

Life, death and deeper waters

A conversation with Ron Griffith

February 17, 2009

At a meeting of a JUNTO group

NOTE: Five indicates words not heard clearly on the recording.

INTRODUCTION

In 1727, a JUNTO meeting, meaning “to join,” was established by Benjamin Franklin. For mutual improvement, the group gathered in Philadelphia to debate questions of morals, politics, and natural philosophy, and to exchange knowledge of business affairs. Current-day JUNTO groups continue to gather.

Group Leader: In 2006, I first called this JUNTO group together. This JUNTO group networks, builds awareness of what is going on in the community and creates camaraderie among its members. The group meets when called, usually in someone’s home. Professions of the members include financial management, psychiatry, airline pilot, public school administration, bank administration, fundraising, management, sales management, physician, engineering / entrepreneurship, horticulture, and clergy.

This meeting, February 2009, was called as an opportunity for Ron Griffith, a community resident, to share his story of making meaning while living and dying with pancreatic cancer.

Spiritual Friend: Ron spoke of the phases of his life: 1. his formational and ambitious years, 2. his years with a secular family-based religious order doing developmental work in poverty areas, . his work in computers and software development during the heyday of Silicon Valley, 4. his decision to relocate and share in the life of a Minnesota community, and finally, 5. his phase of active dying.

It was a sacred and holy time. So few of us ever have opportunities to converse with someone of such openness, heart, and wisdom about the basics of life and death, and our most important values and religious hopes. We wondered aloud together how it could be that a group of men had almost never had such an experience before, even in their own families. Why is it that our human communities are too often places where the deepest parts of life, death and meaning are the very things we avoid discussing?

At the end of the time together we had learned how a good life is to be lived, and how a good death is to be fulfilled: with gratitude, with purpose, in rich relationship and relatedness, and with enduring hope.

Finally, we gathered in a circle around our living-and dying friend, laid our living-and-dying hands upon his shoulders, and blessed him, as he had blessed us.

CONVERSATION

Ron: First third of my prepared remarks are about my family background. It'll go fast and help to put everything into context. Together we have five kids. They are spread all over the place from San Diego to New York. We have eight grandkids. We're further along in our life cycle than the rest of you. Life is busy, task driven, complex these days. I look back and I say I don't know how you do it!

Spiritual Friend: You have already sort of met Ron Griffith through the email. Ron has a long career in computers and software development. He was in Silicon Valley during the hey-day of software development. Also, contemporaneously he was involved for many years in several forms with the Ecumenical Institute/Order: Ecumenical: a family religious order, a secular religious order in the sense of folks committed to spiritual practice and development of Third World communities. They used unique methods in organizational development. Ron also is a surprisingly innovative, creative man; unique in integrity and care for others. One of the things I cherish about Ron and one of the reasons I wanted him to come tonight: Ron has perhaps been more intentional about pursuit of wisdom, courage, virtue. Also, as he will tell you soon enough, is imminently facing his own death. He is here to talk about life, death, meanings, spirituality. The theme is "Life, death, and deeper waters."

Ron: Thanks for that intro. I want to outline first. I make clear a couple of assumptions. One is we're on the same path. Where I'm headed is where you are headed. Timing may be different. I'm not talking just about my experience, I am reflecting on our common experience from my unique perspective. Hope there is opportunity for you to reflect on your experience, particularly if you view this differently. Another assumption I want to make is that it is not unmanly to cry. I probably will. It is not unmanly to lie down on the floor, rather than passing out. I've done that in five restaurants. It is not unmanly to carry one of these. Now the last time I used something of this nature was a little over an hour ago so it's entirely possible.....

I think there are some unique things I can say about the experience of living, dying, and searching for meaning in the midst of all that.

It might be helpful for you to know a little about my background. I grew up in Iowa. I went to Iowa State and studied engineering. I was a real geek. I recall – oh by the way my life is in five Phases. This is Phase I. I recall very clearly standing in a temper tantrum in tears. Mother said to me, "No, you may not have a bb gun until you learn to control your temper." I was relatively demanding. I don't know if that is still the case however. Beret would be better to say. I'll mention Beret several times tonight. I was very impatient!

I was married at sixteen and I had my two kids while going through Iowa State. I had earned a Ph.D. by twenty- six. And that led me to my first self-conscious step because that was as far as my life plan went. And at the age twenty six I had my first mid-life crisis. And it was pretty severe. Fortunately at about the same time, I ran into an organization called the Ecumenical Institute. But the people who provided the energy, who provided the staff, were the Order: Ecumenical.Hold on to that.I later joined the Order, a secular family religious order. We lived under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, interpreted somewhat differently as you can imagine. It's hard to have a family if you take that chastity thing too literally. By chastity we meant that all time and energy was for mission. By poverty we meant all resources were for mission. By obedience we meant that all decisions were about mission.

It was a scary group in retrospect. It was kind of the shock troops of the 20th century religious revolution and did considerable work across the countries. I won't go into that now. The organization is pretty well demised now. That was back in the 60's. There were many of these intentional type communities. We were blessed to be a part of that. Fortunately that came out at about the same time. This was my first conscious death. It gave me the next phase of my life.

Indeed I worked for forty years in what I considered to be a secular ministry - not unlike my spiritual friend is, doing workshops trying to develop devices for computer software. I was very conscious that this was a vocational calling. I did that for many, many years.

I retired from Silicon Valley in 2000. I didn't call it retirement for a couple of years. I wanted to keep the door open so I called it a sabbatical. When you call it a sabbatical you have a place to go back to. I really had nothing to go back to. We finally decided that, indeed, this was going to be permanent and that was when we decided to move back to mid-west in 2001. Much of that period comprises this fourth phase.

Much of that time I worked 90 hours a week serving that ministry and doing nothing in the community. We knew few people and had a few close friends. I probably could not have gotten this many people in a room who I knew well. I was not community minded. We spent fifteen years in the same town in San Francisco Bay area.

It was working on a starting a local food co-op that got me caring about this community. I had not cared about a community for a long time. I became involved in the town Planning Commission. I had interest in renewable energy resources, wanted to build a wind farm here. It is a big undertaking, capital intensive. The cancer diagnosis kind of played into that. That was that fourth period.

In the Fifth period - I learned to sit back and relax. I had ignored internal needs except, for the intense period being at Order: Ecumenical. Sort of there was no choice. Daily Office started at

and so we were very structured and our needs were taken care of. End of Part One.....

Part Two. I'd like to say a little bit more about the Ecumenical Institute and the Order: Ecumenical. This is not a commercial because you can't go join them now. It is again to give more background. The fundamental basis for that was something called Religious Studies I. It was a program developed by a guy who had been a chaplain in W.W. II. At that time he was taking men, who were then leading edge theologians - all of them. Turns out that most of them were Lutheran. Basically came at religion this way: What if we really said God is the source of all? Not just source of what we like but absolute, the all powerful Creator? What would that do to our lives if we discovered that those things that drove us into pleasure and kept us from pleasure were all from the same source? And it would raise the phenomenal question. What would that do to our life when we discovered that those things which drove us into pleasure and those things which limit our pleasure are from the same source?

It would raise the phenomenal question, how do I live in this ridiculous situation, that some people call a humanly impossible situation? The response to that is what we refer to as Jesus Christ. His life said, "You can say, 'YES.'" Simply say, "YES." It's that simple. You say, "YES" and life happens. That was the second thing.

The third thing is Holy Spirit. Once you have that “Yes,” all of a sudden you have that degree of freedom that you’ve not had before. You don’t have to have things your way. You’re not looking for them to be your way. You have intentions, you have goals, and you have directions in your life. But if that’s not the way it comes out that’s not the way it comes out. It comes out because a power greater than you vetoed the outcome. Finally the church is that group of free people who gather together to do something.

Church - is good. Not church - is good. If having pancreatic cancer is good, and not having pancreatic cancer is good, then talking about pancreatic cancer is good. Talking about good and evil becomes a different sort of exercise. So that was a tremendously and very important base out of which Beret and I have tried to live our lives. But there’s some other stuff you might enjoy.

Joe Matthews, who was the guy who was behind much of this work, was reading Kierkegaard one day and happened across a passage that struck him a lot. I read this passage and it doesn’t strike me. What he did with this passage strikes me. This is what Kierkegaard is saying. We observe a situation and a *What?* shows up in our lives. We respond to that situation. There is a *Gut?* reaction to that. But we don’t stop there. That *Gut* reaction leads us to make sense of what is there. There is *So What?* We seek to make sense, make meaning. That finally becomes *Now What?* So you have *What? - Gut? - So What? - and Now What?* This became a fundamental mode of operation, where we avoid leaping to conclusions to avoid being trapped in our first gut reaction. It’s like the audio tape of you controlling the airplane. You probably went through this even if you hadn’t read Kierkegaard. *What - Gut? - So What? - Now What?* Generally this is the way we live our lives.

In some ways the part that I want to share with you tonight is the part that is most meaningful to me. You get up at 6:30 for worship, to bed 11:00 pm. Lots of time to study. It is wonderful to study. Has anyone else heard of this book by Kazantzakis, *Saviors of God, Spiritual Exercises*? This much of the book is introduction (the first forty pages). Essentially the book is a poem. I am going to read one page because it most pointedly tells you where I come from. It says,

We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life. As soon as we are born the return begins, at once the setting forth and the coming back; we die in every moment. Because of this, many have cried out: The goal of life is death! But as soon as we are born we begin the struggle to create, to compose, to turn matter into life; we are born in every moment. Because of this many have cried out: The goal of ephemeral life is immortality! In the temporary living organism these two streams collide: (a) the ascent toward composition, toward life, toward immortality; (b) the descent toward decomposition, toward matter, toward death. Both streams well up from the depths of primordial essence. Life startles us at first; it seems somewhat beyond the law, somewhat contrary to nature, somewhat like a transitory counteraction to the dark eternal fountains; but deeper down we feel that Life is itself without beginning, an indestructible force of the Universe. Otherwise, from where did that superhuman strength come which hurls us from the unborn to the born and gives us – plants, animals, men – courage for the struggle? Both opposing forces are holy. It is our duty, therefore, to grasp that vision which can embrace and harmonize these two enormous, timeless, and indestructible forces, and with this vision to modulate our thinking and our action.

The two forces are inseparable. So the punch line part of my talk is pretty brief. Let’s talk about this vision in three areas. It’s really just one area: tools, gifts, and learnings. I’ll start with tools.

A friend of ours, David Dunn, who as I understand, was in the midst of some trial, some struggle, just popped these words out:

“Life is indescribably full,
unflinching real, and
unfailing good.”

Or another friend, Sandy Schuman, made this observation:

“Meaning is all we want.
Choices are all we make.
Relationships are all we have.”

So, being clear on these things has helped focus me in this period of time- so no more Planning Commission. What I loved about Planning Commission were the people, the interaction. As I reflect, it was the relationships.

So the tools: poetry, guided meditation. Have you all had the opportunity to put on earphones and listen to a tape that typically has American made flute music in the background and guides you through meditation. I find this just incredibly helpful.

I’ve been working with somebody on pain management. Morphine is good too.

A rock is good. Pass that around if you want to. This rock is a healing rock. This rock simply rides in my pocket. I don’t ask anything of it and it doesn’t ask anything of me. It is my companion. I found it in my driveway at Beaver Lake. We have a cabin in Wisconsin. I was recently told I should call it a cottage if it is in Wisconsin. I appreciate putting this in my pocket every morning. It is sort of a little ritual that can in itself point me back to some of these more explicit rituals. This in and of itself, has zero meaning. However it can have meaning as it reminds me of things which I decide have meaning.

I have a photograph. I’ll pass it around. It is a photograph Beret took up at Beaver Lake. It’s a little poignant, shows an empty bench. Art has been very important in our lives.

Relationships, obviously you know I’ve mentioned. Would anyone call a relationship a tool? Is that too crass to call a relationship a tool? We had a number of fine people who spent much of the day with me when Beret had to be in the city. She had her own medical issues she had to deal with. They were being used. They were providing a function, which a tool does. We had wonderful conversations about what’s going on in Northfield; wonderful conversations about what’s going on in life; wonderful conversations about what it’s like to die.

Music. Naps. Naps are good. The phenomenal relationships: my recent association with the community Hospice. You are somewhat familiar with them. The Director, the nurses, the hospice workers are just marvelous. They are proactive. They follow up. Can you imagine a group of people whose purpose in life is to make you comfortable? Wouldn’t that be swell? Well that is what the community hospice does: a remarkable service. It’s just incredible!

So, what are some of the tools you use when you need internal reinforcements? What do you find helpful?

Spiritual Friend: Tools for coping with what threatens, is that what you are asking?

Ron: Let me back that up a little bit. What comes to you as what might be the experience of dying? Is it being threatened? Is it being in pain? It is being..... Whatever that experience is, whenever you have it, that is not only associated with physical death. What gives you courage, strength, assistance?

Participant: Something kind of different, I think. I think of dust to dust. I think of it in terms of how an engineer would think of it - of the physics of the world and how complex and how interesting the world is. We are part of this much bigger world. It intrigues me how ... I give in to that. Not spiritual, just intellectual.

Ron: I can certainly say, I

Participant: I have a Husky Malamute Shepherd mix mutt dog. It's interesting. He gives unconditional love that you don't ask for. He seems to know when I am struggling more than anything else. And if I were to struggle more, he's right by my side whether it's the middle of the night or something. I don't understand it because he's not a passionate dog to me. He loves to be petted and snuggle right up to me. I think it's that unconditional love. That's what I'm looking for when I'm struggling with most anything. It just happens.

Ron: How many of us believe that animals have some sort of intuitive sense? Our cats have been particularly close to us.

Spiritual Friend: When I think about the most anxious, disturbing, threatening, things about death or experiences in life, it has helped me both to be aware that I am cherished, known and loved by someone. And also I think back to an experience, just sort of out of the blue, on a canoe trip sitting on a rock at the shore of a lake, imagining the seasons passing and the rock always being there. And so it became an experience of my own death. That whether I exist or not, things are simply going to go on and my passages will go unmarked in the longer depth of things.

Ron: And that doesn't diminish it.

Spiritual Friend: How grateful I am to have been a part of the stream and how grateful I am that I was truly known and loved along the way. And that I loved others. Those are tools I guess.

Participant: I think a little bit about the thread of life. I commuted up to the cities for fifteen years. One of my favorite things to do was to notice the cycle of crops: that verdant green in the spring where there's nothing. This verdant green covers fields where things are about to come forth. As the season goes on, comes the brightness of full growth and then the harvest; the corn dries in the field and turns brown ready for harvest. And I think about my place in the family, my parents and grandparents and my children. And we have this spot where we feel that this is our spot. That was before and this is after but we're right here. And if we weren't right here, that thread would not be.

Participant: I spent a lot of time in the military and got a lot of exercise, and you come across this problem. You've got to obtain this objective, and there's all this stuff around here. This stuff is there, it's kind of just there and you know you're going to need it somehow. You don't know

how or what form it's going to take. You just solve the problem. When you say the tools - the stuff appeared and you've got to figure out why and put it together.

Ron: Implicit, in that it seems to me, I may be going in a different direction, but there's all the preparation which goes into that. There is the tool building. A couple of more tools occurred to me as we were talking. Humor has been very helpful. Beret and I have probably laughed as much as we have cried. Just to give you an illustration: our son-in-law is putting together a bunch of still photos on a DVD for the memorial service. A couple of weeks ago he was out visiting and he asked, "Would you like to see a preview?" I said, "No. Surprise me." Not denial, not saying "No," it's just letting it be part of life.

Another one is, an old friend introduced me to something called the Breath Prayer. It is not a widely known technique in Christian churches. In fact the book was written back in the early 's. I got it from a local new and used bookstore. The owner had gotten it from a library. It had never been checked out. It is amazingly simple. You might find it interesting. I'll read about five sentences.

You say the name of that force in life that is most powerful, meaningful to you. Then say what you most completely, urgently and thoroughly, most deeply need from that Force. Put it into about seven syllables. Mine I can share with you. It sounds really, really traditional compared to some of the stuff I've been saying but I've encoded several layers of stuff. To get it down to seven syllables you have to encode it. Mine is, "Jesus lead me in your way." That comes to me in several different ways. There are times I say it almost as "Damn it, Jesus lead me in your way." When it is said most meaningfully, it's like I want to be open, to say "Yes" to whatever comes down the pike. I do have one reservation about saying, "Yes." That would be pain. Hospice assures me that it is not going to get out of hand, and if it does, well it does.

Group Leader: Is there anything else that comes up?

Ron: Learnings? When you stop to think about this, it's is how incredibly generous and caring people are. We have been overwhelmed with offers of support, ranging from, "Can I come help clean your house? Can I bring you food? Can I run errands for you? Can I transport you?" And some people had all these on the list. We say, "Not now. There'll be a time."

They really want to do this, it's just phenomenal. Even from people who I'd put in the acquaintance category. I've even had offers from people who are not yet even in the acquaintance category. People are just so phenomenally generous. Are they just out for self? I really in my heart of hearts don't believe that's the case. People care deeply about each other. They are sometimes clumsy about how they express it or inept in the way they express it. I've gotten a more positive view of mankind.

There is something else that has come up about the seamlessness of living and dying. It seems trite, but they are so integrally interrelated. You could not have one without the other, could you? So you stop and think about it, and to me that was just a realization. I guess this is a good illustration that there is a straight line between them. I thought I would be diagnosed with cancer, it's terminal, and then you would die and there is a straight line between them. That's not the way it is at all. You get diagnosed, then you get this side trip called a bowel obstruction. Then something else and that gets you. And so, between the diagnosis and the dying, a lot of living takes place. Each event is another way that life is springing up to be manifest.

Group Leader: I have a question on the generosity side. Do you think, are you aware of generosity now because you have a different set of filters on, or do you feel the event of people knowing of your passage instills in them a generosity so they say, "Oh, I wish I had done this before" or.....

Ron: I think it's both. It's got to be a move to act, before there wasn't a need. Part is we're receiving so many of these, we're just aware of it. Part of it is awareness and part is a need to act. I think it is just inherently there. The more we do to remove barriers to people expressing themselves, the more people express their care in every way. It feeds on itself.

Participant: You said you see life and death as more connected?

Ron: Yes, I see it as seamless.

Participant: You see this in a lot in people who are diagnosed, that feeling you have about this connectedness. If you had known that 20, 30, 40 years ago would that have made your life just different or better? How do you gain that appreciation without being diagnosed? Or should we all be diagnosed? We all are I guess. We all are diagnosed. So you're saying we should be more attuned to that, more accepting, more intentional?

Ron: I think your life would be richer; there would be more meaning in your life if you realized that all along. Let me give you an example, maybe a poor example. I am on a clear liquid diet. That's not a problem, it doesn't bother me to see you eating and drinking. A cup of chicken broth is so-o delicious! And chicken broth is not something I take for granted under these circumstances. Being in a different circumstance causes my awareness to be greater. Again, that's not a super good example.

Participant: Is it reasonable to think we could elevate our life that way, I mean without knowing that we're dying? How do we get to that?

Ron: There is no simple bullet. One of the tools that Beret and I have found very helpful was listening to Eckhart Tolle's CD *A New Earth*. What happened doesn't matter. You're not going to change that. You have no influence over that, so live in the now. I think that's what I do at this point. We are continuously trying to make sense of it. While I am dying, is there yet anything I can do in this world? Or, why death? In some ways it's hard to talk about, to articulate. Anyone else want to talk about that?

Participant: I lost my Mom and Dad in a five month period in same year and that changed my perspective. I don't think it's like your perspective. It changed a lot for me, how I realized I was in the process of dying. I began living in the now. It made me realize how short life is. Those two deaths had a pretty profound impact on me.

Participant: You realize you are in process of dying, where we would think we are in the process of living. We are in both.

Participant: There is a spiritual practice which comes out of the Buddhist tradition where the practitioners will intentionally meditate on death, on their own death, as a way of reminding themselves that the thinking behind that, is what Ron says is true. We are all in the process of

dying. But we forget it all the time. There are things like parents dying that remind you. Then you go back to forgetting again. This exercise is not meant as an exercise in morbidity, but just in being more aware. It can lead one to live in the now.

Ron: There are sharper senses, more gratitude for life as it comes, no matter how it comes. Another example: Beret and I now have a much more intense and much closer relationship than a year ago. We have always had a fine relationship. Part of it is she gives me shots twice a day and suppositories as necessary, all the primary care giving kind of stuff. Part of that is it's just a physical closeness. Part of it is we are just closer in a wavelength kind of way. We are so grateful for that and to me that is living, which is occasioned by the consciousness of dying.

So maybe seamlessness isn't exactly the right word. It's how interrelatedness and awareness of one creates a greater appreciation, greater enjoyment of the other.

I was talking with a friend earlier this week, and in describing the experience of the past week when I had quite a bit of pain. That's kind of just where we're at. I used the word "delightful." He said, "Delightful"? I said, "Sure, is that ok?"

It's there, it's waiting for all of us and I think we all have experienced it. I was a very nuts and bolts engineer, an "I want it now. I want it my way." kind of person. It is a long journey to becoming somewhat more open, somewhat more patient. I still have not given up all my rights to pounding the table.

Group Leader: I used to think, I still do think that if we all, every week, attended a funeral, how much more human we would be. You talked about relationships. The one thing funerals are all about is relationships, how that person has affected everyone throughout their life. I've written about this. I've journalized about this. I absolutely love funerals because it's that rhythm of knowing you are in that process of dying. It's not morbid; it's just the reality, our world, and we just don't want to talk about that. We want to get through those things quickly, incorporating those reminders which allow us to say where we are in the present. Ninety-nine percent of what we do in life reminds us that we don't do that. We do everything else but.

Ron: How many of you scan the obituary pages for someone you know. I think that's a helpful exercise.

Participant: There is something about funerals. For all of us, it will be our next big party, and we're not going to be there. Right?

Ron: Oh? Oh???

Participant: We can talk about that too. The point is, why don't we get together and celebrate this person's life when they were around. Maybe it's good practice; maybe we should have practice funerals or something.

Participant: So Ron, do you find going through this period of a slow death, as opposed to someone who may go through a car accident, as a gift?

Ron: Yes, absolutely. I think Beret also experiences it that way.

Participant: I wondered about that. I lost my Dad to cancer in '59. It seemed very difficult for him to continually wake up each day and endure the experience. That was my perspective. We as a family greatly appreciated the time to spend with him.

Ron: That may have been his experience. I can tell you that is not my experience. I look forward to most things. I look forward to things, and that could have been his experience also. Which, if you push too far, raises questions of ethics. I don't have a position on that. Every day is a day to look forward to.

Participant: You mentioned you have some concern for pain.

Ron: There can be times when the pain gets quite intense. Mechanically, my tumor spreads by exfoliation. Cells are fleeing the surface of the tumor mass and are floating around the abdominal cavity, catching root and filling it up with cancer, pressing on my intestines. So I spent a week feeling that I had to go to the bathroom in the worst kind of way but there was absolutely nothing to result from that. Pain on a scale of "1-10" and I said "8". When a Hospice nurse heard me say the pain was "like an 8," she said it was time to get on morphine because I need not have that pain. They try to manage the pain around "3" which is pretty tolerable. Then it's all relative. It gets scary. I don't have all that fear of pain. I saw my mother die of pancreatic cancer. Hers had gone to the bone, which can be extremely painful. She was on morphine most of her final days - had a noticeable amount of pain.

I think I probably shouldn't drive a car and I shouldn't fly an airplane that's for sure, but I think it's safe to talk to people.

laughter]

Participant: As you think of time, is time moving at the speed you want it right now?

Ron: No, it's going much too fast! There are so many things I'd like to get done. I am really a flake; I can lie horizontal for much of the day. That's fine, so there's things I've wanted to do and can't get done, things I should do but I've not done. So, in that sense time has been going much too fast. I go to bed, looking forward to company in the bed. I wake up in the morning looking forward to when I can have grits. Stuff like that. It is still ok to eat grits.

Participant: What do you find yourself thinking about most? The time of your life? What events?

Ron: That's a great question. I think probably the recent past. There aren't things I'm mulling over, reflections largely of enjoyment and pleasure. I don't want to sound too Pollyannaish. That can be down some too. It's relatively contemporary.

Participant: I remember watching our father go through, I believe it was hospice. I remember hearing from my sister that my dad said, "I have run the race. I'm ready to be done." He was peaceful with it, and that was it. But my mother was not: "It's not time. You can't go." How do you look at that? When it's time for you to go, but

Ron: Beret has been exceptional. She has been through all of this I've been experiencing as well as some other stuff. She has read books on death and dying, how to be with people, how to let go

of them at the right time. “No, you can’t go.” No, that’s not helpful, so. She’s excellent in that repair. What I’ve observed to her, and I think she really gets this is, she’s facing a bigger change in some ways than I am. I am excited about going into an unknown future.

She has some concerns about going into the future because, of course, she knows she will be living alone. She is a very gregarious person. She says she will hang out with girl friends. That’s probably not going to happen. I said, “Start thinking about it, what with a guy?” And she isn’t interested. So, she faces a lot more questions than I do, not about me, but about herself, and I think is doing quite well.

And there have been some books. A friend expressed some concerns about that the other day. Her mother died of pancreatic cancer a couple of years back. She’s been doing some emotional and physical Dad caring.

Beret’s not holding on. I would not know what to do if she was; get a pastor or someone to talk with her. In fact this is closely related to learnings. Fear of dying. As I’ve confessed to you I don’t want to be in pain. But, dying holds no..... I am just not afraid of it.

Participant: Were you like that your whole life?

Ron: Probably not. No, I don’t think so.

Participant: Where were you when you first got the diagnosis?

Ron: This happened under strange circumstances. The doctor who gave us the diagnosis didn’t know he was the first one to tell us I had pancreatic cancer. So he spoke somewhat gingerly. He suggested three to six months. So, we were quite shocked at the time, taken aback. The diagnosis was confirmed during an ERCP (endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography outpatient procedure. That was tough. We had been told there might be three causes: gall bladder, hepatitis, or pancreatic cancer. So we knew that was on the table. That was a shock. You don’t start to sort out fear and other things like that for a while. And I may not yet have hit the worst experience there.

I have a hospice volunteer. I don’t have any particular needs. I might wake up and say to him, “I’m scared to death of dying.” I’m not saying it couldn’t happen. Time is very short and it is apparent each day now. It’s days now. I could be in a hospital bed, incontinent. It may get a little twitchy there. I’ll attempt to be open to whatever happens, to use the resources that are available.

Let’s talk about gifts. Certainly, particularly people in relationships, is an incredible gift. We should not have to go this way to be aware of daily experiences. Curiosity about the future, and I did not see that coming. In some ways I’m excited. I’m not impatient in regards to dying. It can come in its own sweet time. But I am really curious. Aren’t you curious? What’s that really going to be like?

Our massage therapist has something really incredible. Massage is very helpful. She was pointing out that, after massage this week, she had a sense of my being carried gently across water, of being held and presented. She pointed out some of the ways of her adopted Ojibway family. From them she’s learned that they think in terms of two rituals, one of “presenting” to cross over to other world, and the other world where ancestors are performing a mirror ritual to

“receive” them. So what’s it going to be like? Will it just be nothing and the light will go out? I mean, that’s the worst that could be. Well hell might be worse. I’m curious. I assume that

Spiritual Friend: You should begin to think about that too.

laughter]

Ron: Another of the gifts I’ve experienced is at times overwhelming joy, thorough joy – it’s just a delight to be alive. Things are fine. Would I choose them to be different? Yes, I would if I was in charge. I am not in charge.

Then, lastly, I just can’t say too much good about hospice. It is so proactive. My hospice nurse stopped by and said she just wanted to listen to my belly to see how things are going. None of us wanted to go back to the hospital with a bowel obstruction. Has anyone ever had an NG (nasogastric) tube? It is appropriate to decline if you have an option. There are some procedures they can do that are helpful but each procedure has its costs. So each time I’ve gone to the hospital, which is three times, I’ve come out better than when I went in, but not as good as I was a little while before.

Well, that’s all I’ve pulled together. We can do whatever you want in terms of what’s next.

Participant: One of the tools that came to my mind was, I seek wisdom from someone I trust. There is just this quench for information. We don’t often get a chance to talk with someone as aware as you are, of what’s in front of you. That’s a tool and gift to all of us. Where have you found this wisdom?

Ron: Oh, it’s all over the place. It is just waiting to be picked, waiting to be harvested.

I wasn’t going to read this but I will. I will make it through it. Sometimes I don’t. *The Summer Day* by Mary Oliver. Looking for wisdom in a kind of perverse way.

“Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and she thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everyone die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”

Participant: What makes you cry?

Ron: Usually that poem.

Participant: What's behind that?

Ron: I am moved by reality, profundity - so real, so truthful, so meaningful.

Participant: Sadness?

Ron: No, I'm not sad! I am sad in regards to not spending more time with folks like you and Beret. I am sad about not serving the community. I'd love to get those windmills up. I'm sad about those things which would remain unaccomplished.

But, I'm not sad about dying. Life is ok. Life is complete as it is. If there is something else to be accomplished, someone else will accomplish it. Sadness is not a present part of my life.

Participant: That reminds me when you were talking about tools earlier. It occurred to me that when I feel frightened or overwhelmed, or something to that effect, I like to be moved in some way. It opens me; it brings me back to fullness, or the richness. I feel that way now, spending this evening with you. I also want to observe that you have such equanimity about this and a sense of grace. We all admire you and hope we can do something like that when our time comes.

But it also strikes me that you did not start with this when you got the diagnosis. It's so much more about how you've lived your life that prepared you to be able to do this now.

Ron: I thank you for those words and you're absolutely on target. It's is a lifelong journey by definition, from birth to death. We start from the dark abyss, and from the dark abyss we live this life. Life is all together, it's one thing.

Participant: I wonder..... I had a tough day today, in fact I wasn't going to come, because I figured I couldn't deal with this. And it takes me back to a management thing, "What is the worst thing that is going to happen to you? Are you going to not have food tonight?" And keep on going to the last thing. Is this problem you have, you're going to die? The answer again is "No". Well then don't worry about it. But it kept popping into my head with that tough day. My wife ran into someone today and he had his hands in his pockets, and he didn't look like himself. And you know the market is down. And the question is "Am I going to die?" And the answer is "No"; life's going to go on. But I was trying to think that through in my day today. And the answer will be "Yeah." I was trying to take that as each of us will look at our day today and I was thinking. Any thoughts on - in some way I want to go out of here today and someone says, "You're gonna die." And I want to go, "Yeah."

Ron: That's why I did that really short spin on RS I. The way Joe Matthews put it together in that course spoke of having had one's illusions broken. Having lived over against this imponderable question, how can it possible be that the Source of pleasure in life and the Source of limitation are the same? How can that possibly be the situation in which I live? When you've broken free of that, you are free to live. You no longer have problems. The problem is existence. Am I always..... Of course not. I cherish life absolutely. It gives me the fuel to look forward.

Group Leader: I'm not sure I'm asking this question right. It sounds like your spiritual development awareness work was actually done outside the church, and not necessarily in an organized religion?

Ron: Largely.

Participant: Why is that? We all have a rhythm about organized church but we don't necessarily find spirituality there?

Ron: The short answer is that the church is an institution. All institutions are fallible. The church comes with organizational trappings. We need both the memory of the historical church and church renewal activity that goes on outside those bounds. Without the historical church there would have been no Order: Ecumenical. Without both, the church becomes more ingrown and becomes more concerned about petty politics. The two are operating in dynamic tension. The Order: Ecumenical operated on behalf of the church for the sake of the world.

It ultimately went straight to the world, doing social development projects rather than trying to get the church involved in social development projects. It then said, "This is what we mean by social development projects." The Order: Ecumenical went out like a candle. It was never intended to be an institution of longevity.

Group Leader: As you sit on a foundation right now, how much of that foundation is your spirituality, and how much of it is your awareness of participation in the traditions? I mean, maybe it's both and it seems to me the spirit of your conversation is more spirituality and less that rhythm and that tradition of the church. But you've said you can't have one without the other.

Ron: I am not a regular churchgoer. I love going to church on Sunday morning. We seldom have a bad sermon. I find it uplifting to listen to the music I grew up with. The first song at my memorial service is going to be "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," a very, very traditional hymn played with the organ at full volume and all that stuff. It wouldn't seem like that would come out of the spirit movement. I'm also going to ask you to consider singing some songs outside the church tradition. I'm trying to meld those two. It's about what my life has been. I invite others to contemplate.

There have been all sorts of.....

I recently read a book *From Farm to Table* and this is related to the talk. This is a book written by a poet, Gary Holthaus. In the first chapter the fundamentals are the four elements: earth, fire, air, water. Well, you might say the institutional church holds the earth pole. The spirit movement holds the fire pole. It would be kind of what you would expect out of the tradition of the gospel, the Pentecost fire – who says it could only happen then? Pentecost can happen and burning off the dross can happen now. I am not generally a very pious person, but I am a very religious person.

Participant: I have a question for you. Both my parents died of bile duct cancer. They got it six months and had six months to live. Mother reacted by being depressed. She wouldn't communicate; she wouldn't talk about dying. My Dad was just the total opposite. He was much

closer to the experience you had. We talked and every day was a good day. He really enjoyed the last six months of life. And the thing I wonder is, do you get to make that decision consciously? Or is it how you lived your life previous to that or...

Ron: It is a gift, the gift of grace.

Participant: You can't decide six months before that that's the way it's going to be.

Ron: It happens or it doesn't happen. One has to hasten to say a person who goes one direction is not better than a person who goes the other direction. All is good. One's response is one's response to the situation. All is good. There is a degree of relational opportunity. One can say, "I'm hot." One can say "I can't possibly be in here. Turn the thermostat down." There are relational responses along the way. My experience is, I didn't say, "Well let's try this approach, this sounds like this would be interesting."

Participant: Did you have a mentor or someone in business or life whom you really admired or that you felt helped you in some way?

Ron: On the spiritual side there was a spiritual community of about 3000 folks who gathered and we mentored each other. There was a pecking order. We had priors and super priors. I wouldn't say there was any individual who was a mentor. It's kind of a process you build yourself. There are lots of resources you can draw on. In the final analysis your life is your life.

We went through all this stuff. We lived in California for 13 years. We went to the Berkeley Psychic Institute. We did the EST (Erhard Seminars Training) back in the 1970's. We've been down a lot of paths. No people became mentors.

Participant: Grace? You've been practicing for awhile. You've been thinking grace through a little bit.

Ron: Grace does that if you accept it. In my school of thought you can turn your back on grace, and there will be missed opportunities. Beret and I have been deeply involved in the Order: Ecumenical, even after they kicked us out for transgressions of..... I shouldn't be hiding this. That's not a good thing to do, hiding.

We decided to get married very, very quickly and we did not ask permission. We were not living the rule of chastity. They invited us to return in a year, which we had planned to do, except my teenage son came to live with us. He had bad psychological problems. It was not fair to him so we lived outside the structures of the Ecumenical Institute after 1976. That order doesn't even exist now. We kept contact with the people. We shared experiences in life.

Church renewal organizations become "institutions" also. We have kept contact. This is not something we put on the shelf and came back to recently.

Participant: Where are your children in this process?

Ron: I have a daughter who is forty-eight, who is quite unclear what she should be doing. She is the mother of two, a 14 and a 16 year old. She is a reformed alcoholic, reformed now for fourteen months. She is wrestling with that. When she thought a few weeks ago that my time was

short, she jumped in the car to drive up here and planned to spend the rest of her life living with us. We said, "That's not our plan." So she turned around and drove back home thru an ice storm in Kentucky. She is flying back next Wednesday and she's able to laugh about hopping in her car. She must now build her own life from bottom up. She's got to do that and be present to her Dad. *[Note 9/2009: She is now in graduate school and is the manager of a house for women who are recovering alcoholics]*

My son is forty-seven. My daughter and son are children from my first marriage. I last saw him in October 2002. He was visiting and after a couple of days said, "I just need to leave. I'll get back to you when I figure out what is going on." The next time we heard from him was three weeks ago. He said, "I'm coming up." He was here for a weekend. It was as if not a day had passed. He and his wife are coming again for a week.

He was struggling with loss. He moved to San Diego at the same time Beret and I moved from San Francisco to Minneapolis. He saw a slam in Beret's son's backyard which he thought would be in his backyard. It's deeper than jealousy; he felt, "I lost my dad." My death is on top of that. The person who got him to call me was Beret's youngest son. Her son and my son lived with us for several years. Beret's son just called him every day. "You've got to see your dad, you've got to see your dad." My son came, but he would not see Beret's son so he's still wrestling with that. *[Note: Ron's son and his wife returned, interacted with the whole family, and stayed until Ron died. His son then stayed another week to help Beret with transitioning the household.]*

Her two older children are daughters. Beret's middle daughter is very close to me. She went to Vietnam for three weeks. She just got back yesterday. She will not go out of town until after my death. She'll be coming down on Thursday. Her other daughter's husband is the one making the video. The kids are all plugged into this. The grandkids know Grandpa is dying. Of course they should know that about everybody. That will be the next step. The family has been very supportive, very close. Beret's son calls nearly every day to ask, "How are you doing"? He's my step-son and lived with us for four or five years. We're pretty close to them. They live in a community near to us. The family has been so supportive. We moved back here, from San Francisco. We could have stayed in the Bay Area - great weather and wonderful views. We have family back here and that meant a lot to us. We have friends here of forty years duration. We chose family and community over weather.

Participant: My struggle: My dad was in hospice and any time I talked to my dad I would always say, "I love you" because I always knew it could be a day or months. We were scheduled to go to Disney World. We talked to my dad the night before about whether we should take the kids to Disney World. Dad said, "Go." My brother was supposed to go to Texas. Dad said, "Go." I remember we were twenty minutes from leaving, we'd just given my son ... We were just taking off for the airport and the phone rang. It was my sister calling. She said, "Dad just died." So I went into the room and told the kids, "We are not going. Grandpa died." I drove home and the family drove home. We had a wonderful service in rural Minnesota. We buried Dad. I knew I said, "I love you." even the night before. But then we buried him; we had dinner at the church. Then we jumped in the car and drove three hours to catch a flight to Disney World. And now some other goofy things happened. It was the wrong flight. It was the standard "Now you're going to the Super Bowl"; it's "Now that I had buried Dad, I'm going to Disney World."

But I went straight with my kids, having buried someone who was precious to me, to Disney World. I wondered if I missed the mourning. With your kids, they have mourned your death. Is it OK that I went to Disney World with my kids?

Ron: That was absolutely ok. Kids have been in mourning; kids will be in mourning. We have a close friend whose wife died of pancreatic cancer in February of 2008. These were really close people and we saw his wife days before she died. He announced his engagement to another woman in May. We said "Absolutely right on." When you know you know. It was absolutely OK. A period has gone on and there is no reason to extend it. So, I'm very supportive of life going on. A period of extreme grieving is not necessary. In some ways death is a big deal and in other ways it is not such a big deal. Have bills to pay, checks to write, children who need encouragement: life has to continue. I don't find an extended grieving period necessary.

All need a grieving period. I hope Beret and family can move on. Beret will cry tears. We're thinking of having a memorial service three weeks after I die. So it gives people a little more time to digest, to plan for final details. We're not having a funeral. We have chosen cremation. I may have my body donated for medical research. It's not good for organ transplantation.

That's my view. This is the first time I have done this. I might have a different view after. Be very pragmatic about it and very matter of fact about this grieving period. Your dad was not insulted by your heading off to Disney World.

Participant: Will you let your kids know that? I felt that with my father. It is a part of communication.

Ron: A lot of people believe the time to show your love and devotion is before they die, not after they die.

Participant: What do you find yourself praying for?

Ron: Probably the world concerns that you're concerned about too, peace, justice, that we get through this economic crisis with some degree of grace. Not much for personal matters. I am not now doing anything overt to put behind that.

Participant: Have you reached out to anyone from the past that you would not have?

Ron: Yeah! There is a guy who worked for me. He was a marvelous techie, a way off the edge techie. I had not been in communication with him for six or seven years. We had a number of really enjoyable conversations. For some reason he was just a guy I wanted to be in touch with. I'd been in touch with some first cousins that I hadn't talked with for probably thirty years. And that's been important. Yeah.....

Participant: How about anybody you thought you had wronged? Maybe you've never done that.

Ron: I said to my son who lives in San Diego, "If I get any sense about what I've done wrong, about which you've taken offense, I'd like to talk to you and apologize, to take whatever action is needed to clean that up." I never got any response from him.

I asked, "Will you come back?" He replied, "Probably not." So at that time I said, "I love you deeply. I respect you. I'm very proud of you. Whatever wrongs I've committed against you, those that I'm conscious of, as well as those I'm unconscious of, I ask your forgiveness." So that was the primary instance of that.

Participant: Do you have a deep sense of peace for the life you are living? Are you at peace? Isn't that the ultimate goal for the life we all live? to come to peace? I put that in question form.

Ron: Yes. Very much so! I am at one with God. Peace is a way to talk about that. That is the goal of life. Are there things I'd like to accomplish? Sure there are. Those are not the highest concerns I have right now. That is why I use my breath prayer. I want to be open to whatever happens. The One who taught us to say, "Yes" to life as it is, does not abandon us but continues to dip in. This is not something which comes from inside. It is not something that comes from me.

Participant: I have the good fortune to have some really great people in my life early on. My grandmother never died; she lived to be 98. She just quit living. For her it wasn't about religion, it was about faith and how it affected people. She loved young people. She left an indelible mark on the lives of the people she touched.

It's very apparent here; this is a group of exceptional men. You have given us a gift tonight. That is the ultimate and I say that with..... As her life progressed, her health was not good. It wasn't about living and dying, but about being the ultimate human being. She recognized that friendship is life's greatest treasure. It wasn't position; it wasn't power or financial wherewithal. It is about faith. It was about standing tall in that dark night.

I had good fortune to be born into a farm family. Growing up in rural America I understand life and death, the evolution of living and how you accept it, how you appreciate it. We're all sitting here taking life for granted. We all are terminal. You live life a heartbeat at a time, moment by moment.

Who's to say - when we talk about who we are, what we do, where we live, where we come from? Open up the newspaper. You know Norman Vincent Peale made some comment before he died. He said, "I always pick up the morning newspaper and a cup of coffee. The first thing I read is the sports page, yesterday's triumphs. Then I look at the obituaries, see if I got there. Then I look at the front page and yesterday's tragedies." In effect, how we live our lives, the effect we have on other people, the love that we share, the faith that we possess are what count. What a tribute to human kind you are! Everyone has those gifts.

Ron: Every single person has gifts. Our challenge is to see a stranger, whom we would not want to sit down and have lunch with, and recognize that stranger as a person who has that same depth, created by the same Creator with the same sort of gifts.

Group Leader: I have a sense that we are wearing out Ron. We could go on for hours. I wonder if we should pause and conclude in a little bit, because it is taxing. I would like to do one thing if we could. Speaking of the now, we are not ever going to be in this space again. It would be nice to be quiet for a little bit and think about the conversation, think about the thought. Allow our thoughts to be with Ron and his family, and with us as well - what that next heartbeat is going to be, what tomorrow will be for us. If you don't mind, just a little bit of time to be quiet.

[

silence]

Spiritual Friend: Just a couple of things, intuitions or so, maybe others too. I know it is getting late. I came tonight wondering if Ron was going to tell us the meaning of life, like plastics or something. And I didn't really get that. But what I did get was something more important. Ron said life is about openness, gratitude, relationships, relatedness. It isn't about purpose. It's about a whole array of purposes. Maybe if we had asked him to talk about the meaning of life ...

Ron: I probably would have declined. I do know something about dying. Not as much as I will ultimately know.

Spiritual Friend: I've never done this before. I wonder if we could we lay hands on you, and pray with you a little bit?

Ron: How do we orchestrate this?

Spiritual Friend: Let's get you out in the middle. I'll go with the moment of silence asked for.

Ron: Should I be out so people can get in?

Spiritual Friend: We are grateful to God, and so grateful for what you shared.

[silence]

Ron: I can hear the striking...

Spiritual Friend: Not that good

laughter]

Spiritual Friend: Thank you, God, for life and grace that were given Ron.

Participant: Thank you, Ron, for sharing.

Ron: It's been a treat for me.

[chatter]

Participant:wonderful to get a copy.

Ron: Let me see how. Beret was particularly interested in taping our conversation tonight.

Ron died at home on March 12, 2009, 23 days after this conversation.

Ron said: "I can hear the striking..."

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee..."

John Donne

Meditation 17

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions



Transcription and Editing by Faye Caskey and Beret Griffith
Email: beretgriffith@charter.net