Depression takes a lot of work. I came upon a spiral notebook, in the back of a desk drawer, that contained a series of lists that planned what Carrie wanted to do during the summer in which she died. She had always been a list maker, misspellings sprawled vertically as my emotional state again plummeted in the same direction. Potential and general disappointment engulfed me again; all the things she would never be able to do, all the possibility of accomplishment and vitality. Gone. The list brought tears, and as I write, I realize why exactly it is that tear is spelled the same regardless of specific definition, noun or verb. I closed the notebook not due to psychological distance (though that was there), but mostly because my eyes couldn't focus on words beyond the tears.

I again had nightmares filled with Carrie calling out for help. I hadn't had those for months; the regressions seemed inescapable.

For those who do escape, many seem to remember key experiences that signaled their return to the world beyond clinical depression. I met my wife, Janet, about a year and a half after Carrie died, who was going through a painful separation from her husband of eighteen years. She too was in a state of shock and our friendship started out very slowly, seemingly without any romantic possibilities, functioning more as psychiatric nurses for each other. In the middle of depression, having no sexual feelings whatsoever, I didn't picture this to be the ideal way to start a healthy relationship. But as the friendship matured, our topography changed.

A videotape turned up after the move, and I decided on a whim to watch it. It depicted Carrie and I gliding down a waterslide and into a shallow inflatable pool in our backyard. The sun filtered intermittingly through the tall ponderosas scattered about the yard. Both of us laughing, the world felt right. As I watched this tape months after the move, I realized that not only was Carrie gone, but that happy-go-lucky incarnation of me was gone forever, too. While I was much less in the 'clinically depressed' category, I wondered if life would ever really be right again. The next day, however, I started a pilgrimage with Ray that would resolve that very question.

The phone rang. It was Ray. *My dear Richard, I am going to die next week*, he stated calmly.

Whenever I spoke with him, I always felt challenged to stay alert to new possibilities and experiences. The dire nature of what he had said did not dispel the excitement of hearing from him again.

“What’s happening?”

My digestive organs are failing and the dialysis has to stop. I’m having my last dialysis session this Friday. About a week later, I will die.

I couldn’t resist my overwhelming urge to argue with this news.

“But there’s some medical device, some extra bright physician, some miracle drug,” I pleaded.

My dear Richard, do you know anyone who loves life more than I?

I stated that, truthfully, I didn’t.

Then you must trust me and accept this. Ironically, I have never been more alive.

I let out a very deep breath. I wanted to support him in any way that I could. There was a long silence and I could hear slight breathing. My mind racing, I resolved one of his familiar pregnant pauses by suggesting I visit. He wanted me to come, but I knew he wanted me to volunteer.

“Should I fly to Colorado?”

Yes, do visit for a few days. It’s important to see you and spend this time together.

A few more words were shared. Shortly afterward, I think I heard a click.

Only after my pilgrimage was I to fully understand how profound his comments were. Even while dying (especially while dying) my friend reached to share. For Ray, living was synonymous with sharing. Before hanging up, he asked me to collect notes and cards from his Arizona-based friends who wished to say goodbye. He laughed light-heartedly, saying,

Tell them they do not have much time.

Very Morrie-Schwartz-ish. The next four days...the last four days.

DAY ONE

Two days later; early morning flight. I brought nothing to do on the plane so I could focus totally on my thoughts and on Ray. I'd visit for four days, even though he'd probably be alive for six. I wanted, I needed to spend these last four days with Ray not only because of the comfort he'd afforded me after Carrie's death, but also because in some small way I hoped I might help him deal with his own death. I'd find out soon enough that it was still Ray who would be transforming me.

Climbing past 30,000 feet, warm colors of a new day dawned on the landscape like a crisp reflection, my reflection upon situational life. The ultra-bright sunrays, unfiltered by much atmosphere, paralleled that of Ray's personality vectors and the quality he had of rising above much of our needless air, smoke, and fog that are put between us and occlude our sense of connection. Ray attuned to this abundance of life no matter what was engaged in: lecturing, writing, talking, preparing a meal, flying an airplane. He understood that any chosen activity was an integral part life's marvel. As the jet droned on, life still didn't feel particularly abundant without Carrie. While I definitely wanted to be with him, I desperately hoped his death wouldn't rekindle the horrors of the past.

Ray wrote many books, one of which gained immediate and widespread success called 'Twentieth Century Social Thought'. Ever since this book had been published, he had preferred to use the pen name of R.P. Cuzzort (his middle name was Paul). When I asked him why he had chosen to do this, he paused momentarily, choosing his words as carefully as he chose his actions. He explained that after this publication, his royalty checks started arriving quite regularly and his university salary became a rather small percentage of his overall income. Realizing that this could separate and isolate him from his friends and colleagues, Ray made a conscious decision to take his everyday name off the books and instead put on the 'R.P. Cuzzort'. This new notation distanced him from his own success while allowing him in his everyday life to be the 'just plain Ray' that we had come to know.

I once asked Ray which theorist in his book was his favorite, and why. *I would have to pick that enigmatic Harold Garfinkel*, he responded. Garfinkel, another famous sociologist, had conducted an experiment at UCLA in which he told students that they could talk to a wise and famous counselor, one of the best in the business. Garfinkel offered to let the UCLA students talk to this profoundly smart counselor at no cost as long as they were willing to talk over the phone and to only ask yes or no questions about their lives. Most of the students, when offered a chance to speak with this famous counselor, agreed to the format that Garfinkel proposed.

The 'experiment' went on, unknowingly to students that they were talking not to a counselor at all, but in reality to a graduate assistant who was generating random yes or no answers to all of their questions. Now, obviously we think we wouldn't be pulled in by such a farce. Random yes or no answers to questions wouldn't provide us with any important insights. Well, contrary to what we would normally believe, these students found these randomized answers powerful. Even after they were told that they had received random yes and no answers to their potential questions, they **insisted** they had

learned a lot by participating in this hoax; in fact, most of the debriefed still wanted another chance to talk to the ‘counselor’! Ray maintained that point, which was also Garfinkel’s experimental conclusion: that if we expect a situation to be meaningful, we will work quite hard until it becomes that way. We create the meanings we need.

Clearly, meaning is essential in our lives. But where does meaning come from? How do people arrive at different meanings? These are complex and fascinating questions. What this Garfinkel experiment suggests is that meanings are created rather than intrinsically embedded. What this ultimately means is that we all have radical degrees of freedom possible in our lives. We create our own social meanings and destinies, even around something as inevitable as death, Ray philosophized casually.

And he continued with a concrete example. A good friend of his in New York City was a therapist, and while she had a good reputation, she was generally not viewed as ‘great’. Ray had talked to her about the Garfinkel studies and she asked him to send her the original paper on the experiments. After she reviewed the study, she decided to radically restructure her professional life. The advice she had been giving to clients for years was quite sound, but many did not take it to heart. She was aware that the session fees were usually covered by insurance benefits; hence, many clients would show up late or miss a session. Not personally paying most of the bill, they were not highly invested.

After reading the studies and hearing Ray discuss them, she knew she had to create an environment which clients expected to be highly meaningful. She immediately doubled the cost of her therapy sessions. She moved her office into a new, incredibly upscale building. She hired good-looking employees who were well dressed and professionally mannered. She refashioned to high power.

Two years after she instituted these changes, she told Ray her reputation as a therapist was now staggering. She believed she was still giving her clients the same sound therapeutic advice she had given before, but now with her enriched office environment and exceedingly higher fees, her clients were listening a lot better. Though some clients expectedly dropped her after the change, she now had a waiting list of new clients who had heard about her outstanding reputation (one of whom actually told her that she must be “damned good” given her higher fees). The number of late clients declined dramatically. Clients rarely missed a session: her cancellation fees were steep.

Using Garfinkel’s findings, my friend has become a renowned therapist precisely because her clients now expected more from her.

Expectation. Meaning.

The sunshine shadow turned to a highlight of pink. Up and down the cabin passengers were slowly stirring and awakening to a new day. I recalled Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day
Rage, rage against the dying of the light

If old age should rage against the dying light, what should be felt in the death of the young? Of a seven-year-old? Rage is not enough.

For me, my intimate experiences with death had to be compounded with many other seemingly infinite negative emotions, perceptively impossible to recover from. However, when Ray began talking about his own imminent death, I began to appreciate that I was witnessing a very different way of dying. Only later did I fully comprehend Ray's intention to die exactly as he'd lived: with great passion, enthusiasm, and an awareness of the magnificent intensity life offers.

We began a gradual descent from cruising altitude that ended my critical thought for the moment, the passengers finishing slight stabs at quenching hunger, thirst, sleep, and the sustenance of metaphorical shelter. I was jolted up to the aisle by a woman needing to use the toilet. Reseating, I joined the clouds outside. Remembering when Ray asked me to if I wanted to go soaring with him.

Soaring, thinking. Jumping at the opportunity, I accompanied Ray and merged with him via aircraft; seeking warm updrafts and embracing natural currents. From above we saw trucks, cars, bikes, bodies, psyches, hopes. As we were elevating out of the Boulder airport in this bumpy, noisy, tiny two-seater, Ray asked,

Do you feel anxious about flying with me?

Not at all. Not being able to see my face he continued,

You know I have had heart problems lately.

...

What? Had I heard him correctly? He yelled over his shoulder, past the noise created by atmosphere breaking all around,

Heart problems! Heart problems! I have heart problems! They have me on Digitalis to regulate my heart!

What? Why had he not discussed this before we took off?

TWANG. As Ray released us from the tow plane.

Hey, no big deal to land a glider. You just look way ahead for a large open space. Then,

you just push down there on the stick, which lifts the flaps and pushes you down into the ground.

He continued screaming this in heart-rattling shout to further combat the noise. Did he say *'into the ground'* or *'onto the ground'*? The torrential noise was terribly loud. As I envisioned my abnormally erect body and Ray's floundering lifeless body plummeting *'into the ground'*, I began to feel my blood flowing fast.

Got one! As he discovered a fresh pocket of rising air. Ups and downs still, surrendering to the mercy of the wind. Sweating bullets.

Finally getting the drift of it, we began our rapid decent upon Boulder. 15,000 feet collapsed to the ground in a troubled grace.

I felt quite relieved, yet hyper-consciously alive, when we landed. As he climbed out of the cockpit, he turned to me saying, *Did that part about the old ticker failing get your heart racing a little?* After laughter, I knew I had once again been had. Ray actually was on Digitalis for some heart irregularities, but his doctors did not consider his condition very serious. Yes, he had worried me and also slightly terrified me, but in the process he had also let me go in a way that gliding in a winged, jet-less plane could only parallel. Together, they (we) were sheer serenity. It's funny, to have that feeling while in total danger, while feeling almost the complete opposite in your mind just minutes before. Again: silliness aside, sincerity prevailing.

The following week he invited me to soar again, this time letting me actually take the controls for a while. It was magic, exhilarating and unreal. I now knew and appreciated the difference between flying and soaring. Floating, yet controlling the path, playing in light cloud cover, feeling, breathing, possibility.

Ray helped me land, and afterward I embraced him quickly as I saw him smile. Our 30 year friendship had seen much irony and liveliness, virtually no lecturing. Odd, for two professors.

Ray shared many ideas with me, and as my plane drew nearer to Colorado I didn't yet know that he was about to impart one final idea, one final gift. He was about to show me a powerful and utterly profound way to die.

The plane touched down at Denver International, a newly built, multi-billion-dollar prairie-land extravaganza in which the main terminal is shaped like a giant Bedouin village (complete with canvas topped tents) and is connected to a vast underground monorail linking the outlying concourses. After deplaning and beginning a whole new journey to seek the exit of the airport, I peered out huge glass windows, the majestic prairie now blighted with hundreds of airborne travelers, traversing air and space to their next adventures. I felt burdened and morose, however, knowing I'd journeyed just like them, but to a destination that would ultimately feel much different upon arrival. My dear friend's last last days.

I finally reached the rent-a-car, and as I drove I felt cramped in my ‘mid-sized’ vehicle. Not cramped simply by my lack of space, but also by my engrossing and heavy heart. Had I chosen a compact car, would my spirit have been crushed? As we the vehicles, our problems become a function of our personal space and social station. The car’s confinement attuned me to the despair in my heart. Bouncing along turbulently in my mid-sized vehicle with minimal shock absorbers, I finally reached the outskirts of Boulder. Crossing a ridge east of the city, all of Boulder spread out below. The sight conjured up a rush of memories: my five years as an undergraduate, another seven as a graduate, myriad friends, a few special loves, and of course, Ray.

Before making the weighty arrival at Ray’s doorstep, I stopped at the store to buy some culinary gifts. Peaches, apricots, cherries, but also two of Ray’s favorite cheeses, drunken goat and red dragon. I pulled up in front of Ray’s sprawling two-story house, which though large, was simple and unpretentious. The engine quieted as I paused. I knew this visit was essential, but I also shuddered to think how painful it might be. I’d packed heavy sleeping medications in case pain prevailed once again. Still, I knew – really *knew* – I had to see Ray. I rang the doorbell as simultaneously Ray and Jane’s shitzus started their obligatory yapping. Their frenzy shattered the calm presence I’d hoped to gather.

Jane and Ray had devoted themselves to each other for the last twenty years, although Jane was still legally married to an influential political speechwriter. While Ray had no desire to formally remarry after being widowed, he loved sharing his life with Jane, who was a retired nurse practitioner. Her nurturing personality and sharp wit was a perfect match for Ray’s insatiable thirst for life, love, and connection, creating playful sparks that they often ignited together.

Jane answered the door, battling to keep the hyper dogs in the house. In spite of her obvious fatigue, her eyes sparkled with recognition as she looked up at me. She was definitely glad I’d made the journey. Immediately she led me through the large, informally furnished living room into Ray’s study. While the shutters over the large windows were still closed, causing the room to be in near darkness, I could see my friend slouching awkwardly in the corner recliner. His posture and color brought imminent shock. If I’d seen him on the street, I might not have recognized this emaciated, jaundiced man; he looked completely worn down. He extended a limp hand, which I would have sworn did not belong to the energetic friend I had known for the last thirty years.

As I clutched his tepid hand, he laughed vigorously saying,

Not quite what you expected? My dear Richard, I can see you’re surprised by my appearance. I may have to postpone that front page GQ exposé. Yes, my body is giving up, but ironically, my spirit has never been better.

Sitting down next to Ray in immediate comfort, he continued. *When you reached out for my hand, it reminded me of some reflections I had yesterday. I was here in the study and looking at my hand. I do not know if you have done this, but in the right mood you can look at your hand and almost sense that your hand itself is an instrument of agency. I looked at this hand; my old hand, boney as it is now, and I still fondly recall all*

of the things that I have touched. All of the things that I have felt. All of the wonderful people who I have come to know through at least a handshake, if not more. All of the food the hand has delivered to me. All the sensual touches. All of the writing I have done. This boney, wrinkled old hand has been around.

As I look at this hand, I think about its ability to reach out for the world. While I know this very hand will soon do no more reaching or touching, I am still in great awe of hands, and indeed of lives, in which we can reach out, we can touch, we can hold and we can feel. Indeed, life is about reaching out and touching, anything and everything. I see this clearly now, as well as the fact that it won't be reaching or touching much longer. You do understand, don't you? he pleaded.

I assured him I did. Shared experience begs significance.

Ray looked exhausted and his body radiated the pain and anguish of dying, yet the sparkle in his eyes revealed his intelligence and burning desire to share.

Oh my dear Richard, this thing we call life is so glorious. We are a privileged group, we the living. Pausing and letting out a prolonged sigh, What joy to be fully alive. Oh, I have had regrets. I have made plenty of mistakes. Even when I have reached out for the wrong things, embraced the wrong people, or made bad decisions in my life, my desire to connect and belong remained. So when I see my hand, I see my life, and my insatiable desire to reach out. My dear Richard, let me hold your hand. Let me touch you as I experience the person you are. This is truly one of the greatest blessings we the living have.

As Ray held his hand in mine, his whole being coming alive; the man awkwardly slouched in the recliner becoming vital again. So much shared over the years, how much distance still left to travel.

The more we spoke, the more Ray's energy increased, multiplying with every jubilant word. In spite of his own impending death. His fascination foreshadowed my own as the mood turned from the initial somber calmness to that of joy and rejoice. The dying often become lost in the self and the dying itself. Interest takes energy.

The ways in which we deal with death. When people are dying, we distance ourselves from them and convert it into trite euphemistic expression. We either make up stories about how they will get better or, if we really admit they are dying, we often start emotionally and sometimes even physically withdrawing. We do this because everything about death strikes a deep level of fear within us. We fear being close to death as it reminds us of our mortality. We fear the out of control nature of the experience itself. We fear watching our loved ones endure the entire process of dying.

Linguistically we distance ourselves from it. Instead of saying someone is dying, we talk about 'losing someone' (should we keep looking for them?), and continue with the abundance of euphemistic expressions for death. She 'passed on' (to where?); he 'kicked the bucket' (ouch?); he 'bought the farm' (what farm?); she 'bit the dust' (gag-gag); he is doing 'the big sleep' (let's wake him up!); she has 'given up the ship' (can we help her get it back?). Or the medical twists, such as the patient developed 'conditions not conducive to life' (like, a bullet through the head?), or more simply, 'complications causing her to not make it' (make it where?). Do these linguistic evasions really help us process and understand death or occlude it?

The dead at the mortuary quickly become 'the deceased', the mortuaries become funeral homes, the director the 'grief counselor', the arrangements for the body become 'the disposition of the deceased'. This professional terminology seems cumbersome and oddly impersonal. The death of a loved one, friend or family, is very personal. And it's the last thing we do, or anyone does. It only makes sense to be totally present, brutally honest, and constantly aware of death when it's making an appearance, as brief as that may be. Ray understood this clearly.

Weird, he mused, how dying can give you the final push to feel most alive.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK, someone pounded on Ray's front door. Looking out the side window, Ray spotted Gus Coteria, the president's assistant, the University of Colorado's plumber. Ray had dealt with him before and knew he was there to advance the public relations image of the university. Obviously, Ray's death could be a major PR event.

If we ignore him, he will go away, Ray declared.

Before leaving Arizona, I'd contacted some of Ray's closest friends about his death, letting them know they could write him if they wanted. Incoming phone calls were tricky because Ray's sleeping patterns were now highly variable. Looking through the stack of about 20 cards and letters, Ray smiled and laughed, stirring up more memories shared. If it was from a mutual good friend, we'd pause and discuss them for a while, pondering the future through the past. Ray continued to focus on the best traits of people, this process being contagious as I found myself seeing old acquaintances in more engaging and optimistic ways. Ray continued to grow on me, like a delightful disease.

Interesting, what people write to a dying man. Connection is a hard thing to convey through written words from afar, what ends up working are those moments of shared humor.

After finishing with the cards for the moment, he looked up at me,

And this card, from Stu. He's still laughing at how I managed to fall into that creek while trying to retrieve my favorite fly. And I wasn't laughing then at all, but how could one fail to now, given that I was terribly drenched. I must've looked ridiculous...

The ridiculous imagery amidst all that is usual and normal. Many of the cards contained such sentiments with humor as balm for difficulty. Humor being used to merge and not defend or forget, the cards proved highly affective.

Continuing, he explained that dying and the long protracted time he had spent on dialysis were difficult at times, but the vivid memories of the people he had known and loved made the hard times bearable; these treasured memories were like credit in the bank. On days that you are depressed, these memories come as credit, enjoying them like well spent cash. Not to commodify people, but rather to consciously realize their personal connection, utility, and potential. We all have times when we need to cash in some of those memories, to relish the funny times and the engaging encounters we've had. For Ray, people were what counted and his good memories account was brimming. He could've lived much longer if it all truly did translate into extra health and heartbeats.

Our sharing became an elixir on his fading energy. By the end of our time that afternoon, Ray was bouncing around the room, literally, as a man with a new lease on life. Shortly thereafter, his longtime love Katherine arrived to spend the afternoon with Ray. Katherine was his first 'big' love and now Ray was fully energized for her visit. As I left Ray's home on this bright afternoon, I obviously contemplated death, life, and the ways in which we can directly and powerfully confront each of those on a personal level, but also the simplicity of the afternoon; the breeze, the warmth, the way my body traversed through it all with pleasure and ease. Was I really feeling this?

When I returned to Ray's home on the first evening of my final visit, I was surprised to find Ray alone in the living room looking at his social theory book. I asked him what he was thinking. He paused quite a while before saying, *Social theories really are interesting – at least to me. Some of these theorists feel like old familiar friends.* I was reminded of the time I'd met up with Ray at a large Sociology conference, where many of these prominent people in the field were socializing with Ray, some even sharing helicopter shuttles with him. He got along with everyone, befriending all from

the lowest to the highest social ranks. Through all this, he'd specifically chosen for me to come on these last days. I did question this, but it seemed more important to live without question at this moment. It just made sense.

We only spoke briefly that night before he retired for the evening. I'd decided to sleep at my sister's house in Boulder instead of staying with Ray and Jane, who did invite me to stay there. With all of the hospice support staff coming and going, I didn't want to compound matters. A hotel sounded too impersonal, not to mention the added expense. When I arrived at my sister's empty home, I was suddenly aware of how odd it felt to be in her home without anyone there. Immediately, I feared this might feel like my daughter's empty room, but after taking several deep breaths, I reminded myself that while the house looked abandoned, my sister's family was only out camping and not dead. My regressions tried and failed.

Taking stock of my feelings after my first day with Ray, I realized that while I was clearly saddened to see my friend dying, being with him was actually renewing something deep inside of me. I wasn't going to need the heavy sleeping medications I had brought. I slept with windows fully ajar, the heat of the summer vanquished by night air.

DAY TWO

Again I arrived early in the morning. Due the hour, I recall another early morning from my past – the first time I heard Ray speak to a large crowd. He was addressing the incoming freshman at the University of Colorado. The speech went something like the following, paraphrased from his actual address, which was not recorded:

Hello dear freshman. My name is Ray Cuzzort, and on behalf of the University of Colorado I would like to extend a hearty welcome to you. Tomorrow, you will begin your undergraduate education, and I can assure you that it will be a grand adventure indeed. As I see thousands of you seated before me, I realize the awesome possibilities that await each and every one of you.

LIFE is out there, and you will decide how much of it you will embrace. You will also decide both in and outside of the classroom what kind of person you will become. The choices are staggering, and I believe the results will be richer than you anticipate. I stand in awe of the futures you will create.

Let me share a little about myself. I have a PhD in Sociology. I have read thousands of books and tens of thousands of articles. I am a presidential scholar. I have written seven books and have lectured to thousands of students all over America and abroad. I am a loving son, father, and grandfather. I have felt a wide range of emotions including rapture, ecstasy, severe depression, anger, envy, and most importantly, profound love. I have known great friendship and loyalty as well as deceit and betrayal. I have known crippling poverty and have also made more money than I ever anticipated. I can fly gliders, little planes, big planes, even jets, yet I also know how to appreciate a simple walk in the garden.

Dear students, I need to tell you. I feel impelled to tell you. That if you know everything an old geezer like me knows, it would not be enough to build a good life for yourself. The knowledge I've accrued has served me well in building the life *I* needed.

It is NOT, however, a template for *your* life or anyone else's. You have the creative task of traveling many paths to find the one that will suit you. This is a life-long challenge.

Dear students, we live in a time of phenomenal change. The rate of change is exponential. Within your lifetime, you will see more change than people have seen over hundreds of years. I want to repeat myself: if you know everything I know, it would not be nearly enough to build a

good life for yourself and those you love.

My advice to you is this: Passionate living and learning will be the key to building a good life. There are so many things to learn. No one but you should choose the path that will suit you. I do not care if you study sociology as I did, theoretical physics, or even underwater basket weaving. But I beg you to find a passion for living and to find areas of study which touch your very being. You need to learn how to compare and contrast varying kinds of knowledge while always staying skeptical of any viewpoint which excludes all the others. Revel in your learning, and with compassion in your heart, you will prosper. You will prosper as a human being in this grand adventure of living. Welcome to the University.

After hearing Ray's "old geezer speech" (so named by him), I had an epiphany. I NEEDED to study with him, and through a series of calculated schedule maneuvers, I succeeded in taking a graduate seminar with him. It was (unconventionally) held at his house every week, which included drinks and fresh food, prepared by Ray himself. Drinks were especially flowing in the shadow of a recent, tough, & critical divorce that had just preceded Mr. Cuzzort. I called him Mr. Cuzzort for a few weeks; I was intimidated and rarely spoke at first. However, after making some heartfelt comments on issues I believed in, Ray welcomed and responded by asking me to stay after class. *Brandy? We MUST drink a toast together...*

When I asked him why, he said it was because he was certain we were going to become good friends. Noting that everyone seemed to call me 'Dick', he asked, *Does anyone ever call you Richard?* No, not really. With a huge smile, he said, *That settles it. I'll call you Richard.* And from that day forth, He either addressed me as 'Richard', or (more commonly) 'My Dear Richard'. The formality of it even seems silly as I write this, but with Ray sincerity overrode silliness.

As Ray ate his breakfast, he projected an overall sense of excitement and energy. Hard to believe, looking at this man who was enjoying his breakfast so much, he was about to die and was blatantly conscious of it.

We went for a sit in the garden. Ray talked yet again about what a privilege it was to be alive. *I have always known this, but with death so close, each and every moment becomes more precious. This intense connection I feel reaches out not only to people I love and the things I know, but to the larger cosmos as well. The absolute joy that I feel in living is circling through me, through the mountains ahead of us, even through the blades of grass beneath us.* Grinning, he said, *My dance with death makes me appreciate even more the tiniest parts of life, like subatomic particles, quarks and vibrating strings, as well as galactic events like quasars and black holes, and of course everything in between.* I couldn't say I understood exactly what he felt, but I wasn't in the same position as him nor did I have the knowledge he'd amassed.

For Ray, knowledge and insights were keys to personal freedom. He understood that education (in the broadest sense of the word) illuminates options for all of us to build more creative and self-directed lives. Being around Ray, this was not just theoretical

possibility. His humor and ability to play with situations helped us see that our world is rich with possibility.

There are some moments when time stops; past, present and future merge, leaving you irreverent and ignorant of time and perfectly content. Sitting in the garden with Ray that morning was such a moment. Ray eventually struggled to his feet to get his guitar. It was quite an enjoyable performance because what Ray lacked in natural talent (he was NOT a good singer) and training (he'd NEVER taken a lesson), he more than made up for with enthusiasm.

Years before as a grad student, I was chatting with Ray at his home when the sanitation worker drove her truck away. *Good to see you!*, he said while waving vigorously in response to her own wave. What was that about? I inquired. *She's a remarkable young woman. Her husband is trying to get off heroin. She told me about how complicated that can be.* Ray cared.

He cared, but with a warmth and presence rarely seen from others. Inquiring about my marriage to Janet, were we doing well? Looking beyond the conversational 'fine', reaching for more. As he asked about my unfolding life, I realized that most people really are not that interested in other's lives. He also asked about my unsettling nightmares, which fortunately had receded.

Ray knew that Janet and I had been trying for the last several years to have a baby. He listened to the litany of problems involving the spiritual, physiological, emotional and financial tribulations of fertility treatments. Extremely taxing, I once counted 700 hypodermic needles used in the entire process to inject Janet with various toxic hormones. And I now know more about reproductive endocrinology than any patient should. For example: the uterus must thicken and physically stripe before a fertilized ovum will attach. So much for spontaneous sex.

He smiled as I explained the latest development, and that smile pissed me off. *Well, the two of you are very lucky.* How could our contemporary scenario be construed in any way as 'lucky'? *Many people go through their lives, never valuing anything as much as the two of you. Your commitment causes heartaches but defines you both. Good for you.*

Interesting. At that time, Ray could not foresee his encouragement would help Janet and I continue our fertility treatments, which finally led to the birth of our twins less than a year after his death. He touched me on the shoulder, saying, *Whatever the outcome, you and Janet have strong passions, my friend....a real blessing.*

Ray had seen love, lived and lost. He'd been married once and intertwined in several other relationships, some just as heavy but with twice the brevity. He had always told me he'd learned more from the women he'd known than from his entire academic career. Though our culture has always told us men are the more strong and resilient sex, Ray had always countered that by pointing out women as the most powerful. And he was not just talking about women's miraculous power to bring new life into the world, which simply awed him. He was talking about just how central they are.

Men frequently take themselves way too seriously. We are overly competitive, particularly with each other. Somewhere along the way we have received the social message that we have to be in control. We feel impelled to right the wrongs, solve the problems, and take charge. No wonder we tend to die first.

Women have taught me countless ways to deal with this, and to be a more peaceful, reflective and appreciative person, all through gentile play. I'm sure through trial and error, Ray had learned and revealed to me his four keys for loving relationships: good communication, recognizing a lover's past, avoiding high drama, and setting aside entire days to celebrate the one you love. He could explain those at length, but if you take them at the surface it's probably better. Don't over-think: simplify. And if things weaken, then rebuild: simplify.

Looking at pictures, we came across one of Ray's lovely mother and were reminded of a time years before when he invited me along to visit her. Never once hearing of Ray's father, Ray spoke on several occasions about his mother, his family having been poor and grown up in difficult circumstances. What emerged was a tough-love relationship.

At the senior center, Ray's mom was definitely pleased to see him but showed no demonstration of physical affection in any way. After she formally thanked him for coming, we asked her what was new at the center. Talking about various different friends and their particular issues, ailments, or treatments, she broke from her stoic reporting and became more animated, saying "Then there is that other business." What business?

"Oh, you know I have talked to you about this before! We have that mad man, here at the center. That man in the lab coat that keeps exposing himself to other people. He is...aI guess he's a flasher! Disgusting, just disgusting. Why, if he came up to me....."

Has he hurt anyone? Has he grabbed anybody?

"Well, no. But he should be locked away forever!"

Mother, if they caught this man and put him in prison, you would be disappointed. Mom looked dumbfounded.

Look at how exciting it is to have him on the loose. How animated you've become in your conversation! This is obviously an exciting part of life for you and the other ladies on this floor. If they catch him and send him away, you will surely have much less to talk about. That would be disappointing, would it not?

She grew very quiet and looked at Ray intensely. "You certainly look at things in a peculiar way; no wonder you became a professor. Such an odd boy, such an odd boy!"

I remember leaving the senior center wondering how Ray had become so playful, having been raised by such a mother. Recalling this story gave us a few chuckles, the laughs seeming more valuable because it was not part of the usual prescribed dying format.

Later in the morning, after his short nap, he and I decided to go for a drive. We meandered through the streets of Boulder, finally ending up at Chautauqua Park, situated directly below the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. We went to the park's restaurant for iced teas.

Bubbling conversationally, Ray commented on good-natured humor and how it helps us keep our balance. It became, for him, a valuable tool to help juggle and enjoy the complicated contradictions life throws at us. Ray clearly believed that there was no point in losing your balance just because you were dying. I asked Ray how Jane was holding up, keeping her balance, and he looked away briefly and seemed to be contemplating his reply. Turning to face me, he replied, *Well, I think she'll miss me a lot.* There was a twinkle in his eye and I realized that what he had said was of course true, but was also quite light hearted. With a more serious tone, he said, *Jane is an amazing woman. She has a phenomenal ability to enjoy life and her ability to cope with great loss is like her ability to cope with other aspects of life, which is extensive. Jane will be ok.*

He lapsed into silence after saying this; I could tell that dying and leaving Jane did trouble Ray. Both were about to happen. He was more attached to her reflected feelings than his own. It pained me to see my friend hurt this much. I think I did vaguely see his eyes well up with tears, but before I could be certain, I found myself staring rather intently at my iced tea.

I wanted to find the right words to help ease his sadness, but there are no right words. I realized I could do for him exactly what he had done for me after Carrie's death: I could (and would) stay present with him, sharing in whatever pain and turmoil he cared to share. I would be there whenever and wherever he needed or wanted me. And I would value the journey.

Ray, abating the silence, switched into contemplative mode. *When I think about my life, I think the most wonderful part has been the women I have met.* He recalled being in love for the first time...*dazzling. Her name is Katherine and she is at peace with herself and the world. I probably have idealized this love, but even now when I stop to reflect, she has a definite presence that adds a level of tranquility and peace to my life. I was young and full of spunk but I didn't know squat about what really counts. She appreciates so many of life's nuances, simple things like a vase full of flowers, a quiet walk through the park, a moon peeking out behind the clouds – simple aesthetic pleasures are wondrous to her. The way she shares these things allowed me to relax, enjoy the world around me. I think she did more to humanize me, to make me the compassionate person I feel I am today, than any other living being.* The pseudo-dichotomy between simplicity of love and profundity of love was not a difficult one to juggle for Ray.

Finishing our iced teas on the porch of the Chautauqua and watching the frisbee players on the grass mesa below, I couldn't help but think about Ray's ideas on the importance of steering your own course in life. Ray was not a proscriptive guy. While he would offer advice when it was sincerely sought or help you evaluate your plan of action, he would never actually tell you what to do.

He had myriad ideas to share on a wide variety of topics, but he always trusted in you to decide if and how you might use his ideas. As responsible adults, we would never let a child put their hand down on a hot stove because we know more than they do. Ray

never treated me like a child about to touch a stove. He always let me choose my own pathways, even when they headed ultimately in the wrong direction. Perhaps even especially when they led in the wrong direction, as well, learning more from experience than could be told. Ray intuitively knew this.

He'd told me about the day his daughter presented her fiancé. From the moment he'd seen him, Ray sensed something wrong with him. Always respecting his daughter's right to choose, yet his feelings only intensified with time. She expressed a desire to have children with him, at which point discussion led to his past. She told Ray that her intended had spent much of the last 7 years in prison for selling cocaine to junior high students, at the junior high. This obviously ignited Ray's growing distrust.

Soon after, Ray gave his daughter \$5,000, in cash, as an early wedding present. His worst fears were confirmed when the fiancé disappeared with the cash. While his daughter was upset, she too realized that her intended was not the man of her dreams. Ray was not totally surprised by what happened, but relieved that his daughter had not paid a higher price.

Ray's instincts were uncanny and often proved fortuitous. Before this visit I was still coping, not doing, pain being the constant backdrop. And to have a friend who understands your pain better than you, better than a muddled depressed mind, telling you you'll survive all this and thrive again is invaluable. I remember saying to Ray that I really didn't know if I'd ever get well, I'd become an emotional cripple. Ray acknowledging two things: that this kind of situation IS one that can permanently cripple, but that it would not happen to me.

His confidence in me helped me believe in myself. Quite the gift. After our time in the park, I dropped Ray off at his home so he could nap and eat a light lunch while I drove aimlessly, but intentionally. I wandered Boulder, finally ending up with what I remembered best: the university. The immense flood of memory was almost too much to handle, but within the context appropriate and welcomed. Like water all around, the past embraced me tightly, comfortably.

Returning to Ray's, I found him still napping. A hospice nurse was sitting uneasily in the living room, looking adrift with her only patient sound asleep. This construction of death by Ray was physiologically made possible by hospice's array of ways to help. For many dying patients, the battle to stay conscious and pain-free is an easy one to lose. In the shadow of seven years of dialysis, Ray knew how to stay present in spite of a panoply of medically aggravating medicines and procedures.

I knew dialysis was very taxing for most; the process is quite grueling. Most dialysis patients don't survive over two years. First, there was the issue of placing stints inside the veins on the underside of one's forearm, planted semi-permanently several inches deep so that the blood treatment lines can be readily hooked up. Ray's forearms were perpetually bloated, scarred and wounded from complications involving this. The long dialysis sessions, referred to as 'visiting the count' by Ray. The repetitive cycles of blood cleansing had taken their toll on Ray, including times when problems occurred, blood spilled, clogs happened, lines ruptured. Though now he was done with that, his blood reaching toxic levels couldn't be much better.

All of this, also, was in the vast shadow created many years earlier when Ray had refused a kidney transplant. A thunderstorm in the streets of Boulder had become fairly violent during a particular afternoon when Ray was out biking. He had heard a large

truck approaching; assumed the truck saw him. The driver did not and struck him hard through a striding right turn. Thoroughly dazed, Ray stayed calm. He refused the ambulance. He shunned the attention and commotion it caused. After the police cited the driver of the truck, Ray accepted a ride home from him. During casual chat, the two decided that Ray should probably get checked out at the hospital, which turned out to be good because Ray had severely lacerated a kidney. He was in critical condition and had to undergo immediate surgery to save his life. The driver became incredibly worried, Ray trying to ameliorate it.

Don't worry...I'll be okay, Ray still trying to calm and comfort the increasingly agitated driver.

Years afterward is when Ray had to move onto dialysis. After even more years of waiting on a transplant list, Ray's number had come. He asked who would get the kidney if he declined it. Contrary to policy, Ray found out it would be an 18 year old boy. Ray couldn't justify his gain in any sense and quickly passed on the kidney. He just wasn't able to justify someone his age taking the kidney before a struggling young man. He felt it was an easy choice to make. I wonder if we'd gone through these last four days if he had taken the kidney. If he'd still be alive today.

During these reflections, the hospice nurse and I spent several hours waiting for Ray to awaken. When he did not awake, I began to comprehend how truly exhausted he was. Eventually, I excused myself, telling Jane I would return tomorrow unless Ray felt good enough to invite me back sooner. Ray never called.

Surprisingly, I again slept well.

DAY THREE

Startled, I awoke with Carrie in my head. Instead of the usual pain, there was slight momentary happiness.

My daughter is quite...was quite similar. She too was unusually empathetic and intelligent, she showed an abiding interest in others asking strangers how they were doing. We all felt a mature soul strangely emerging from someone so young. She had only met Ray on a few occasions, but still asked about him whenever she saw his picture on my desk.

The most memorable time that I spent with them both was at a formal party to honor Ray. Tuxedos illuminated and evening gowns flowed, reflecting our feelings like a crisp moonlit lake. Before the party started, a mad rush had ensued to don our formal attire, Carrie watching all of the preparations carefully. Her dress, evenly dotted with silver stars, didn't feel festive enough so surreptitiously she added dozens more. From her sticker collection, red stars, gold stars, purples and greens, a veritable explosion of celestial color. As she casually served appetizers to the guests (and herself) off a large silver tray, everyone could not help but notice her stars falling to food and floor amidst her shining excitement.

Ray ended up with many of the stars himself. And as they fell steadily, Carrie becoming preoccupied with keeping them on, I remember Ray assuring her she sparkled with or without stars.

They'd sparkled like snow, like the time we'd burned our skin going from snow to Jacuzzi, back again. We'd be soaking up the hot tub heat, Carrie would run outside and make snowballs, come in and unload on us. Then she'd switch the mood by creating a snow angel in just her bathing suit, quickly jump back in the searing water, comfortably burning skin. Every time I walked by the window that winter I'd see remnants of the snow angel, inviting all to play.

I arrived shortly after the summer sun had risen, the Boulder air still warm from the previous day. I'd missed my friend a lot the day before and I hoped I'd get to visit more today. Jane looked exhausted as she ushered me into the small garden behind the main house; Ray had had a restless night and she'd been up all night trying to adjust his medications. Several hospice workers had also spent the night trying to supply the medical and support services that allowed Ray to undertake this last journey. All of us, especially Ray, were moved by their determination to help, while always respecting Ray's preferences about how to live out the time remaining. They informed me that during the night, Ray was declining faster than expected.

Jane explained that Ray had been outside for quite a while playing with a glass of water. Wondering what this was about, I went up to Ray, though he didn't greet me in his customary manner but instead continued playing with the small glass of water as he saw me arrive. He was simply enjoying the silence between us and his child-like fascination with this small glass of water. I sat down politely, waiting.

I heard slight sounds emerging from the house, from Ray himself, and also began hearing the sounds I'd hear at daybreak in the distant past. Creaking hinges opening, the

bedroom door, the patter of feet going down the hall into the bathroom. A flush followed by footsteps into the bedroom. Her cheery voice, asking *What are we doing today*, no pause for reply, *let's get going*. Always eager to be starting a new day. Ray, even now, paralleling that sentiment from Carrie, expressing agreement silently to an unasked question.

He'd swirl the water in the glass, pause attentively, observe, repeat. He put his fingers in the glass and licked off the small beads of water, oblivious to anything beyond it. I, on the other hand, became irritated and impatient. My friend was dying! I desperately wanted to be with him while he was elsewhere, focusing on what? Without words he sensed my annoyance. Smiling,

My dear Richard, even the simplest things in life are profound mysteries. Consider water. This morning I was quite thirsty, so I filled this particular glass with water. I have drunk a lot of water, but this morning I looked and really saw the water.

*It's colorless yet seen. It flows, splashes, ripples, and swirls. It can form colossal tidal waves or be totally passive. Cosmologists and astronomers believe it is **the** definitive life sign. The vast majority of our own biological being is water. Ancient Chinese thinkers like Lao Tsu believed it is the philosophical underpinning of life. It covers seventy percent of our planet's surface, but if we go even a few days without it we die. Simple yet profoundly elegant. Common yet sacred. My dear friend, let me get you a glass of life affirming, water.*

Moving beyond impatience, I was touched. Ray again holding death at bay by being totally present in the moment. As the sun shone directly onto the garden, Ray and I shared water. He could consecrate even simplicity itself.

In spite of his restless night, he was in a particularly philosophical mood this morning. He said we (teachers) need to pay more attention to the narratives people create to see who they empower.

The stories we tell ourselves, creating who we are. Reminds me of Randy, a friend of mine. You'd like him. He teaches an introductory biology course at a large university with 1,200 students a semester. Each term, at least 200 students fail the course. And with the dominant story for many incoming college students being that of doctor or lawyer fortune and fame, a failing grade crushes. This typically generates, for Randy, at least one death threat per class. Quite an odd thing to typify. But as he explained, we live in a violent culture with the dream being so narrowly defined, many do get crushed.

The trick was to pick the right dream, the right story, most people not even knowing they have the choice. Ray was obviously narrating his own death, refusing the traditional path. I looked back again, striving to know more somehow, battling; my own sense of dying culturally rigged.

As soon as my first wife and I realized we were about to bring a baby girl into the world, we conjured up countless names and corresponding inbred connotations that

everything became totemic. Finally she realized that she wanted to name our daughter after her deceased sister Carran who had died at 23 in a sudden car crash. She explained that Carran had been the joyous spark within her original family; we both wanted that kind of spark and agreed upon this as a final decision. A resuscitation. The naming felt perfect as Carrie grew to be such a dynamic personality herself. The coincidence that they both met the same fate of brain death in a car accident is stiffly haunting. While not superstitious, it makes one wonder about improbable parallels.

On the afternoon before Carrie died, we had stopped at Devil's Punchbowl State Park on the rugged coast of Oregon. This particular place is dominated by a massive rock extension that protrudes into the ocean beyond, a natural sluice etched into the rock that extends landward and ends in a curved bowl cliff. Rushing to the edge to see, we came across a couple arguing at the edge of the parking lot. A pretty young woman was informing a young man that she would not walk over to see the punchbowl, saying, "I don't want the devil and his bad luck following me." I remember holding Carrie's hand and thinking how being superstitious would interfere with daily living. But believing in it or not, less than 3 hours later the driver struck her down.

Two days before the accident, we stopped to eat in Florence at a diner, debating whether to continue going south down the Oregon coast or to go north from Eugene to Washington's Olympic mountains. Having overheard us, two teenagers dressed entirely in black approached us. In a casual manner, they recommended heading south to Yachats, Oregon, an idyllic sounding town on the coast. Heading down at their advice, passing Devil's punchbowl en route, we stopped for ice cream when arriving in Yachats. Carrie wanted two scoops of ice cream, though I told her it would ruin her dinner and be unhealthy, so we passed. Moments later when the single scoop was done, we went and tried to cross highway 101, the fateful pick-up driving south, two scoops of ice cream would have changed our fate indefinitely. Why to talk to those kids who recommended Yachats? Why to visit superstitious places? Why to eat less ice cream? Easy to travel back to these feelings, a vortex of questions and do-over thoughts.

Joan Didion, in her elegant, heartfelt book The Year of Magical Thinking describes how daily events frequently combined to send her into a vortex of pain and despair following the death of her husband John. Simply reading her description of this vortex rekindled many memories, which still haunt and visit episodically. Pain provides powerful connections and isolations.

Thinking of narratives and potential, I recalled with Ray stories about my daughter. Several weeks after my daughter Carrie was born, I went into her room in the middle of the night to make sure her body was covered up on the chilly winter evening. As I looked down on her, I began to think about all of the potential she embodied in her gentle manner. As her father, what should I wish for her? I viscerally knew that I wanted her to be her own person, finding her own pathways through life, yet I also wanted her to share some of the things that I found importance in. I wasn't sure how much I should try to impart, knowing that even without trying she would partially see the world as I did.

When I talked to Ray about this, he responded, *I have thought about that very question myself. I finally decided what I want most for my daughter is that she have a sparkle in her eyes and a bounce in her step. All of the other choices should be hers.*

The last topic we discussed on that morning was love and relationship. Ray usually reviewed the topic philosophically or more concretely, based on actual experiences, but during this discussion he bridged the two.

Love relationships are more.

I expected continuance. He smiled in contentment, so I asked,

“More what?”

Smiling, *More of everything. More aggravation, more joy, more complication, more pleasure, more understanding of ourselves, more connection, more betrayal. More.*

He reflectively recounted a story of early love with a dash of deception. The beginning bliss and resulting. He'd never even pictured what life would be like after he'd been cheated on, but with the realization that things were invariably more complicated. Infidelity, but then resulting in mixed emotion, stronger love, more physicality, more communication yet haunting distance; the spectrum of experience widening to fully facilitate the human understanding of love. And again, to type and typify every detail would just be more words, the point driven that living through these kinds of experiences makes us who we are. Relationships transport us to places we wouldn't have dreamed possible.

Ray continued casually about the different possibilities for loving, caressing many of his personal experiences, Jane knocked on the door to the study to inform of the hospice nurse arrival. He excused himself, leaving me in the study as he had more blood work performed. As I awaited his return I was left in company of all the conversations we'd had about life, along with love and its centrality in the pantheon of human experiences.

Jane began fixing a light lunch for all of us when she realized we needed several items from the grocery store. I quickly volunteered for the job, eager to help but also to get a break from the house and process everything that was happening around me.

The supermarket was almost empty so I rounded up the missing lunch ingredients quickly. Waiting in the checkout line, I happened to be behind a mother and her young, inquisitive child. Standing near the large windows at the front of the store, the child kept asking, “Why? Mommy? Why do we have clouds in the sky? What are the clouds outside so big? Mommy, why are clouds white?” The exceedingly curious child reminded me of a question Ray had asked me years before.

During almost eight years as university honors director, I met a variety of interesting speakers. The generous budget brought in such people as Francis Crick (co-discoverer of DNA) and Edward Teller (father of America's hydrogen bomb). Quite a diverse group. Ray was intrigued with this variety and wanted to know if these diverse experts had anything in common other than being exceptionally bright. After contemplating for a few years, seeing more people, students, writers, speakers, academic leaders. I discovered the answer to Ray's question was curiosity. Without exception, all of these highly bright people I'd come across were also highly curious. Their curiosities

and inquiring minds produced unending questions and ultimately an enriched understanding of their disciplines.

As I eventually told Ray about my discovery, it dawned on me that Ray himself was probably the most curious person I had met. His curiosity had led me to realize how vital curiosity is. Before I returned home, the little girl in the supermarket was harshly ordered to quit asking so many questions. I purchased the food and returned to Ray's home.

When I got back, I was surprised to see Ray no longer in his study but instead crawling across the couch on all fours while his two shi-tzus (Gingus and Kahn) were racing beside to keep up. Ray was barking and growling ferociously, teasing the dogs with their own rubber bones, making the dogs wild. As Ray became louder and more animated, so did the dogs. It was quite amusing to see my dying friend playing so vigorously. *When I am gone, Jane will play with you. Jane is not as good a dog as I am, but she will take good care of you, my friends.* While soothing the dogs with his tone, Ray was also letting us know that he was processing his own impending death. He would clearly have loved to stay, to bark again another day, but his time was drawing to an end.

Dining on the patio and overlooking the profusion of summer flowers, Ray began talking about the future and the importance of embracing change. *I am sorry I'm not going to live to see the twenty-first century, particularly the changes that are sure to come. I am curious, very curious about how the twenty-first century will unfold.*

I remember seeing my first TV screen many years ago and realizing pictures could be broadcast through the air! I remember watching Neil Armstrong walking across the surface of the moon. These events were marvelous. The twenty-first century has to bring with it unimaginable changes. I wish I were going to be here to see them.

As he spoke, I too thought how wonderful it would be if Ray could live longer. But we both knew better. Ray's direct and honest approach didn't allow us to go too far down the road of the pretend.

Shifting the tone of our conversation a little, I told Ray the story of being in the university president's office the day IBM delivered three personal computers to us. Nobody really knew what these things were as we opened the large boxes. Somebody from the school of engineering came to explain how these completely cumbersome objects could serve as independent computing stations outside of the revered mainframe. I remember one person explaining their utility, saying, "They can 'word process'." We all had baffled expressions. The discussion that they might someday replace typewriters brought guffaws and snickering all around. I also told Ray about my grandfather who had been one of the first 'horseless carriage' salesmen in Denver. They didn't sell well, mostly due to the fact that people were afraid of all the air being sucked out of the enclosed carriages, as they could go up to fifteen miles per hour. With time, manufacturers gave up on closed-air vehicles to assuage existing fears, their open-air replacements causing sales to expand dramatically. Change, being the remarkable process it is, will continue to astonish.

I asked Ray what he thought the twenty-first century would look like. While he knew there would be major technological changes, he was more interested in how society would evolve. Looking at the world scene as problematic, he worried about the proliferation of weapons and violence and how that could be handled. Concerned about

the widening gap between haves and have-nots. Apprehensive about where leaders, movements, history; where all of this leads.

Later on that third afternoon Ray began to have serious gastro-intestinal distress. Deciding not to eat any dinner because of it, I sympathized with him and didn't want to eat either. Ray recalled how hard it had been for me to eat after Carrie died, so in spite of his own suffering he cajoled me into having a sandwich. Shortly after dark we retired to his study.

He began this evening's conversation by asking me what I feared beyond what I had already endured. He knew my greatest fear had already been enacted on the day I watched Carrie die. Beyond the death of my children, I did have an abundant fear of not being able to protect my family from having a hard life. I also feared being isolated. For many months after Carrie's death, I felt completely isolated in spite of the best efforts of family and friends to get me re-immersed in life. Being alone by choice is fine, sometimes even desirable, but feeling irreparable isolation can be terribly ugly. I also told Ray I feared death; well, not death itself, but a long protracted painful illness. I feared losing my mental capabilities more than anything else, but I also knew chronic pain can unravel the best of us.

Ray had been through much fear and pain, which he usually kept to himself. He'd told me about many dangerous endeavors he'd been through to control fear, to find fear exciting. Ray said that from his vantage point, there were many different kinds of fears: rational fears, irrational fears, and fears that capture one's imagination. He talked about how things like lightning really worried people,

Of course, you can be hit by lightning, but there are so many other more dangerous things in our world that we ignore or minimize. I don't need to remind you about the dangers of vehicular accidents. Pausing, then continuing, However, when most of us see a car, we see possibilities, not danger. Cars are exciting to us in spite of the real dangers they embody.

Ray looked out the window into the fading light beyond. I could see that he was lost in thought, through the shadow-filtered trees outside. The silence went on for several minutes.

Understanding fear is the first step in letting go. As I look at my own life, I let irrational fears prevent me from doing all that I should have done. As a young man, I was painfully shy; people frightened me. Even now I can't stomach those devastating self-doubts.

I even used to worry that my writing was so poor no one would understand it. Ironic how my little theory book got acclaim for being so readable. We're stuck if we don't move beyond our crippling fears.

And optimism doesn't inspire as fear does. Optimism doesn't install seatbelts, build bombs, drive armies, or sell insurance. Fear does. At least I haven't let a fear of death hold me back now, Ray added playfully.

Being only hours away from his own death, he still showed concern for the life of the living. Watching him rock slowly in his recliner, looking into the evening, I again appreciated how often Ray had encouraged us to reach. My mind was racing as I made the drive back to my sister's house. Though tired, sleep was slow to arrive. My body

ached for sleep, but my mind wouldn't let me. By the time I drifted to sleep it seemed as if I were waking.

DAY FOUR

Things can change in an instant. All of death's reflections looking like a thousand words pasted and plastered on my brain.

Plans regarding death. I'd had a friend in Manhattan who was house sitting for a man, a three week job. The daily chores entailed taking a big, old dog for a walk once a day, some cleaning and other chores. Two days into it, though, the dog died, natural causes. Though disturbed, the owner understood as he explained the plans to be carried out. Cremation.

My friend agreed, and the place was not far away. She did not have a car, however, so she decided to take the dog in a duffel bag on the subway. Just a few stops away. She had trouble lifting the bag through the turnstiles, a man having to help her through them. When on the train, the man asked,

“What is *in* that thing?”

She quickly replied something about computer parts, a forced answer to obviously conceal. And the two sat, a stop went by.

One stop before hers, the man jolted up, grabbed the bag, hopped off the train as the doors shut.

Even death can change in an instant.

I awoke slowly, my eyelids cement. I'd experienced complicated dreams both satisfying and alarming. I sensed today would be a tidal wave of the same. It was the last day I'd spend with Ray.

It was a Tuesday and we began the morning by driving together around Boulder with no particular destination in mind. We found it calming to witness the hustle and bustle of everyday life proceeding as normal even as our own lives were now anything but normal. Driving past Boulder, we eventually decided to go to the top of Flagstaff Mountain, just west of the university. As we drove up the switchbacks, Ray began talking about the sheer beauty of life. From our perch atop the mountain, we looked westward to the Rocky Mountains as they formed the continental divide. Looking east we spotted metropolitan Denver, and beyond, to the great plains of America.

As Ray stood there, he lifted his arms to the sky and clouds with a graceful sweeping gesture, encompassing everything,

What a sight. How could I not miss all of this?

The beauty, the majesty of it will surely go on; only my ability to appreciate it will be gone.

I won't be here next Tuesday.

Through large gestures,

The clouds, the sky, the mountains, Jane, you.

It is present in everything everywhere.

Beauty is so clear now, so abundant.

This is to be alive.

Fully alive.

You do feel this, don't you?

Richard, you have to know this.

You must know this.

He stopped for an answer, he needed it. For once, Ray needed my affirmation, wanting from me what he'd always done for others. I stated that I did feel this, though I was hesitant. On top of that mountain, as the wind whipped through the pine trees and my beloved friend swept his arms across the plains below, I saw a man who loved life, overwhelmingly so. Wonderful, contagious, joyous, complete.

His words and gestures cut deep. A man not bitter to be dying, not angry at the medical establishment and its inability. Everything amplified by his conscious awareness. I felt it bittersweet. The euphoric/melancholic dichotomy made the moment more colored, more vivid, etching. Ray's celebration atop Flagstaff Mountain remains.

Going down the mountain, Ray's energy level collapsed again and pain overtook him. He clearly needed rest and medication. Though exhausted and quiet, we returned home as he folded his arms, retaining a tranquil smile. Through the pain he radiated contentment and peace, as the man I saw on the mountain, the inspiring visionary, became the sick man in front of me, the man who was dying.

While Ray retired for a long nap, I felt compelled to stroll amongst Boulder's forested foothills in the afternoon breeze. It felt essential to commune with nature in the John Muir sense: "The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness." I saw rolling hills, soft browns, but with greens coming through, everywhere, inviting me. I went to clear my head a bit, but predictably I ended up remembering a story about Ray. This particular story was appropriate, though, as it was about a time several years before when Ray was dying right in front of me.

We were in Flagstaff, Ray coming to visit, I trying to reassemble after Carrie's death. He had recently started dialysis, but was in great spirits. Immediately upon his arrival, Ray could see that I was consumed by my own grief. He purposefully decided to attack one of my intellectual heroes, a writer named Michel Foucault, just to get me reengaged. I fell for the bait, spent hours defending Foucault, feeling better.

Two days later, Ray needed dialysis. While prescheduled, the machines used in Boulder were different than those used in Flagstaff (slow-filtering vs. high-speed), and it wasn't apparent what the consequences would be. After his hour-long session with the high-speed machine, we returned home, locked in discussion yet again. I remember him telling Janet and I we had completely missed the point, though our disagreements were full of energy and good-natured teasing.

But suddenly, Ray became quite pale. He muttered something about feeling like he was slipping away, and then collapsed. We had a difficult time getting him onto the couch as he went dead limp, his eyes open, his body and mind in shock. We called 911 and were eventually connected with the dialysis clinic staff. Adrenaline mixed with panic and a sluggish phone created our state. A perfect example of how the phone can feel disconnecting. Describing his symptoms, they surmised that too many body salts had been removed. Quickly, they dispatched paramedics. Through static they told us to dissolve a bullion cube in warm water and get Ray to swallow the broth.

I remember clearly holding Ray's head in my lap and trying to feed him bullion broth. In a very gentle manner he kept saying,

No thank you...I'm not hungry...

His body twisting and looking eerily different.

No food for me, thank you anyway...

I continued to spoon the bullion into his mouth and he eventually began inadvertently swallowing some of it, and as I held his head I realized how serious this was. My eyes filled with tears, my ears strained to hear the siren of the approaching ambulance. He was dying right in front of me. I felt Carrie's still warm body in my arms. Life, much too fragile.

The worst having flashbaced and gone, the bullion worked. Within a minute or two, Ray started talking coherently.

I think I'm coming back! Oh! ...I'm not sure where I went, but I am definitely coming back now... Why, how nice to see you! My dear friends, how lovely to see you! This is quite a surprise....

When the paramedics arrived to check his vitals, Ray was already doing fine. They watched him for a while, eventually convinced that the high salt content of the bullion had saved him. This incident made me realize even more that Ray was indeed the consummate gentleman: even as he felt himself slipping away, his manner was not one of alarm or panic, but of gentleness and caring. As he returned to consciousness, his gregarious qualities came right back, too. Dying did not panic Ray. This nearly cinematic foreshadowing proved to be a rather accurate vision of how this man would deal with his own conscious death. No fear, no panic, just staying as clear as he could while sharing whatever time remained. When I eventually left the foothills bouncing into my car, I felt lighter and clearer.

That moment atop Flagstaff Mountain hit me twice as hard, perhaps picking up momentum traveling down the steep slope. I realized much of my experience of Ray had been indoors, in classrooms or offices, contained by drywall and cement and plaster. Seeing him in such a moment, in endless sky, creating an eclipse of dark in visceral perspective. Definitely satisfying.

Ray slept more of the afternoon due to sheer exhaustion. Afterward, he met with his daughter and grandchildren. The private meeting didn't go well, and surprisingly Ray 'didn't want to talk about it'. I knew he'd had a rocky relationship with his daughter ever since her mother (Ray's wife, Phyllis) had died many years before. I could easily sense his severe disappointment about this tumultuous meeting. Disappointment aside, Ray began our last afternoon together with the question, *Why do we have to be so judgmental?*

Ray then told a story about deciding to interview all of the students who had failed a class he had taught. After grading thousands of students in his career, he had always assumed those who flunked his courses were either not capable of doing the work or weren't motivated enough to finish. When he actually talked to these students one-on-one, the vast majority had innumerable and compelling reasons why they'd failed. The breakthrough here was that their reasons for failing did not sound like excuses, but rather were things that would make it difficult for *anyone* to do well in the course. Ray had discovered his own judgmental attitudes within.

Proceeding, he asked, *Why do we frequently assume people are not trying when they fail?* As Ray began to face serious health issues of his own, he became astounded to find out that many medical professionals cope with serious illnesses by blaming the sick. They'd comment, "Well, this person is quite sick, but they didn't eat healthy their whole life," or, "they were overweight," or "they smoked," or, "they didn't exercise enough." The implication was that they deserved the serious health issues they were facing. Ray understood that this behavior paralleled his own assumptions at moments.

Ray repeated his questions, adding an element of responsibility. *Why don't we assume the best about people?* After delineation, I agreed with Ray's assumption that most people are trying to do what is right. *We must trust that, we must.* Ray concluded, *I now understand that, while many people do not end up where they want or need to be, the vast majority have honestly tried to get there. It's damaging to be so judgmental. We need to wise up and stop being this way.* Laughing at the irony of his last comment, he finished by saying, *And that is how I judge the judgmental.*

As the afternoon darkened to dusk, Ray mentioned that there was something he wanted to give me. He walked into his closet, searched, and eventually emerged with a framed photograph of the two of us, taken right after we'd flown our first glider together quite some time ago. This picture led to more pictures, eventually coming across one of Ray at 25 leaning pretentiously against a plane.

Oh, youth! You gotta love the young people. Back then my life seemed so straight-forward. The older I get, the more complexity I see. But that's not to say without more interest. I remember that time well, and I wouldn't go back for anything. I didn't grasp the fundamental complexities of my own existence, let alone anyone else's. I didn't reflect; I just plowed on. Having had more experiences is wonderful. I love being 65, although as I look at this photo, I would like to have my young body back. So would I, Ray.

That evening, we decided to have a small feast to celebrate summer, our friendship, life itself. Being August, there were plenty of glorious fresh fruits available. Ray requested some cherries, as they were a particular favorite. Jane made some homemade bread and we sat down to enjoy each other's company for the last time. I am forever honored by Ray's real final gift: many of the few hours he had left.

Ray dressed for the occasion in an elegant black silk suit. Jane wore a flowing blue dress, and I knew she enjoyed this change to dress up as a welcome respite from the death-in-progress. We all understood we had one last time together, as the gathering itself became cause for celebration. Again, surreal by hidden consciousness, the moment created by the invisible guest, change.

How ironic that, while good for our spirits, the meal itself would help kill Ray, the food spawning digestive organ failure. Heart failure. We all knew this, yet there was no sense of panic. Ray ate modestly so as not to accelerate the process; we all understood his life was now a matter of hours. We immersed ourselves in the joys of each other's company.

We toasted repeatedly, shared fine sherry and elegant California wine. The subtle poison working its way through our bodies, but accentuating the ever-widening separation between those who'd live through the alcohol's toxins and those who wouldn't. The words between bites bonded and separated. The level of candidness. Each moment more immanent, each line weighed more.

As the food was disappearing, Ray lowered his head momentarily as if he was lost in thought.

Death is a profound mystery; it's hard for us as living beings to understand how we can be fully present in the world, and yet after a moment called death, we simply cease to exist in this life as we know it.

*One of the ways we deal with the mystery of our own mortality is to sidestep the philosophical components of death, creating instead a scientific and mechanical narrative about the human body. While dying, we query doctors to find out **why** this is happening. Often the mechanical, technical explanation given to us by medical professionals makes the inexplicable death process appear logical, rational, and even*

scientifically inevitable. This type of mechanical analysis does not really shed much light on the mysteries of death, but it is what we use to deal with this profound mystery.

Ironically, Ray then proceeded to explain to us exactly how he would die in a medical sense.

We need to face what is happening to me. I'm suffering acute liver failure, pancreatic collapse, with serious heart complications. Since stopping dialysis, it was just a matter of a few days before the toxins in my body would build to a fatal level. I've lost almost half of my body weight. My skin is yellow from jaundice, and it'll only get more so. I'll become dehydrated by my body trying to discharge the toxins it can't process. The whites of my eyes will turn yellow, which'll be painful AND blurry. My general discomfort will probably reach such levels that serious injections of morphine WILL be needed.

And that's when it'll happen.

We all pictured his death so vividly. The sense of disconnection ran deep in the air, us wishing for a moment we could just be close to him again. We knew his death was here, but still asking, "what'll happen?"

It'll happen.

The nurses, you know, they can't keep their hands off of a guy like me. And I'll be on morphine, loss of consciousness, no one will know. They'll have their way with me...

Literal silence followed. ...

Gotcha!

Our confusion turned to laughter, as we understood that Ray was putting us on yet again. He loved to tease, and caught us completely off guard due to the dire atmosphere. The death in progress.

However, we'd got what we wished for, seriousness not overcoming friendship. Humor again connecting, Ray knowing we needed that as much as he.

Within this mystery, there was the sense that death was a life ritual that was only understood through experience.

Ray drank to us, to life, to his lovely partner Jane.

This is a woman with whom I've shared so much. We know each other's idiosyncrasies. We bickered and fought. But this is the woman with whom I have shared it all. Look at this beautiful woman. See the way she radiates even now. This is the love of my life. I Love This Woman. What we have shared can never be taken away from either of us, even by death.

There is so much to see and do; the only thing I've never fully understood in life, not even a bit, is boredom. Fully animated again, he continued, Life offers up so much to experience. Of course I know many people are terrified of death, which is human. I don't want to die, but it has certainly intensified everything else. Life is right in front of us, right now, just waiting for us to enjoy.

As we sat and listened to Ray, his flowing generosity glowed brighter than ever before.

Today has been the best day of my life. I suspect that if I live through tomorrow, it'll be even better.

Turning his attention to me, and smiling directly at me,

My dear Richard, you've suffered. Your loss reveals the immense depth of your love for her. No one should endure such a tragedy, but the brutal anguish you've lived is a monument to you both and all you shared. Even when life is most cruel, it is still engaging.

With my whole being, I salute the immense, enduring love you have for your daughter. It is the profundity of our love and our compassion that makes this world rich. Without profound love, this belonging, we exist in a complex but benign universe. With this love, we are immersed in luminescence.

His pain intensified as he struggled to stand up. We had sat too long on the hard wooden chairs. My eyes filled with tears. Standing, he opened his arms to give me a final hug. As I embraced him gently but affectionately, I realized that with his severe weight loss, Ray was already physically departing. He gave one last time.

With searing compassion, he said,

My dear Richard, I shall never see you again. Thank you for being who you are.

He paused, let me absorb,

It has been GRAND, not just this visit, but EVERYTHING. It is essential to know this.

Our time ending, my mind overwhelmed, flooded. Impending loss overshadowed by abiding admiration and love. He waited until my eyes calmed,

I love you.

“I love you, too.”

We both have known this quite some time. Still, it feels good to say it.

He paused again to let me catch up. Then whispered.

So many profound mysteries, like our amazing friendship. Enjoy life, my dear friend.

He had given all.
He knew what he had done.
He turned and slowly walked away.
I never saw him again.

* * * * *

After that last night at Ray's, I didn't stay at my sister's house but left for a red-eye departing at midnight. Stopping on the eastern ridge of Boulder overlooking the city below, I called Janet. Through smiles and tears we talked about Ray. I was on my way home. I'd felt the need for the immediate flight and knew I would; after seeing Ray and such finality, it was instinctual. Hearing my words pour through to Janet brought an increasing realism, more reflection. Thank goodness for Janet.

Heading east on Arapahoe Boulevard, I drove for ten miles oblivious to the passing road. The next thing I remembered was walking.

I lunged at blaring stars, city lights in distance, brilliant so close above, Carrie's limp body in immediate sight, arched star arrangements overhead, blood rivulets spreading below, overhead. Ray resting to have more, anywhere, a mind engorged with pounding heart, all together, now. Then deep breathing, then deep conscious breathing. Hiding and denying gone.

I felt a presence, I really did, of someone being there. I left Ray for the last time, I rejoiced in his death, I think because of the way in which it truly emboldened his life. I remember thinking these were odd thoughts to have. Yet the thoughts were so much more conscious, more so than before I'd even left his house.

I'd heard so many voices before, from so many people, so many dialects and thoughts and emotions. I'd laughed at things I shouldn't have, I'd been absent of tears at other's tragedy. I'd thought I had understood my world and that of the those around me.

But the voice I heard in my head, the inner soliloquy we all have, it sounded different at this moment. It's like I hardly noticed the change until it was brought to my attention by neurons beyond. Sure, the monologic language was smarter, had been through more experience, more suffering than previous, but simultaneously it recognized that I had not suffered different than most. Maybe in details, but not necessarily in scope.

We all feel pain.

To think suffering isn't human life misses much instance of that which can be truly felt and experienced. But to take the bad without the beauty is to only stay within yourself. To feel others is infinite.

The moment of changed glance, the moment at which the blurred vision of motion becomes sedentary. The eye retains it's properties, but it's function is attuned, ready. As I drove again, I remembered all that I saw, hands steady, eyes prepared, I boarded the red eye flight clear eyed.

On August 23, 1999, Ray Cuzzort died. Jane and Katherine were with him when he died. His last hours were lucid and full of animated conversation. This is precisely what he had wanted.

The University of Colorado hosted a large memorial service in Old Main. While it seats hundreds, there were still several hundred left standing outside. The university did get the publicity it wanted from Ray's death. Although Jane asked me to speak at the memorial service, I didn't want to attend. I knew it would help many process their loss. But I'd already done that, and we'd done it together.

When resolutions abridge, the possibility for misinterpretation heightens. As death usually comes without notice, suddenly and unpredictably, many try to interpret the life and death in their own terms, which can be misleading. Plain and simple: as Ray died, he extended me a second invitation to life. Dying on his own terms, or at least more so than most, was precisely what he chose.

Ray did not live to see the 21st century. Ironic he died a mere 4 months before the new millennium being best known academically for writing Twentieth Century Social Thought.

My twins, Trevor and Julianne, are now seven and moving faster than I. We found out Janet was pregnant about six weeks after Ray's death, one of many things I wish I could've told Ray.

Recently while cleaning out my closet, I came upon a video tape, an old home movie of Carrie and I playing in the yard. While watching it I expected to be surprised at the sight of her fully animated, her voice, her mannerisms, her laugh. But what I didn't expect was to see the virtual stranger posing as her father.

The man in the video looked and acted like me, but he is not. The man led a charmed life, unaffected by suffering. He'd have students in his office crying, him thinking,

oh, there's something wrong again,

abstracted. That man in the video no longer inhabits this world.

Years earlier after Ray's wife had died, I was sitting in his university office, he was gone. I drifted over to the window overlooking the large courtyard below. He was walking away, on his way home, when a group of students seated by the fountain waved at him. He walked over, exchanged unheard conversation, ending with everyone laughing. He never knew I'd been watching, he turned and walked away.

And as he did so, he paused momentarily. An unconscious shifting of weight, a turn of one foot, perhaps deciding which sidewalk to take. In an instant it had passed, Ray continuing straight. Why is this so vivid.