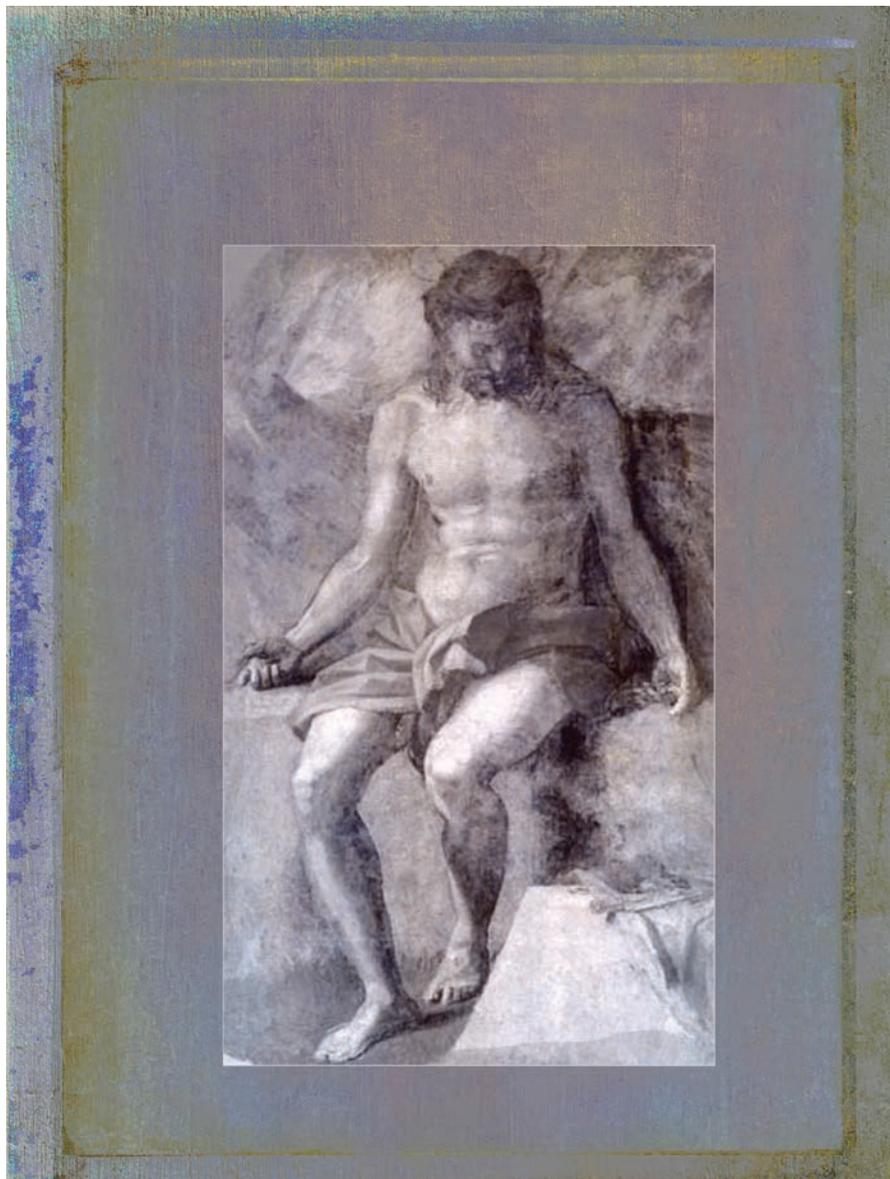




the empty bell

Radiant Light

A CaringBridge Journal



Painting by Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530). Re-imaged colors and border by Robert A. Jonas.

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First week of Radiant Light Therapy!

Mar 21, 2014

Margaret and I arrived just three days ago, and through the generosity of John Bullitt and Jane Yudelman, we are within 20 minutes of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute. I receive my third dose of radiation this afternoon, and then we drive back to Northampton for the weekend.

It's a total blessing for me to be here, in John and Jane's home. We're just a few blocks from Davis Square the the Red Line. This morning at dawn I took a walk--coffee at Starbucks, egg-and-sausage crepe at the little cafe across from the gym where we signed up and worked out yesterday.

As I walked through the Square I talked with a few early morning workers and walkers, and I gradually realized that I don't know this place. I had inadvertently thought that I know what Cambridge is, what Somerville is, who you are, who I am, but then my heart and eyes opened to the reality that I am a grateful sojourner in a strange land. Here, there are cows in the morning sky! (see attached) I'm not the same person who once lived in Cambridge, so the City I remember isn't this one, but it is.

I see faces passing by, absorbed in their own lives, but I realize that while I don't know what anyone is actually experiencing, there is a kind of lightning strike of curiosity flashing through my body. I feel friendly toward everyone I see, interested in what each person is thinking and feeling, and open to the precious possibility of mutual affection. A deep, prayerful sense of creativity arises: if I don't know what is happening here, anything can happen, especially if the ground is sincere mutual regard and care, and love.

Well, this is just my first morning walk, so who knows what's next? I'm tremendously grateful to be here and to receive John and Jane's hospitality, and thankful that I am able to receive such expert and careful treatment at Dana Farber.



Sunday, looking into Week #2

Mar 23, 2014

As of today, March 23, 2014, I have 39 more radiation treatments ahead of me at Dana Farber. The drill is to drive 30 minutes through Cambridge and Boston every weekday, and to be ready for the Table at 1:40 pm. There are four radiation rooms in the department, each one has its own oncology radiation team and each one is assigned a color. I'm with the Blue team. I scan myself in and wait in a room with a big screen TV that often features Judge Judy who is dealing with people who have misunderstood and hurt one another. I see that many people are rapt with the stories, and I wonder what they are hearing and seeing.

I bring my iPad and am currently reading, Paul Fleischman's "Wonder: When and Why the World Appears Radiant." I had lunch with Paul a few weeks ago, right after my diagnosis, so our sharing was intense. We traded PSA (prostate specific antigen) stories and theories and reflected on how one can stay in touch with one's soul in medical environments. Paul is a Jewish-Buddhist psychiatrist who wonders about the deep source of wonder within the cosmos and within our bodies. He helps me to realize that I am bringing wonderment to each of my radiation treatments. This medical environment can shape people to itself, to the diagnoses, prescriptions, predictions, and protocols of a materialistic, merely biological approach to being human. But in the waiting room, I sense the fears, hopes, discouragements, pleas, and prayers of the patients who are wondering how to live now, now that they have received the clear message that this life isn't forever. I'm beginning to meet men with prostate cancer, and we share stories about our Gleason scores and the likelihood of survival. We talk about side effects, doctors, and the indignities and blessings of our treatment which focuses on our entire pelvic area.

In the doctor's office and on the Blue Table, there is no privacy. Young men and women dance slowly around each other, talking quietly in the anteroom in front of a whole wall of TV monitors featuring x-ray images and text read-outs being transmitted from the Table which is in the next room. Before we are led through this anteroom we must put on pajama bottoms or sweatpants so that they can be easily pulled down to the pubic bone while we lie on the Table. I wear my green Green Bay Packer sweatpants, probably an unconscious effort to assert my essential manhood in the vicinity of that fear which all men in my situation must face, that the prostate defines our sense of gender, power and integrity as men.

Radiation treatments for men include this scene: a large room of mechanical devices, in the center of which is a long table covered with a white sheet. You lie down while four men and women move silently and efficiently around you, lining up your body and especially your pubic bone, with the very center of the Table. Above you is a cross--with equal horizontal and vertical lengths--cut into the ceiling straight above you. There is a red laser light shining from deep within the cross. When they have you all straightened out and when all the markers show that your body is perfectly aligned to receive radiation in exactly the right places, everyone leaves the room. And then, for the next twenty minutes, a huge cream-colored hard plastic and metal machine with three gracefully sculpted six-foot long arms that end in laser eyes, rotates around your body. Occasionally there is a clunking sound as the radiation is turned on and off. A red light on the wall to the red glows read when the radiation is on. One feels nothing, but the imagination is free to wonder what is happening. The radiation doesn't stop at



the prostate but goes straight through all the surrounding tissue. One is keenly aware that we are at the mercy of the doctors and medical technicians who have taken pains to make sure that the radiation doesn't hurt the urethra, colon, bladder or other bodily tissues surrounding the prostate. But it will hurt these other living cells and one hopes, not too much. (Radiation like this can cause bladder cancer, colon damage, incontinence and impotence).

But this is only what's happening on the outside, and this is what every prostate cancer man who undergoes radiation at Dana Farber must endure. Inwardly, men are dealing with this in different ways. Some get hopeless or depressed. Some complain. Some are in denial. Some still can't believe this is happening. Some are terrified. I've been through some of these feelings and thoughts, but for me it's been a really intense spiritual journey. For me, the first week has been like a dynamic living poem that flows with terror, grief, joy and beauty. I've been blessed with a wife who loves me so tenderly, with a warrior-like determination to love me better every day. My challenge has been to receive the love she offers me. I've also been blessed from the Christian and Buddhist traditions with stories, disciplines and tips about how to face pain, suffering, limitations and mortality without simply freaking out.

Who knows what's ahead, but in the first week, the Blue Table and the red laser cross shining down on me have been a temple of the Lord. The Table has been an altar of love, and the radiation has been burning away everything within me that is not love.

Week #2 eagles & lasers

Friday, March 28, 2014

After today I have 33 more treatments to go. The most anxiety-provoking thing for me is driving through Cambridge/Boston traffic every day. The hectic pace is aggressive and impersonal, and I quickly adapt. I zip among the striving automobiles and inwardly work with complaint, blame, anger and irritation. When I get out of the car and walk through the whooshing sliding doors of the busy hospital, I am calm again.

Take elevator down two floors to the radiation oncology department, check in, and walk through another sliding glass door to the changing room. Take off pants and slip into light blue hospital pajamas. Sit in a long rectangular waiting room lined with chairs, and wait for my name to be called. So far my daily appointments have run fifteen minutes to an hour behind schedule. I check email on my iPad.

All kinds of things can disrupt the schedule. One of the machines goes down, patients arrive late, or, as happened a few days ago, the staff can't find the source of a strange odor in the radiation room. Radiation technicians waited outside and then entered the treatment room between patients, trying to scout out the source of the smell.

Margaret says that each fifteen-minute treatment is like a treasure in the field, a small jewel surrounded by wider and wider concentric circles of time. The daily round-trip to Boston from our place in Cambridge can take all afternoon. I'm retired, and this reminds me of what it's like to have a job. It's stressful, and the job becomes your life.

If other people are in the waiting room, we sometimes talk. Yesterday at 1 p.m. a woman a few chairs down was crying. A nurse came by, stood next to her and stroked her back. She asked, "Is there anything I can do for you? Do you want to come into the next room and sit with me?" The woman spoke breathlessly through her tears, "I just want to get out of here. I've been here since 8:30 this morning, and things keep breaking and people are late. I just want to go home." The other day I met a Harvard-trained lawyer being treated for prostate cancer. He told me that his wife has advanced-stage breast cancer. She will die before he does. He looked so sad. We exchanged cards, and now, an email.

Each day when I am called, I walk into the anteroom of the Blue Table. All the technicians are young and wear white uniforms. Behind them, three walls are covered in TV screens, blinking LED's, digital read-outs and keyboards. One woman turns to smile and say hello; she is very pregnant, with twins. She tells me that she is due in two weeks and will have a Caesarean. We walk down a twenty-foot long hallway. On the walls are photographs of Rocky Mountain alpine fields, all of them lit from behind by invisible sources of light. As I walk into the Blue Table room, two or three young white-clad operators greet me, "Hi, Robert. How are you today?" I try to be honest and creative in my answers. Every day is the same, but completely different, just as my life before and after diagnosis is the same and yet completely different.

I lie down on the long table, which is covered with a white sheet. I pull down the waistband of my

blue pajamas to my pubic hairs so that the operators, a young man or woman on each side of me (at hip level) can put their faces over my lower belly, searching for the small tattoo that has been implanted just above my pubic bone. They push and pull my hips and the white sheet, so that the tattoo is aligned precisely with their laser lights. My prostate is the landing strip, and the radiant eagles that streak out of the huge machine above and around me must land at the exact same spot every day, soaring through a dense fog of physical, bureaucratic, technical, financial and all-too-human challenges and uncertainties. I want the technicians to be precise. My life depends on it.

After I am arranged properly on the table, someone might say, “All set, Robert, we’ll see you in a few minutes.” Then everyone leaves and I lie in the dimly lit room, looking up at the suspended ceiling as yoga music is piped in. I asked for yoga music from Pandora radio, for the long smooth chords of synthesizers, flutes and harps, because this music lengthens the chords in my body and in my soul. I can pray with this music.

Every day I am surprised when it happens: the room becomes a sacred place, a temple of healing. I never decide that I want this to happen. I just give myself to the moment, and something beyond me happens. I lie still and I hear a *clunk-clunk-clunk* to my left, somewhere near the hallway where everyone left this room. Then there is a louder, single *clunk*, and a large rectangular light-box that says “X-Ray In Use” glows red on the wall to my right. A buzzing sound permeates the room as the light glows. Then the light and buzz stop, and I lie in silence. This sequence happens nine times in fifteen minutes, with no other sound between the clunks, buzzes and lights except the steady background of quiet music. Twice during this sequence someone comes quietly into the room, reaches under the table and pulls out an X-ray sensitive plate. The person leaves without a word.

Then more silence, followed by the buzz-and-glow that indicate that beams of carefully calibrated X-rays are diving deep into my body, looking for their prey. Their talons will strike the backs of teeming, oblivious cancer cells, and kill them. I’m not making this up. This is as near as I can figure out what’s happening. I know that these X-ray eagles are sent through machines that are constructed by some of the brightest left-brain scientists and technicians on the planet. I know that they are probably not that into the language of metaphor and meaning, and yet, it is all something holy to me.

I am trusting these people with my whole body. I am here, all of me is here, and I am willing to let this drama play out within me. I feel as if I am inside the world of J.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, being buffeted by huge forces of good and evil, and calmly witnessing and participating in the final battle for life, and for goodness. My body and soul are the battlefield.

Almost every time I’ve been on the Blue Table I have cried. Tears stream down my cheeks and drip onto my ears, and I feel as if I am doing nothing. I am being held up by a power that is beyond me and greater than the technical powers that constructed and operate these machines. That small cross that is cut into the suspended ceiling above me is there every time, and at the end of each arm of the cross a tiny red laser light shines down on me. Yesterday, as I lay on the Blue Table, I found myself repeating this mantra through my tears, “Burn away everything that is not love, burn away everything that is not love, burn away everything that is not love.”

Birds of Prayer

Wednesday, April 2, 2014

This is the third week that I have driven from north Cambridge to Dana Farber Cancer Institute for my daily radiation treatments. My radiation oncologist is a woman who is crackerjack smart and totally focused. She will do her best, she says, and she wants my health related behaviors, such as diet, to be “pristine.” I can get into pristine. It taps my Roman Catholic training as a Third Order Carmelite, to commit myself to “poverty, chastity and obedience.” Fortunately, I had a few wonderful Catholic priest friends who reminded me that one Latin root of obedience means “to listen.” I always liked this better than the translation “to submit to authority.” So, when I walk through those automated sliding doors into the anteroom of the Blue Table, I am listening. For what? For who?

I can say glibly that I’m listening for God. But what does this name refer to? Only the Judeo-Christian conception of God? But even Jews and Christians will say that no human conception of God is God. So, I have to say that I don’t know what I’m listening for. All I know is that I’m not totally tuning into the medical frequencies that have constructed this huge, complex, dynamic and quite beautiful Cancer Institute. I am listening for that place where all frequencies--including the x-rays--come from. Being raised as a Christian I learned to trust the deep truth of the Genesis story, that we are created in the “image and likeness” of ultimate reality, the Creator. So, I trust that the source of all frequencies is within me, in my own mind and heart. I’m not sure what the neuro-science geeks would think about this, but I don’t care. I stand at the brink of life and death, and ultimate meaning. Who cares what others think? Why am I here, and why is there something rather than nothing? Nobody really knows, and I’ve always loved Rainer Maria Rilke’s declaration, that the question is more important than the answer. I had seen an eagle’s swooping presence in the red laser beams that guide the radiation to my prostate. Sobering, terrifying, beautiful and transcendent.

On Monday night Margaret and I had dinner with an old Cambridge friend, a psychologist who preceded me at Dartmouth and at Harvard’s developmental psychology program. We met at the Changsho Restaurant on Mass Ave. Rich’s wife told the story of how she and Rich met. She said, “I saw something in his eyes that captivated me, eyes embraced by the lovely crow’s feet skin wrinkles around his eyes.” Antra and Rich fell in love. As I listened to this story I felt intuitively that Rich had received these crow’s feet on his face because his spirit is so naturally joyful and his smile is so broad that it lifts his whole face into a precious light, a light that has wings, and one that is rarely seen at Harvard. Cambridge is the intellectual capital of the world, and so we marveled that all four of us at this table survived Harvard and still wonder about ultimate questions that transcend reason.

Antra spoke about how relationship is the ground of love and becoming, and I whooped in agreement! Yes, relationship is the *Holy Between* where humanity, creation and divinity meet. I shared the image of a painting that I have behind my studio computer in Northampton, one that I bought from a Tlingit artist on Vancouver Island years ago. It features a man/eagle, whose face is man on the right and eagle on the left. Behind him is a dark British Columbian forest, standing silently beneath a full moon. The four of us shared this vision, that if humans are to survive the current devastation of nature, we must morph into one another and morph into the living presence of other creatures. We are all just who we are, in particular, and as we become more and more who we are, we are becoming each other :-)



Rich's eyes beamed love as he shared the story of how he wrote the "Birds of Prayer" poem for me and posted it on my Caring Bridge Journal. I was close to tears, that a friend would share such love. My diagnosis has rendered me transparent to goodness, and I sense such a wealth of goodness in Rich and Antra. I listen to them from the heart and I let myself be changed by their presence. Rich's poem suggests that birds of prayer are eternal beings who have a mission to comfort those in need, those who are suffering in the shadow of death. Birds bring prayer and *are* prayer. The poem says that they will teach me. I am listening.

The next morning I awoke at 5:30 in the midst of a dream. I was standing at dusk in someone's expansive green garden. Six oversized crows played among the emerging flowers and grasses with their feet dancing in the air. They could fly, but they were having fun on the ground. These crows were about half as large as a person and they rolled over each other laughing. I understood what they were saying, not in English, but in my heart. The whole scene blossomed with gaiety, safety, joy and humor. I looked down and saw a huge crow reclining before me with her wings playfully outstretched. She was swaying slightly above the grass, as if dancing on air without beating her wings. She smiled at me, a beautiful crow's smile, and said "Hi, my name is Theodore." I felt invited to join her crow family in play.

I awoke with tears of love in my eyes. Later, another friend said, "Yes, this makes sense. 'Theo Adore,' 'Theo Adore,' 'Theo Adore,' the adoration of the Divine.

I get triggered by Boston traffic and momentarily lose my cool, but something great is happening within me, and among us, as I am challenged with this announcement of my--and our--mortality. Realizing our finitude is the occasion for love, for play and for gratitude. And I am so grateful.

Die Before I Die

Apr 15, 2014

Feeling trapped and exhausted. I'm inside metropolitan Boston, but I can't go anywhere because I'm too tired. I lie down and, from the bed, call a new friend, a retired priest named George who has a cancer that is as aggressive as mine--Gleason 8-10. He says that the Lupron has wiped him out. Radiation was O.K., but the Lupron, jeesh. He used to exercise every other day--walking up to eight miles a day--but now he can hardly get himself out the door. No libido, plus the expected fatigue got worse and worse, and now he's on anti-depressants. My legs feel like lead, but I don't care. I'm making them work. My priest friend says, "The Lupron destroys your testosterone, and it's not only your sexuality that dissolves; it's your overall energy and your joy." Yikes! After I finished this phone call I felt so heavy that I lay down on the couch to ponder my situation.

I had told George that I didn't feel depressed, but after hanging up I felt bad, and I remembered that I have this problem about boundaries. Sometimes I empathize so much that I jump overboard into the roiling sea with the person drowning, and then there's no one on the boat to help us. So I am careful to clear my mind and heart, and to pray for George before I move on. It's 4pm and I think about going out, but my body is heavy and I'd rather do nothing at all.

Generally I work out at the local health club every other day, but lately I have had to will myself out the door. I can no longer depend on my built-in hormones to propel me through the day. My energy must come from another source--raw will. I am actively cultivating an inner voice, so that when health club day arrives, the voice says, "How you feel or what you think about this doesn't matter. Get your butt out the door." I put on my workout gear without thinking, and then jog several blocks to the club. I jump onto an elliptical machine and try to get my heart rate up to 120 bpm for as long as possible. For thirty or forty minutes I pump my legs like crazy, relax my body to help my breath circulate freely, and declare that this is how I will push myself through my haze of passivity and lethargy!

One recent late afternoon I put my camera in a backpack, along with my shakuhachi flute, walked to Davis Square and took the T out to the Aquarium stop on the Boston Harbor. It was 5 pm and so I bought a ticket for the 6 o'clock sunset cruise. While I waited, I took pictures of the harbor seals trapped in a fifty-foot-long glass aquarium. About six of them swooped past the street level windows over and over. As they passed me, our eyes met for an instant and I thought of the Rilke poem about a panther he saw in a zoo.

From seeing the bars, his seeing is so exhausted
that it no longer holds anything anymore.
To him the world is bars, a hundred thousand
bars, and behind the bars, nothing.
The lithe swinging of that rhythmical easy stride
which circles down to the tiniest hub
is like a dance of energy around a point
in which a great will stands stunned and numb.
Only at times the curtains of the pupil rise
without a sound. . .then a shape enters,
slips through the tightened silence of the shoulders,
reaches the heart, and dies.

--RainerMaria Rilke (tr. Robert Bly)

I thought to the seal, “I’m so sorry that these conditions have given you this horrible case of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), swimming this same pathway, day after day.” I decided to enlarge a photo of one cute seal and pray for her release. I wondered if the people standing at the windows and watching the seals were somehow trapped, too. I know what it’s like to feel trapped. I am trapped inside a male body without testosterone. What’s a man without testosterone? I live out this question, accompanied by the hot flashes caused by the hormone therapy.

When it came time to board the boat, I looked across the docks and spotted two busloads of shouting, screaming teenagers beginning to line up for the same tour. OMG, I thought, I can’t bear their frenzied cries. I may need to jump ship and swim to shore. So I went back to the booth and got a refund for my ticket. Improvising, I caught a cab and said, “Take me to the Episcopal Cathedral on Park Street.”

Margaret once preached a series of Good Friday sermons there, and I played the shakuhachi at the service. I got out at the Park Street stop, saw a few homeless people enter the Cathedral, and walked in the twelve-foot-high doors. The church was dark and the pews almost empty, but the lights were on at the altar, where about 25 people--mostly twenty-somethings--were standing in a circle and singing Taizé chants. I walked down the aisle, stepped into the circle, and joined in the singing and praying. When they got to the Lord’s Prayer, I got stuck on the phrase, Thy will be done. Where is the boundary between God’s will and my own? Is my will my own?

When the service ended I went up to thank the musicians, who had been laying down a blues beat during most of the service with electric guitar and bass, djembe drums and synthesizer. I unwrapped my shakuhachi, looked into the faces of the band and said “C minor?” They smiled and nodded. I began playing runs of Cm notes and soon the keyboard and drummer joined in. Within a few minutes the three of us were lost in the music. I thought to myself, “Hey, maybe I’m not depressed, after all. Can depressed people experience this joy?” I don’t know exactly what’s happening to me.

Back at Dana Farber the next day, lying on the Blue Table as the X-ray machine slowly spins around me, I wonder, “If I lose track of my spiritual discipline--remembering that God is burning away everything that is not love--will God stop burning away everything that is not love? Will God stop loving me if I forget that I’m being loved into existence at every moment?” I’m reminded of the medieval controversy about the priest’s disposition in consciousness at a Eucharist. If the priest is distracted and thinking about other things during the Mass, is the Mass still valid?

I close my eyes and remember an insight that came to me in the very first week of radiation treatments: this cancer diagnosis is an invitation to wake up, a call to come to terms with and to make peace with my whole life, before I die. Is this what spiritual teachers mean when they say that we should die before we die? I’m not dying, but something very much like me is dying! Am I ready to die? Is everything complete? Where am I still stuck in fear, anxiety, regret, bitterness, judgment, resentment, anger, envy or pride? This strikes me as a divine imperative: I don’t want to die stuck! I believe that where I am stuck is where I have inadvertently constructed boundaries to limit God’s boundless love. But nothing is more important to me than to assume a stance that allows these walls to become transparent or to dissolve. To die before I die, then, is to become nothing and no one, but God’s love. The only thing that gets in the way of this process is the eruption of “I.” Even if I think that “I want” to become God’s love, I’m lost. There is no “I” here. Of course, there is an “I,” who is known to



friends as Jonas, but to see this “I” as precious and unique is simultaneously to see every “I” as equally precious and unique. And so the separation between myself and others falls away, and there is only divine love. God wants to become God within me, within this blessed, precious, temporary form I call “I.”

Sometimes, this process is easy, as when I lie down on the Blue Table and simply open myself to the X-rays and the divine Light that is piggy-backing on the rays. And sometimes the process is exceedingly difficult, as when I must will myself out of bed. Am I willing myself, or is God willing me out of bed from within my own will?

Sometimes, I wish this process of transformation were easier, but here we are in Holy Week, and I think of the range of experiences that Jesus had to undergo. The accolades on Palm Sunday moved into the recognition on Holy Thursday of imminent danger and the importance of friends; and then came the crucifixion on Good Friday, the self-emptying of Holy Saturday, and the Resurrection on Easter morning. All these experiences are happening Now in each follower of Christ just as they happened for Jesus in his Now. Dying before we die, we join Jesus in the never-ending, always-arising Resurrection of a freedom and joy that includes and transcends our suffering. That, at least, in my hope as I lie day by day on the Blue Table.

I am You and You are Me and We are All Together

Apr 22, 2014 4:32am

This two-month experience away from home, with daily trips to Dana Farber's radiation oncology department (elevator down to L2), has emerged as an unusual kind of spiritual retreat. Living with Margaret at the home of my brother-in-law and his partner, who are people of deep sensitivity and kindness; finding intelligence, skill and compassion at Dana Farber; receiving the love and prayers of dear friends all across the country; and practicing the discipline of returning to the Blue Table with hope-- all of this has taken on the ambiance of a monastic journey. My oncologists say that I'm responding well to the treatments and that there are indirect signs (e.g., PSA readings) that indicate I may live a long time. But cancer can recur, and there are no guarantees. One of my first shakuhachi students, Ken Arnold, recently died of a prostate cancer similar to mine, a cancer that seemed gone, and then returned. So I approach the BlueTable with the attitude of "Here you are. This is it. This is your life. If you can lose it all, how do you want to live these delicate, precious moments? Can you be fully, honestly just who you are without pretense? Can you accept all of yourself and let go into love?"

I'm finding that the "self" in self-acceptance is much larger than I had thought: there is no end to it! A few days ago I awoke at 5 a.m. praying fervently for the young drowning victims of the ferry accident in South Korea. I saw photos of the ship going down, aware that hundreds of people had been told to stay inside their rooms as the ship listed and began to sink. I imagined that some of the teenagers were still struggling for life in their sealed cabins. Somehow, accepting myself means accepting all of us. I am not you, and I am.

It was Good Friday, and there was great suffering and heartfelt compassion emerging all over the earth. I thought, I am only one small story within this larger universal story of life. Only one, just as each of us is "only one." But it turns out that this "one" that we are, is a window into the All of God. Years ago, Margaret and I lost a daughter soon after she was born, our dear Rebecca. To some degree we have glimpsed what many South Korean parents are now enduring. Our hearts are interchangeable. My friend and mentor, Fr. Henri Nouwen comforted us when Rebecca died, and he said to me, "Jesus lost Rebecca, too."

I am also exploring non-Western treatments such as acupuncture, Reiki, massage and nutrition. New doors are opening. Dana Farber offers the best in Western medicine, and yet my Western trained doctors tell me to take Milk Thistle extract to help heal the liver, which is taking major hits from the drugs and radiation. One day, I met with Dr. Rosenthal, the chief of Dana Farber's Integrative Therapy Department. I was struck by his kindness and his sincere interest in my story. He encouraged me to continue the acupuncture, to exercise and to eat well. «There are many avenues of healing.» Yesterday when I walked into the radiation oncology waiting room to swipe my card under the digital-laser Blue Room card reader, I said hi to Dawn, a Black secretary who wears snazzy colorful clothes, smiles readily and punches my reduced-fee automobile card every day. She asked how I'm doing and I said, "Good, considering the circumstances. I guess you see a lot of suffering here." "Yes, I pray for you." She smiled, "I pray for everyone here." Dawn and others create a humane atmosphere that transcends the medical equipment, time constraints and bustle of a busy metropolitan hospital. I am so grateful to these people.

Twice a week I lie on the acupuncture table with several needles in my body. Memories of my childhood and young adulthood pass through my mind and heart. After Bill M. takes my pulses and puts the needles in, he quietly leaves me alone on the table for twenty minutes. This becomes another sacred time in the cancer monastery. Last week, as I lay there, I saw myself as a Harvard doctoral student almost thirty years ago, living in a small apartment off Mass Ave. in a marriage that was falling apart, raising a daughter, and trying to get my focus on a dissertation while holding down three jobs. I was living so close to the bone that my brother helped me pay the rent for a couple of months. When I finally got down to my dissertation (written on a manual typewriter, using white-out to correct mistakes), I would shudder with fear over the keyboard. What if I couldn't finish my doctorate? What would happen to me and my family? My body and mind were often contracted with anxiety and worry.

As I lay on the acupuncture table, tears came to my eyes and I heard a distinct inner voice, maybe *The voice*, say, in the most kind and compassionate way, *It's over now*. And then I wept with grief and love for all of us--for my ex-wife, my daughter, and all of us who work so hard to survive in this super-competitive American reality. I have spoken many times about those Harvard years with therapists and friends, but I was surprised to discover that my body was still carrying a burden of fear and tension. And now, *The voice* declares in a most gentle, feminine way, *it's over*, and I cry with relief and a profound sense of mercy, forgiveness and love toward that nuclear family that was so wounded. All this suffering and love are passing through me because cancer is making me transparent to my own life. It is saying to me, *Now is the time to look deeply into your life; it's all available to you now*. Cancer is reminding me that I am only who I am, I have cancer, and it is O.K. All striving to be someone else is over now. *It's over*.

As I lie on these radiation and acupuncture tables I relax into the altar that is my whole life. Occasionally, I see Henri Nouwen's face. When he presided at a Mass, one had the feeling that he was transparent to the Last Supper, directly transmitting Jesus' presence, and his last words to his friends, "This is my body, given for you." My dear friend and wife, Margaret, an Episcopal priest, allows herself to receive this transparency at the altar. People recognize that she is more than herself when she presides. Priests in the Apostolic traditions--Orthodox, Catholic and Episcopal, offer this special opportunity to priests, to disappear into Jesus at the Eucharist, and in this transformative event, to offer this sacred transparency to all who come to the altar. I sometimes envy a priest's socially sanctioned and unique liminal role. But Henri's view was that each of us who comes to a sacred altar has the opportunity to grasp and to lift up the cup and chalice of our lives. He would ask, *can you drink the cup of your life?* As I lay on the Blue Table and the acupuncturist's table during the last days of Holy Week, my cup, my life, was being lifted up within me every day.

I have explored spiritual practices in several traditions, but I've never left Jesus' world. I have adapted to a secular civilization, but I still see all my experience through Jesus' lens. This lens renders a Christian transparent to an infinitely vast life that some call Christ consciousness, a life that animates and connects all beings. In this consciousness, all beings are continuously given to each other in love. In this consciousness we are invited to receive our lives as a sacred altar where all of our experience and memories--pleasant or unpleasant--are transformed in love. At his last Passover, Jesus told his friends,

I must leave but I am your eternal friend. I give you my peace. My love comes from the Author of love who is infinite, and I invite you to abide in my love. You will bear much fruit in this love. Yes, you

have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. I want only that your joy be complete. I am not separate from you, not separate from all of creation. I am in you and you are in me and we live in God's love. Are you willing to trust me? Just step off the edge of your self into this infinite Self that we share.

I am learning to let others help me in practical ways. I am learning to let the prayers of others enlarge me beyond the boundaries of myself. Jesus and his followers have taught me that it is good to surrender all of my life for others and to receive all of my life from others. In a way, I am giving up an individual agenda, tearing up my resumé, walking away from professional roles I've played in the past. Sure, I will still use all the skills I've learned, but to "die" in Christ (1 Cor15:31 and Col 3:3) is to live without attachment to what I've learned so far, without attachment to anything less than God's love. Facing death in a more direct way has given me this opportunity, to glimpse a life that is lived without holding back, without trying to prove anything, without having to be unique in any self-centered way. Death takes everything away, so why not let it all fall away now when we can enjoy this freedom from ourselves? I've known good people who live like this. They are living icons--vivid images of what cannot be imagined. The lives of these heart-centered people pass through my mind as the radiation passes through me each day, and their merciful presence seems indestructible and timeless.

Our individualistic culture gives us the impression that we are each biologically separate beings--separate from each other and from nature. At Harvard I received an excellent education in the reason-dimension of my mind. I am so grateful. But to be back here in Cambridge is an opportunity to see both the value and the limits of this education. Reason has its place, its value and its use, but we are not in fact separate from one another and nature. The existence of our galaxy among billions of them is preposterous, and it is totally unlikely that any of us are here, right now. It is absolutely unreasonable that we are living on a sphere that is rotating on its axis at 1,000 miles an hour, rotating around a sun-star at 67,000 miles an hour and spinning through the Milky Way galaxy at 568,000 m.p.h. All of this is happening in virtually empty space that has no up or down. We can forget our tiny efforts to control the situation. Blaise Pascal (17th c.) mused that "the heart has its reasons, which reason does not know." My heart is teaching me things that reason and science can't prove but which--nevertheless!--cultivate palpable experiences of hope, beauty and love. Reason's most powerful questions--why, how, where and when--seem irrelevant and powerless in the vicinity of goodness, compassion and beauty.

My heart is receiving a teaching from the Beyond Within, that we give each other our being, and our spirits are nourished by the spirits of others. With the hormone treatment and the radiation I often feel fatigued and sometimes afraid, but my emotions are labile and tears of love are always ready to soften the hard pan created by reasonable fears. I can feel a little depressed and lost in practical tasks, but then I feel a surge of desire as I lay suspended on my altar tables. I want to live!

The other day, as I lay on the acupuncturist's table with needles in my chest and abdomen, I put my hands over my eyes and a rich blue light dotted with countless shimmering stars poured through my eyelids into my whole being. Jesus was holding my hand out here at the boundary of a never-ending explosive, evolving and gorgeous cosmos, and letting me go.

The Red Cross of Laser Light, an Undeserved Grace

Tuesday, April 29, 2014

The other day a Roman Catholic priest and friend, Bruce T., offered to meet Margaret and me in the Brigham and Women's chapel for an anointing. The small chapel was empty, except for two Black women in the two back corners of the room. One, dressed in a light blue surgical gown, was lying across two chairs, either sleeping or praying or both. The other sat silently with her eyes closed and her hand on a Bible.

Bruce, Margaret and I walked to the front, near the altar. I sat in a pew with Margaret standing at my side as Bruce spoke prayers of healing and blessing. I have been increasingly estranged from the Catholic tradition since the death of my friend, Fr. Henri Nouwen, and as the Church has been steered away from the radiant Spirit of Vatican II by some recent Popes. But tears came easily as Bruce recited the sacred prayers. I felt the reality of an infinite love touching me in the very center of my heart, and I cried.

I had had a difficult morning, and our chapel time turned everything around. As we got up to leave, I noticed that the Black woman who had been reading the Bible was also rising to leave. She smiled warmly at us, and at the door she turned and said, «You're healed now. . . .You're healed now.» Oh yah!

In previous Journal entries I mentioned the two-inch by two-inch cross that is cut into the white, sound-absorbing ceiling tiles above me. It is a sacred symbol of the Incarnation for me -- not only the specific historical incarnation of Jesus Christ, but also the universal incarnation that Jesus' Incarnation made possible. Jesus has been my spiritual teacher all my life. For me, his life, crucifixion and resurrection is an archetype of a fully alive, divinely radiant human being. He offers a vision of what it can be like to surrender one's self-centered ego to God. There may be other fully divine-human incarnations on this planet, but this is the one that I've been given to know and to live.

The red cross of laser light reminds me of my fundamental purpose: to seek God and to seek my true self. I don't want to live according to convention, habit or the opinions of others. I also don't want to live and die exactly the way Jesus did. How He lived and what He did has opened the way for me to see what happens when the Divine Mother-Father puts on the garments of any particular personal life--what the Divine does with each person's history, skills, interests and relationships. I want to discover who I really am and I want to know what is true--not conventionally, but ultimately. I know that these goals can never be fully achieved, but I really don't see an alternative. Plus, I keep having experiences that are inexplicable in anything but spiritual, poetic and aesthetic language that points to an ultimate Mystery. I breathe in awe and breathe out gratitude with every breath.

As so many medieval European women mystics perceived, the incarnation of Divinity into nature and into human beings is happening all the time. I really believe that it is happening now, in us, if we are willing to trust the process. I'm especially drawn to the writings of Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch, Hildegard of Bingen and Marguerite Porete, all gifted with revelations of incarnation. Mechthild (13th c.) wrote:

*As love grows and expands in the soul,
it rises eagerly to God
and overflows
toward the Glory
which bends toward it.*

*Then Love melts through the soul
into the senses,
so that the body too might share in it,
for Love
is drawn
into all things.*

And I think of my favorite poem from the Greek Orthodox Abbot, Symeon the New Theologian (C.E.949-1022) who wrote:

*We awaken in Christ's body
As Christ awakens our bodies,
And my poor hand is Christ, He enters
My foot, and is infinitely me.
I move my hand, and wonderfully
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him
(for God is indivisibly
whole, seamless in His Godhead).
I move my foot, and at once
He appears like a flash of lightning.
Do my words seem blasphemous?--Then
open your heart to Him.
and let yourself receive the one
who is opening to you so deeply.*

*For if we genuinely love Him,
We wake up inside Christ's body.
where all our body, all over,
every most hidden part of it,
is realized in joy in Him,
and He makes us, utterly, real,
and everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed
and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light.
We awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.*

Whew! What a fresh breeze of truth. Just about every day I feel this boundless love in my own body and heart, and I sense the bending of the Divine into the Blue Table room, not only to me, but also to the other thirty-some people who place themselves on this altar of medicine and healing every day. We are exercising our God-given right to trust others with our lives, and to be fundamentally changed by this action. Any small act of trust ignites and transmits a glimpse of our ultimate and holy trust. This ultimate trust is a gift from beyond us that comes when we surrender our self-centered ego control to God, but it does not mean that we float off into a bliss beyond this body or this world.

Jesus grounded his ultimate faith and trust in the Divine who chooses to keep incarnating in nature, and in our bodies, psyches, and relationships, including our political and economic arrangements. This is a surrender that is not passive but actually empowering and endlessly creative. We are giving ourselves to the vast Mystery who gives away Her eternal body as the cosmos, as us. We need our ego-self to live responsibly, but the right surrender renders our egos transparent to the One who brings each of us forth in each moment. The self-centered ego becomes transparent to the Divine One who goes by different names around this globe--Kwan Yin, Avalokiteshvara, Shiva, Holy Spirit, Shekinah, Christ, Elohim, Chi, N'um, Shakti. She gives Herself to us and we give ourselves to Her in this radical decision to trust Her and others with our lives.

Reason steps in and says, Be careful! Trust may not be appropriate here, or warranted. So in every situation we face an important moment of discernment: should I give my life to this person, this medicine, this God or this spiritual path? And once that discernment and decision are made, we must also decide whether or not to throttle it down or to practice the trust 100%. There are relationships and situations where it is necessary to keep one foot on the brake. But what I've discovered is that trusting God 99.9% doesn't cut it. Holding back some bit of ultimate control for myself doesn't cut it, because God wants all of me, and will get all of me in the end, anyway. When I die, God will not welcome who *I want to be or pretend to be*, but exactly who I am. (Thus the title of my previous post, "Die before I Die.") There are periods in my life that I can't make sense of and experiences of which I am ashamed, and I might not be able to fully plumb those events with compassion. But I have a faith and intuition that God is seeing them accurately, with eyes of mercy and love. So, why not let God see them now?

The great Jewish writer, Victor Frankl reminds me that this journey of incarnation is not easy or always pleasant. He wrote, "What gives light must endure burning." The horizontal arm of the red laser cross is my brief chronological life, including all the events in my personal history; and the vertical arm is eternity. The cross reminds me that I live at this crossroad in every moment, and that I am burning. The horizontal arm has been incredibly active within me here at Dana Farber. Every time I lie down and am left alone with the clunk-clunk-clunk and buzz of the X-rays and radiation passing through me, the deep waters of my consciousness heat up and memories bubble to the surface. I don't feel "normal." I feel raw, emotionally labile, and incredibly sensitive to the pain and the blessing of every scene in my personal life that breaks the surface. My life is being reviewed and completed, and it is a radiant burning. I can barely watch it happening in the dazzling darkness.

Just before every electric arrow of radiation is sent through my body, the machine that rotates around me takes an X-ray to make sure that it is accurately targeting the prostate before the cancer is burned away. And it seems as if certain memories of me, as *in utero*, and as a baby, youngster, adolescent, young man and mature adult are being located and targeting for another kind of burning--the burning and healing of love that recognizes any tension, bitterness, loneliness, resentment, jealousy and anger

that might be rooted there, and completes that experience in a merciful embracement. I am simply witnessing this transformation, but I am also giving myself to it and feeling it deeply. My life is on the line, and the Blue Table is my altar and my monastery.

Last week as I lay there, I saw in a bubble of memory the face of my father who died of lung cancer in 2002. I was at his bedside a few weeks before he died. When I was young my dad wasn't able to hold himself or our five-member family together after he bought a bar in northern Wisconsin in 1956, then medicated himself with alcohol, and finally abandoned us altogether when he moved to California in 1961. I had passed through years of shame, rage, and psychotherapy about our relationship. We had some opportunities to talk this over, though we never fully resolved it. But now I saw him lying in a hospital bed in Santa Rosa, California. He lies there, absolutely still, not fully realizing that he is dying, not understanding what it means. He looked so sad as I told him that I loved him and had to leave. And now, as I lie on this white sheet, I shed more tears of grief and love. I am mortal, but there is a depth in my personal life and awareness that seems limitless. The depth is not mine and not me, but it is opening within me and changing my "me." I was pretty familiar with the continent that I assumed was me, but now I'm standing at the coast and looking out into a vast, dark, watery, dangerous and beautiful Unknown, and I don't know who I am. There is no end to the mercy that I see in myself and in the patients around me at Dana Farber.

Meanwhile, all the tools of expression available to me--words, symbols, music, images, even dance--exist on the horizontal arm of the cross. All I can do is to stand at the rim of the Grand Canyon and point to the vertical axis, to the depth. I'm reminded of another 13th century woman mystic, Angela Foligno, who had a similar experience of seeing her whole life infused with God's love. She wrote,

But now it seems to me that everything we are trying to say about this experience reduces it to a mere trifle, because what took place is so different from what can be said about it. I myself am very ashamed that I cannot find better words to describe it.

God is beyond all descriptions, beliefs, and images, none of which are the thing-in-itself. None of them are the complete experience of Divine mercy, awesome beauty, unconditional understanding and boundless love that comes to me on the Blue Table and keeps reappearing throughout these weeks in Boston. Sometimes, I find myself praying, "Please don't leave me when these treatments are over. Please don't leave me. Help me to remember this healing and this awesome, undeserved grace."

Be a Man: But In Whose Image?

May 7, 2014 11:12am

Luis Almosa and his wife, Lolita, are here in the waiting room every day. For several days we look up, catch each other's eye, and smile. He looks older than me, but who knows? I don't have a clear perspective on my age. I'm a 67-year-old member of the proud, infinitely young boomer generation and I remember clearly the admonition that I shouldn't trust anyone older than 30. I sometimes notice myself inwardly singing the Beatles' song, "Will you still need me, when I'm 64?" I feel the kinship of age with Luis. He and I share the challenge of diminishment that comes with sickness, old age, and death. Eventually I walk over to him and say hi. He says that he and his wife are living at the local B&B that is run by the Boston hospitals, and that while they're here, they're giving tango lessons. Teaching tango is what they do in Northampton, where I live! He gives me a flyer offering free introductory lessons. I tell him that I play the shakuhachi, and I give him one of my CD's, *Blowing Bamboo*.

We are both tired from the drugs radiation, but over the course of several waiting-room conversations, Luis and I come up with this idea that I'll learn to play a tango piece on the shakuhachi and play at a tango festival in Springfield in August. The next day Luis says that he listened to *Blowing Bamboo* and that this Japanese music is "fantastic." The day after that I receive audio files of three tango pieces in an email from Lolita, and set up my audio software so that I can learn the pieces and record myself as I play along.

Luis' last day radiation has now come and gone. We embraced before he made his final change out of the light-blue pajamas that all the prostate guys wear into radiation. He looked more tired than ever, and said that he hadn't slept much the night before. We both said that we were really happy to have met.

"I think that our meeting is not luck," Luis told me, smiling and pointing up to the sky. "Destiny," I agreed. Luis remarked that I am one of America's blessed men. I swept my hand back and forth between us and said, "What we see is what we are." He laughed and touched my arm.

I love Luis' courage, his zest for life, and his extravagant, erotic Latin passion. His eyes sparkle like stars in a dark sky, and he speaks from a universal soul, even as his body suffers with cancer and its treatment. I can't wait to begin practicing the shakuhachi tango, and I'm reminded of a bumper sticker that a friend gave me when he heard that I was writing a book about the Holy Trinity. I had told my friend that I was writing about how human beings are created in the image of the Trinity, and that, according to ancient Christian tradition, the Trinity is a dance-around of love. I told him that you can't understand the Trinity unless you *are* the Trinity. "A tall order," he said. And I replied, "Well, then we have to grow taller." So, that's what each of us is, deep down: a dance-around of love. The bumper sticker reads, *Trinity is a Tango*. And we are that tango, too.

Along comes a that is particularly difficult, and I find myself wrestling with a bout of depression, exacerbated by a horrible trip to Boston. I drove the car myself and kept running into red lights, roadwork crews, and single lanes. Then a traffic accident ahead of me on Storrow Drive left me standing still for ten minutes. Although I had given myself extra time to get to the hospital, I still had some moments of anxiety as I sat in the car. What was this angst all about? In part, I feared that

if I missed a radiation appointment, I would need to live in Boston for an extra day, and would miss returning to the Pioneer Valley to chair a Board meeting of the Kestrel Land Trust. But there was something else, too. While stuck in traffic I glimpsed a memory that had come up in one of my therapy sessions years ago. My dear mother, who died of ovarian cancer in 1979 when she was in her mid-50's, once told me that her labor with me went on for two days, and that eventually the doctors decided to do a Cesarean Section because my heartbeat was faltering.

With that memory I also recalled a that I often experienced as a child. I'd wake up in a sweat of terror after dreaming of what seemed like a never-ending expansion of brightly colored circles arising ahead of me. In the dream I felt caught in a whirlpool of surging waves that appeared to be going somewhere, but in fact went nowhere. The dream was scarily impersonal. I was alone and trapped, and could never get out.

As an adult, I sometimes become and can feel as if my survival is at stake. If the Christian perception of our identity is true – that we are created to be a holy dance-around of love -- this feeling of being entombed stops the music and interrupts the dance. Associating present feelings to my birth experience makes sense to me and helps me perceive a deep continuity in my life. But I also know that asking *why* something is happening isn't always the best way to understand it or to solve a problem. One of my favorite medieval mystics, Meister Eckhart, counseled people to “live without a why.”

As I sat in the car, breathing my panic, I could hear Eckhart telling me, “Just be in this present moment and don't go searching after a cause.” I chuckled when I remembered the Bob Newhart skit from his television show, when he plays a psychotherapist who has invented a new way of dealing with problematic emotions, thought-patterns, and behaviors. He simply shouts at his patients: “Stop it!” Good luck with that.

As I write about it now, I can see the deep meaning behind the anxiety that comes up for me when I drive in traffic, and I can see the humor, too. I also know how to deal with this over the long run: notice the anxiety, soften into it, relax in the moment, and breathe from the belly--no matter if the traffic is slow or fast, or the light is green or red. So I have a very practical game plan for dealing with anxiety, one that I learned from Buddhist meditation teachers.

I also see the psychological and spiritual at work here. When I am very quiet and relaxed I notice that I long to be seen, known and loved, just as I am. No need for defense or pretense. In my helplessness as a victim of cancer I have glimpsed the young boy in me who needs a mommy. And I am also an adult who recognizes an even deeper longing for the One who creates all mommies and daddies, along with the cosmos! In such moments I know that our existence is nourished by an ever-present immense Mystery. I have faith in the Immensity, however you want to name it -- as God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Holy Mother, Buddha, my dear Far-nearness, or simply the One who gives me life. I know where to go with my anxiety: I need to acknowledge the child in me, and I also intend to pray with these feelings that transcend my personal life and family. I need to let myself be embraced by unconditional love.

That said, I need to balance the conditional everyday world and the unconditional, spiritual one. I know the danger of spiritual bypass--the temptation to downplay very immediate practical and relational difficulties so that I don't have to deal with them --the temptation to ascend into the heavens in an attempt to escape the reality of my relationships and responsibilities. As I drive home, I realize that I

need to sort some things out with my wife. After all, she had offered to drive me to the hospital. Why hadn't I accepted? At the time I was ambivalent, both wanting a ride and knowing that she was preparing a talk on climate change; I wanted to give her some time and space. Who am I to stand in the way of saving our planet from self-destruction? Am I being selfish or weak if I ask for help?

I notice that I desperately want things to be normal despite my illness, I'm basically O.K. It's life as usual with a small twist called cancer. But the truth is that I'm not O.K. I need help, and it's hard for me to ask. I'm a guy and I can handle it. After all, I grew up near Green Bay, Wisconsin, in the shadow of Lambeau Field and the Green Bay Packers. I was the captain of our championship high school football team, and now I own a share of this community-owned team. I'll always remember the game when the Packers' star linebacker Ray Nitschke broke his forearm and coach Vince Lombardi took him out. Well, Ray wouldn't accept that. At the sidelines he instructed the medic to give him a shot and a splint, and then he bounded back into the game. Ray was my generation's model of a real man.

But then there is Luis. Luis calls his wife, "my mommy." He said, "She does everything for me: reminds to take my meds, makes my appointments, cooks the right foods, helps me to fall asleep. I couldn't do this without her." I cringe when I hear these things, because I'm a man who experienced the feminist revolution. We men will bring home a salary and fix the plumbing and the car, but now we also master childcare, laundry and relationships. We can do it all. Nevertheless! This cancer diagnosis renders me transparent to the guy I really am: when I feel trapped and abandoned, I want a mommy to take care of me. It's embarrassing, but true. I take comfort in one of Eckhart's teachings, "Expect God evenly in all things." Whether young or old, strong or weak, competent or needy, expect God right here and always now.

When I investigate this mommy need I wonder, who is this? My actual mother has passed away and Luis' path is not my own: my wife is not my mother. When I allow myself to relax into the deep primitive need for a mother, I cry, and in the tears I feel released into love. Simply opening to the longing and the need seems to fulfill them. I am a case study of one person, seeking to learn from everything that is happening to me and perhaps making some conclusions. I have to consider the possibility that all my feelings, memories and perceptions are being fueled by the drugs and radiation. I have to take everything I think and feel with a grain of salt. It's all part of the conditioned world, but now I'm pretty much walking on faith, on the Unconditioned world beneath all this. Maybe I'm feeling more vulnerable these days because the Lupron drug has stripped the testosterone out of my body. Is a man's aggressive, empowering can-do spirit just a testosterone-induced trance? Do men with low testosterone levels become uninterested in football? Do we men regress to a child-like state when our testosterone is taken away? I see research possibilities.

So, after I arrive home from my bad day, I have made the tentative inner decision to talk with Margaret about what I'm feeling. Before dinner we sit next to each other at the kitchen table. I am silent. Margaret begins by saying, "What's happening with you? You're not talking but I feel that something is wrong." But I have to make a special effort to speak. I'm reluctant to tell her that I need more help. I actually have the thought, "Why should I have to tell her what I need? She should just see what I need and help!" But I've been in the psychotherapy business long enough to know that this is what a child naturally assumes about the mother. Mommy is the one who knows exactly what I'm thinking and feeling without my having to say a word--a perfect narcissistic mirror. The fantasy of mommy is that she provides for my needs even before I know what they are. I think that for adult

men this primitive psychological need be rooted in the greater Unconditioned reality. After all, St. Augustine's experience was that God knows us even better than we know ourselves. This feels right; I don't just want to be loved. I want to be loved infinitely and unconditionally. It was my mentor, Henri Nouwen who first alerted me to this important distinction in our loves. No relationship and no community can expect to work well if we direct our deep longing for the Unconditioned to other people.

But now, at the table, this is just me and Margaret. She may sometimes transmit God's love, but she is neither God nor my mommy. As I sit with her, I realize that I must speak my needs, but I feel as if I'm struggling through a deep field of mud. I hate feeling helpless and needy! So, I begin to talk, but at first I can't look at Margaret as I speak. I'm too exhausted and embarrassed. Gradually we open up to each other about the strain of our situation. Margaret shares her grief about what we've lost because of my cancer. I can't handle some of the many tasks required to make our multi-leveled life works smoothly. Two of the drugs that I take list dizziness as a side effect. I don't feel dizzy, but I'm more likely now to drop things and lose things. I have to make a special effort to be mindful. I can't multi-task as I did six months ago. But the greatest loss for Margaret and me concerns our intimate life together. The cancer treatments are attacking my prostate, the hormones are suppressing my testosterone production, and my libido has crashed around me.

Throughout our thirty-year relationship, making love has been an important way for us to connect with each other and to express our love. Now, my whole physiology will be affected by the treatments for at least two years. Sitting together at the kitchen table, we feel the grief, and cry. We hug and are comforted by saying and hearing, "I love you." And we talk about the challenge of continuing to communicate our desires and needs in the midst of this situation of loss and change. I feel so grateful to know this woman who so clearly and dearly loves me, and I her.

In my pre-diagnosis life, I developed certain convictions about what it means to be a man. Now those convictions are dissolving. Who am I as a man? Every guy with prostate cancer faces questions like these.

A few days ago I walked into the waiting room and saw a new guy, a 50-ish Black man, sitting quietly, looking down at the floor. I said hi and he looked up. His face seemed expressionless and resigned.

"Are you here for prostate cancer?" I asked.

"Yes, just radiation after surgery."

"So you did surgery first?"

He glanced and replied, "Yes, they took out my prostate in November."

And then I saw profound sadness in his eyes. He sounded like a mother who had lost a child.

Becoming Known in the Dance-Around of Love

May 27, 2014 8:54am

I have now received my last treatment in the radiation oncology department of Brigham and Women's Hospital, level L2. This adventure began nine weeks ago, on March 18. I have watched a hard winter pass and have welcomed spring's appearance along the Charles River as we made the daily drive into Boston. Time has passed slowly and swiftly.

I bow all the way to the ground to all of you who have accompanied me in prayer. I am so happy to be on the ground, rather than under it. I am grateful to have this opportunity to live more years on this dear planet Earth with you.

My radiation oncology doctor, Dr. B., says that I have responded extremely well to the hormone-and-radiation protocol, and that my prognosis is "excellent." When I asked, "How do we know that the radiation is working?" she answered, "We don't." She meant that even though the signs are very good, and even though I'm officially in remission, we can't actually see the dead cancer, lying there with its feet in the air. We must go by secondary evidence. Still, the other day my oncology nurse told me, "You did beautiful," with her dear South Boston accent. I believe her.

In our last weekly meeting Dr. B. and I discussed side effects and what to expect going forward. I'll have suppressed libido for another two years, and some continued urinary dysfunction for a while, along with some fatigue. There are drugs for these things, but I hope I won't need them. I will have to see some follow-up doctors and nutritionists. My PSA has been knocked down to .03, which is negligible. Doctors expect it to slowly rise, and hopefully to hover at no more than about 1.00 for the rest of my life. That would be very good! I feel sad for all the men who watch that number rise after treatment and who fear for their lives. Perhaps I, too, will face this challenge some day. Uncertainty is built into all our lives, but a diagnosis certainly adds spice and a vivid aroma to what might seem like a bland and tasteless meal if we are sleepwalking our way through the cafeteria of ordinary time.

I like Dr. B. She is smart, knows her research, has a fine sense of humor, believes that doctors should cultivate their humanity in addition to their technical expertise, and is exacting in her instructions about what I need to do to get well. Last Thursday, when Margaret and I walked into my exit interview with her, she swung around in her swivel chair, shifting her attention from the computer screen to us. I noticed that she was wearing a snappy, multi-colored vest and a relatively short skirt, black fishnet stockings, and black high heels. As Margaret and I walked in, there were smiles all around. Without thinking, I said, "Wow, those are classy stockings!" Dr. B. dresses as a sexually alive person--which is ironic, since she treats hundreds of men whose libidos are repressed by the hormone therapy (she calls the Lupron injections "liquid castration"). Margaret and I both enjoy Dr. B., and I'll miss her as I move on to the medical oncologist, Dr. T.

Dr. B. asked how I was doing and what this experience had been like for me, and I felt that she was really listening. She checked her computer monitor occasionally, to report the good news on the medical front, but I also sensed that she was interested in me as a person. She said that she was getting to know both Margaret and me, and that we were fortunate to have the inner resources to deal with this

challenge. Margaret had given her a copy of Margaret's book, "Holy Hunger," the story of her recovery from an eating disorder, and she told Margaret that she loved it and had just recommended it to a patient that morning. I had given her a CD of my first shakuhachi album, "Blowing Bamboo," and she had just shown one of my YouTube nature-music videos to a doctor in training. Why had she done that? Because, she said, she wanted him to understand that his patients were people, too, with lives to live. Dr. B. suggested that I post a video on YouTube about the psychological and spiritual dimensions of prostate cancer treatment, for her to share with her patients. I may do that.

Dr. B. and I talked about the many different ways that men go through this challenging journey. Apparently, not many approach the experience as a spiritual practice or as prayer. Perhaps, we agreed, men face the threat of death in the same way that we have lived our lives. The fighters fight, the angry ones become bitter and resentful, the depressive become depressed, the pray-ers pray, the do-ers gather endless numbers of facts about the disease, the co-dependent ones worry about what others will think, the Whole Foods customers research the history of their nutrition to find the cause and cure of their cancer, and the retired psychotherapists analyze the situation and try to figure it out. Some of us do a little of each. I told her that the Blue Table had become an altar for me and that the radiation room had become my sanctuary. She smiled, perhaps knowingly. I didn't ask if she has a spiritual life.

When these intense treatments at Dana Farber began I did not know that I would be going on a spiritual retreat. I've been surprised to discover this unexpected doorway into the Divine life-- in the shadow of death and right in the midst of a behemoth medical complex. It's as if God were saying, "All right, you've done pretty well sticking with our relationship so far; I hope you can stay with me through this experience." A friendly challenge.

As I meditated and prayed on the Blue Table during radiations, I became more and more convinced that the Divine One is going through this experience with me and is sharing it from within me. I see no clear boundary between my personal life and history, and the Divine. I'm humble about this and see no self-importance in this perception. In fact, it's the opposite: my life and all creation is nothing at all because everything emerges out of the Divine, lives in the Divine and moves toward the Divine. This is not a big abstract idea for me, but something delicate and tender. My German Lutheran grandparents posted on their kitchen wall a small reproduction of Warner Sallman's painting of Jesus—the one where Jesus has gone out to find the lost lamb and now returns home, carrying the little creature on his shoulders. I, and we, are being carried in the Divine.

I often remembered this image on the Blue Table as I softened into a childlike trust. I trusted that when I prayed, my dear FarNearness was already here, and that whatever prayer or mantra came up, it was arising from deep within me and not just from my adult ego self. After all, I wasn't trusting myself. Once I had made the decision to entrust my life to this process at Dana Farber, I was—as they say in poker—all in. I chose to participate in something that seemed like a Beyond Within. Near as I could tell, I wanted what God wanted, and I didn't have to be somebody I'm not in order to feel this way. Henri Nouwen introduced me to this notion of faith, the idea that God isn't that interested in my image of myself but rather wants to share in who I really am, with all my personal history, and in the midst of my particular realities and responsibilities. Our true Self is always being carried, and the trick is not to fight it--not to try to carry ourselves.

So, the key challenge for me has been to surrender deeply into the reality of my situation, and to allow the real “me” to be seen by Ultimate Reality, and by my sacred teachers, Christ and Buddha. One of my Zen mentors, the Korean master, Seung Sunim, often said, “Don’t add anything.” Don’t add anything to who you are. No need to dwell in regret, self-abasement or envy. You’re adding these unpleasant qualities. The abilities and talents that you have are enough, and even if you aren’t an Einstein, Beethoven or Walt Whitman, your gifts are unique and will be eternally fruitful if you accept and practice them with a whole heart. Let all comparisons slide right on by. Trust God and yourself with the guileless heart of a child.

While Jesus challenged his disciples to the highest levels of adult responsibility and wisdom, he also taught them to trust like children: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:3-5).

I have felt terror and anxiety, especially in the first month after diagnosis, but I have never thought, “I wish I didn’t have cancer.” Normally, when I get bad news I protest first and get to the grief later, but when I received the diagnosis by phone in December I fell straight into a deep well of grief. Margaret, on the other hand, stood strong in protest in her heart. She didn’t want this to be happening and she identified with an angel of protest and protection. She told me later that she wanted to throw herself in front of the radiation beams “because I love you and I couldn’t bear to see you be hurt.” I feel so fortunate to receive her love.

I’m also fortunate that I haven’t gotten stuck in the psychic flypaper question, “Why me?” From the moment I received the scary diagnosis, my deep intention has been to follow through on Meister Eckhart’s suggestion to “expect God evenly in all things,” and the advice of several medieval Zen masters, who said, “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.” Oh my, this is difficult, and yet I find this advice easier to follow than trying to deny or fight with reality. I often say to myself, “I have cancer,” and I try to plumb the meaning of it for me.

Practicing childlike faith as an adult is a continual process of discernment: What is in my control and what is up to God or other people? As I let go on the Blue Table, I remembered and imagined the presence of all those friends (like you!) who said that they were praying for me, and I allowed their prayers to carry me, because I could not carry myself. I practiced letting go of fixing myself, and instead I trusted my dear FarNearness, and all those who trust in prayer. I imagined the countless people all over the planet who had trusted in prayer and who were praying for others right now, and I relaxed into that invisible, global community. Our hidden bond is the ark that keeps us afloat on dangerous seas.

Before my diagnosis I was a type A, ambitious, multi-tasking, service-oriented person. I still am. I get a lot done. But cancer has confronted me with my absolute limits, and in all the ways that count, there is nothing I can do to change this. I have cancer. Every day for over two months I had to show up at the Blue Table, and it didn’t matter what I wanted or how I felt at the moment. This was my practice and discipline, to be faithful and loyal to reality.

Now I am officially in remission, but there is no guarantee that all the cancer cells have been killed. Many could still be hiding out within my body, waiting to infiltrate my healthy cells. Looking back, I can now see the pride that I once took in being healthy. I thought that I could keep myself safe by doing

the right things – by eating well, exercising, and living a good-enough, morally defensible life. Maybe I was judgmental, sometimes thinking that only other people get cancer. And perhaps they contracted cancer because they hadn't taken care of themselves. Cancer has shown me (once and for all, I hope) that I am an everyman and am susceptible to all the suffering that others are working with.

Cancer has shown me that ultimately I can't save myself, I want to keep this in mind as I go forward -- to change what needs changing, accept what I cannot change, protest what can be helped by protest, and surrender to the great compassionate power of healing that the Creator has built into the evolutionary process. Moment to moment discernment is the rudder on this ark. When I can't follow through on this commitment I will probably fall back on this slight adjustment to the Serenity Prayer:

God grant me the coffee to change the things I can
and the wine to accept the things I cannot. ☺

Over the years I have prayed and have cultivated the discipline of mindfulness. The latter skills have helped me to spot the Go-getter Controller and Fixer more quickly, before he can take total control my life and lead me away from my dear FarNearness. My discipline is to notice the Controller as soon as he rounds the corner, and to pay him no mind. To pay him mind is to give my mind away to him.

So, I often cried on the Blue Table, feeling how alone and helpless I am in the great impersonal sweep of evolutionary time. I have cried tears of pure gratitude for my mother who bore me, for my grandparents who took me in when my beloved parents descended into alcoholism, anxiety and violence, and for all those who love and support me now. Each tear sang "Thank you," and by the time a radiation session was over and I heard the operators come through the door, my tears had expressed a chorale of love that cannot ever be repeated. Every song of love is unique, and yet they are all linked across time in the heart of the Divine.

These flowing symphonies have moved through many rooms of the deep caves that make up my personal history. Scenes from my past have circulated through my awareness and have been blessed. It seemed to me that the Divine Life was being lived through me: me being melted and transformed by the Divine sculptor and the Divine re-discovering what it is like to be a mortal, suffering human being.

My little "I"--with all my personal history--often felt completely dissolved in love. It didn't matter whether a particular event had been painful or joyous, clear or confusing, lovely or ugly, or whether it had taken place in childhood or adulthood. Every experience I had ever had at any age was waiting to be blessed and resolved.

At the same time, I have great respect for the unconscious and the unknown. Countless events in my past did not appear to me on the Blue Table, and I don't know what is ahead. At the moment, I am O.K. with a huge expanse of Not Knowing. Like dark energy that cannot be seen but comprises most of the known universe, my dear FarNearness is conscious of everything everywhere. This thought comforts me. What is not known and can never be known, is known, and known from the heart of creative, evolutionary love.

As I opened myself to those moments when the radiant beams of Love rode into me on the backs of the gamma rays, my life became an open book. The laser cross of red florescent light that shown down on me was slowly, ever-so-carefully, passing over every experience I've ever had, burning away the inessential. I could not see this happening directly; I entrusted my life to this faith.

This perception still lives in me: I love being alive, and I realize that I would not have to be alive. From the broadest possible perspective, the chances of me being here in this moment are about zero; the chances of any of us being here are about zero. So, this is an astonishing and awesome thing, to be present to each other now, through these reflections. I care deeply for my family, home, neighbors and fellow workers in the environmental work that I do, especially at the Kestrel Land Trust in western Massachusetts. I do not want to die. When I do die, I will be dead for a long time! So, every moment is precious and everything that I am and have, is a gift from an infinite Source. My cancer diagnosis has challenged me to realize that I possess nothing on my own, and that I have nothing to prove or to hide. My life has been given to me, and the One who gives everything in the cosmos is a conscious, knowing and loving Source. The Divine One sees all of me from within me, and I feel most fulfilled when I see myself through the eyes of God who sees through my own eyes.

As I do this--or as this happens in me--I discover that everyone is found in my own solitary depths. The message of our unique belovedness is sent equally to everyone. By its divine nature, belovedness is a shared experience. The more I "get" that I am especially beloved by the Divine origin of all things, the more I realize that everyone, and all creatures, are equally beloved. This reality instantly dissolves any ego-tripping or narcissism. We mortals are all in the same boat on this planet rotating in empty space, and the whole shebang is longing to receive and to radiate love in every direction (Mark 16:15 and Romans 8:19).

I have reflected on the irony that that while I had never felt so alone with my life and personal history, I also realized myself as totally connected with life and completely accompanied by others and by the Divine. It seems true that the more I accept my aloneness, the more I realize that I am not alone --SO not alone that I am sometimes more with everyone when I am alone than when I am physically with them. The narrow gate of personal suffering opens up to a vista of Divine Life in which nothing and no one is left out. Our "I" becomes a "we" that is a dance of love. This was one of the most beautiful results to emerge from the early Christian Councils (4th and 5th centuries), the characterization of the Holy Trinity as a perichoresis (Greek: dance-around of love). Non-Christian spiritual paths may have different names for this ultimate reality, but it is the same dance of compassion and love that we all long for. We tend to forget that we are created in this image and that this is what our brief lives are all about. It's so easy to be distracted by our immediate problems and by the flow of 24/7 information and entertainment. We tend to forget that Divine Love is here and already transforming our pain into itself. Realizing this brings me to tears of grief and joy. Joy, because to live in love is joyful, and a tender sorrow because everything we love is passing, just as we are passing.

Finally, I want to share with you the image of a painting by Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530), an Italian painter from Florence. My friend, Rob Hirschfeld, Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, says that it is the only well-known painting of the Risen Christ after his death and before he left the tomb. The original painting is in beautiful color, but as I contemplate this holy figure, it appears in my heart in this B&W sort of rose light, with this frame. (See photo section of this Journal)

As I lay down every afternoon on the Blue Table at Dana Farber Cancer Institute and received radiation treatment for prostate cancer, I identified with this image of Jesus. Each day, after I was precisely placed on the Blue Table in the crosshairs of the red laser light that radiated down from the ceiling, I could lift my head and see the red cross shining just above my pubic bone. And I could imagine del Sarto's painting. Having died, Jesus awakens and instinctively looks down at his wounds, but something unbelievable has happened. He doesn't quite understand what these wounds are about or how he can now be alive. He has awakened to a new Risen life, and he is astonished, apprehensive and full of a subtle Light. He is embodied, but now he is somehow transparent to the Light and less solid.

Now, when Jesus gets up off the stone ledge, he is utterly changed. He is no longer just the mortal Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus Christ--the one whose body and mind radiate Divine Light. In his farewell address in the Gospel of John (chapters 14-17), Jesus tells his friends that his new life is now theirs and that everything he has, and is, now belongs to them. When we understand that the Incarnation is meant for everyone, we see that our wounds are gateways to the Light. We are only ourselves, yet now we are infinitely more. Eternal life is not "later," but now. And nothing of ourselves is left out.

My Buddhist teachers have called my attention to living in this present moment, now and now and now, and then noticing how everything is continuously changing from moment to moment. But my mind wants to stop the world in order to feel secure, to have a handle on things. The Controller within me wants his way to be the way. But still, it's true that everything, including myself, is impermanent. Everything is changing all the time. In 1 Peter 1:24 we read that

All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,
and the flower falls. . . .

How can we feel safe and trusting in the midst of constant change? On the Blue Table each day it seemed to me that the molecules of my body--which give me some duration of recognizable form--are constantly shifting, morphing and changing. I realized that while I can make certain minor adjustments to my physical form, some power beyond me is keeping me together. I realized that I needed to trust this power to keep re-forming me as "Jonas," even while the killing gamma rays were entering my prostate from every angle, every day for over two months.

While I lay on the Blue Table, I sometimes recalled the awesome reality that while the radiation machine rotates around me, the Table, this hospital and this city are dwelling on a small planet that is rotating in empty space in the midst of a cosmic and evolutionary cycle that is measured in billions of years, with no end in sight. I realized that as far as we know, change is eternal and eternally creative, and is happening right now, and right now, and right now. Everything is passing—and hopefully, this cancer is passing sooner than later. And yet, even in the midst of this flux, I am so grateful for duration, grateful for the experience of chronological time, grateful to have a life that has extended sixty-seven years so far. I still long for something solid and unchanging, and it's clear that the only thing to lean on



is Divine Love. All those whom I love are always living in this eternal Love, and nothing and no one is ever lost.

I have moments of fearing death—especially when I consider saying goodbye to the people, communities and natural settings that I so deeply love. But the stronger feeling is a creative, grieving love that is both unchanging and always new. This Love comes from the Beyond Within, and it radiates from our dear FarNearness who will carry all of us into the heart of our ultimate longing. For me, that longing is to join in the infinite dance of evolutionary love that is always changing and timeless.

Now that I have finished my radiation treatments, I have an opportunity to get to work and to practice what I've learned from them in every detail of my relationships and community and social responsibilities.

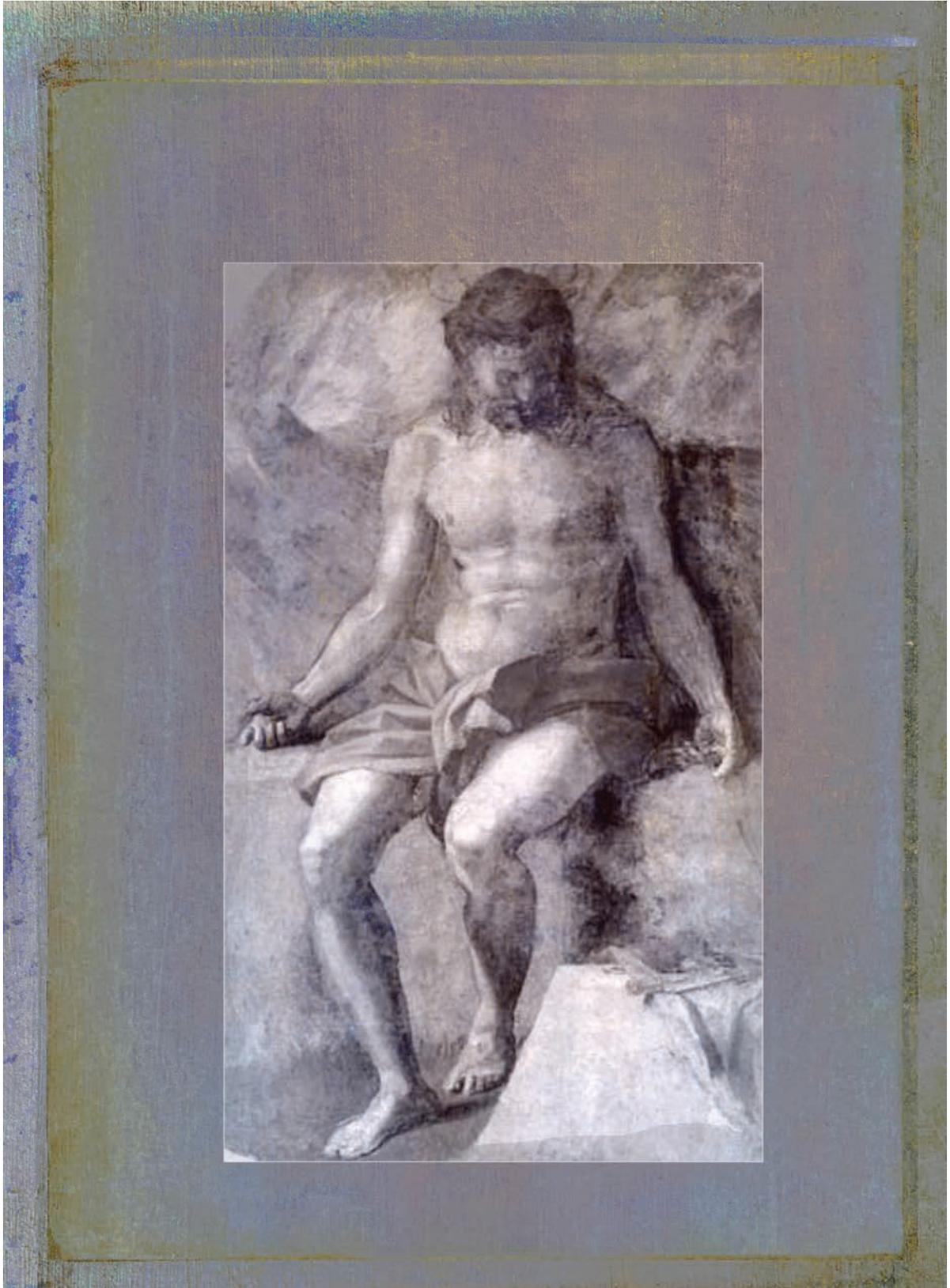
And now this, from our gifted poet of the Infinite, Rainer Maria Rilke:

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
so that what no one has dared to wish for
may for once spring clear
without my contriving.
If this is arrogant, God, forgive me,
but this is what I need to say.

May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.

-Rainer Maria Rilke, Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God (Translation Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy)



Painting by Andrea del Sarto (1486–1530). Re-imaged colors and border by Robert A. Jonas.

Refreshing honesty

Mar 29, 2014 11:13am

Yesterday I changed into the blue pajamas and walked alone into the waiting room. Only one person in the waiting room today, a heavy-set man in his 60's who sat with his hands folded on his lap. He looked down at the floor with a blank stare, but I knew that I had no clue what he might be feeling. I asked, "prostate cancer?" He looked at me without changing his expression and said, "Yep." I figured this would be a short conversation, but I took the risk, that maybe he'd have more to say.

"Can I ask where you are in the process?"

"Day thirty-eight. Just three more days,» he said.

"How are you doing with all this," I asked. "They say that toward the end of the radiation, you get a lot of fatigue. Is that true for you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't notice much. Everyone says that I'm lazy anyway, so it's hard to tell." heart



Comments

First week of Radiant Light Therapy!

Joel Russell — Mar 22, 2014 1:45pm

What a beautiful meditation on being in the moment! I can hear your heightened awareness of all that is around you and all that is fresh and precious in life. It reminded me of how I felt after my first child was born, walking around and seeing everyone with new eyes, seeing them as the infants that once came into the world so new, as beings of infinite potential and emotional range, beginning lives of possibility, but bounded by the inevitable finitude of human existence. Thanks for the reminder that seeing with new eyes is always possible at any point in our lives, but it must be heightened so much when one passes through the place you currently occupy. Blessings to you my friend. May you maintain this state of attunement and awareness. - Joel

Sarah Bullitt — Mar 22, 2014 3:56pm

Lovely, Jonas.

May your experience continue to be a blessing for you of opening your awareness to the clarity of seeing the Reality of Love that envelops the wondrous preciousness of every moment. A beautiful gift for all of us to partake in with you.

Daniel Shanahan — Mar 22, 2014 8:04pm

Jonas, taking your heart for a walk! What a great way to be in the world!
Happy you are finding a groove in the city.

Sunday, looking into Week #2

Sarah Bullitt — Mar 23, 2014 11:41am

Beloved Jonas, thank you so much for sharing the details of your experience.

You may find, as I have found in numerous situations in which I was ostensibly the vulnerable one, that you become the Doctor of the doctors, you are the Healer of the healers around you. A curious flip occurs in identity, when you bring a deeper wisdom into the environment. Even as you feel you are the one who is helpless and “done to”, you realize an energy of powerful love going through you that humbles those around you who are in the social position of control. They then turn to you for self-affirmation, guidance, teaching. It is quite extraordinary. I would guess you have already experienced this...

Much love



Linda Michaels — Mar 23, 2014 6:23pm

Dear Jonas,

Thank you for sharing this with us. I will set my phone alarm for 1:40 and say a prayer for you every day Monday through Friday. My prayer will be that you feel your angel with you and that you feel with you as the doctors and nurses leave the room, the Love of everyone who has known and loved you in the past, and the Love of everyone who knows and loves you now, and the Love of everyone who will know you and who will love you in the future. Our Love will be there with you to support you. "May the Good Shepherd lead you into peace of heart, into hopeful thinking, into strength of will, health of body, harmony of soul and clarity of spirit, now and in the time to come." (This is one of my favorite prayers adapted from Adam Bittleston.) Much love to you and Margaret.

Roger Pierce — Mar 23, 2014 7:22pm

Eloquent. Graceful. Hopeful.

John McDargh — Mar 23, 2014 9:19pm

Dear Jonas: I am here in Newton Centre..if you need a place to stay (though I take it that is perhaps squared away), or want company on one of those 39 visits to the Table, please let me know. Meanwhile, my friend. .you and Margaret are in the heart of my prayer. Courage,
John

Steven Abdow — Mar 24, 2014 11:42am

Thank you for letting us in on your journey through this journal. You are an inspiration.

Richard Borofsky — last edited Mar 28, 2014 9:34am

Birds of Prayer

For Jonas

We are many.
Migrating
from a cold hemisphere,
from continents beyond oceans,
from far off hearts
(where we are no longer needed)
tireless miles flying.

Finally coming to roost
in the just-budding branches
of a red maple tree
outside
your bedroom window,
that is the nesting place
of your most intimate need.

Perched and chirping,

we sundry, wingéd pilgrims
offer you our prayers:

May you be uplifted,
like kestrels circling
high in the sky blue silence,
riding the prayer of warm air rising.

May you be still as
the iridescent hummingbird,
suspended in mid-prayer--
before you,
the length of a blessing away.

May your love have the loft of the condor;
talons for faith from the peregrine.

May your losses compose a songbird's call,
and your longings be fledged and preened.

May you move through your life as we move through air.
May you become a bird of prayer.

---Rich Borofsky

Week #2 eagles & lasers

Erik Hoffner — Mar 28, 2014 10:20am

Beautiful writing about a challenging routine, Jonas. Thank you.

Roger Pierce — Mar 28, 2014 11:35am

Perhaps there is one great eagle carrying you through the air as the others do their work. Float...

Linda Michaels — Mar 28, 2014 12:34pm

Archangel Michael is the greatest slayer of dragons that I know Jonas. I hope you call on him to be there with you. You are in my thoughts and prayers...

John McDargh — Mar 28, 2014 1:03pm

Thinking of you offering your heart on the Blue Table today Jonas, and the metaphor of the rescuing eagles ,then those familiar words: "An I shall lift you up on eagles wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of my hand.." with love, John

Sarah Bullitt — Mar 29, 2014 12:45pm

Oh, dear Jonas. So beautiful.
These journal entries could be your next book.
Much l

Steven Abdow — Mar 29, 2014 1:22pm

Thank you, Jonas, The treatment room as a sacred place. I can sense that.

Rob Hirschfeld — Mar 31, 2014 6:36pm

I think I'll find a yoga music station on Pandora to listen in solidarity with you, Jonas. The Blue Table is really an altar the way you envision and describe it. May the Spirit continue to hallow this work you are doing. Sending love your way!

Judith Eiseman — Apr 3, 2014 8:31am

This really is a graphic and beautiful picture you paint.
heart

Birds of Prayer

Margaret Bullitt-Jonas — Apr 2, 2014 8:21pm

It is a privilege to share this journey with you, Jonas. I like to imagine those child-sized, playful crows, wrestling and laughing, praising God and inviting you to join the dance.

Sue Mosteller — Apr 2, 2014 8:23pm

Jonas,
Your words are so inspiring and hope filled, and they touch me deeply. It seems to me you are capturing this moment in time, not just to ponder, but to penetrate the deep questions, both of humanity but also of the universe itself. I love, "as we become more and more who we are, we are becoming each other." So radically true. So, dear Jonas and Margaret, we 'abide' in each other, and it's a privilege to share this profundity with you - and so many others. Thanks for writing. Thanks for living it this way.
Loads of love,
Sue

Richard Borofsky — last edited Apr 3, 2014 12:11am

Dear Jonas,
Thank you for your deep receiving and appreciation of us and our love. Our love and the love of all who know you upwells in response to your keen listening. Your vulnerability in the face of finitude has hollowed and hallowed you into a beautiful human chalice, holding the wine of our love's communion.

Abounding and abiding love,

Rich

Sarah Bullitt — Apr 3, 2014 5:38am

How beautiful Jonas. This is the wisdom of the shaman, the visceral embodiment of Love in animal form.

Georgene L. Wilson — Apr 3, 2014 8:57am

Dear Jonas,

Have made the connection and now have read you BIRDS OF PRAYER. It is also heartening to think of the Eagle story I sent to you yesterday being akin to your entry here on Caring Bridge. It is so akin to your entry, that I had not even seen!!!!!! It reveals to me that we are one!!!! So I will continue to be with you and Margaret intuitively and with love.

Blessings,
Georgene

Erik Hoffner — Apr 4, 2014 12:49pm

Prophetic dream about the crows. Wise beings, message carriers. And smart, western science just declared that they're as smart as your average 7 year old child.

Jeff Utter — Apr 8, 2014 3:16pm

Jonas,

I'm trying again to post on caring bridge--have not been successful so far. Thank you for sharing this latest report. You know how I have tired you out with my theological arguments in the past, so I will refrain from such, but I will add one thing from my own experience. When I was doing shamanic journeying, one of the two power animals that came to meet me and promised to accompany me and watch out for me was Crow. When I did research later on crow symbolism, I discovered that the crow became in Western history a symbol for the Virgin Mother. Understandably, since actual crow mothers are very good mothers. Your dream would indicate that you are receiving the best possible nurturing and relational care from on high.

Bob McGahey — Apr 10, 2014 9:42am

Thank you for this sharing, bringing me into heart-depth as had not yet happened on a busy, somewhat anxious day. I'd love to see your friend's poem. My soul too, survived Harvard, and I was delighted to learn after I was admitted to Emory Grad Inst of Liberal Arts that they had a rich program in continental philosophy (14 years after Harvard), exploring questions that were no longer relevant to Harvard philosophers. I wish you healing at the altar of the Blue Table, Jonas.

Becoming Transparent: the upside and downside

Georgene L. Wilson — Apr 10, 2014 11:16am

Dear Jonas,

Oh, I have a hunch that your shining will pour through all these bandages! You may think that you are becoming invisible but you will still be a visible heart radiating to the hearts of all whom you engage, even through windshields and CaringBridge messages.

AND ALSO, you are becoming so aware of the violence of even thinking ill of another, or of part of ones own self. This is Wisdom. Illness grants those who attend consciously, a PhD in "Awakening to Our Finitude Held in Infinity's Graciousness". From my own experience with death-dealing MRSA over a

5 year span of time, I received an extravagantly abundant rinsing in the grace of trusting the Ultimate to always be enough daily bread. Bless all whom you engage, and all their relations, in the drive from Cambridge to Boston with your deep silence. This is the service, ministry and companionship we can offer even when we seemingly have no energy. The journey into transparency is wild!!!!!!!

Watch that water bubble rising from the rock!!!!

Be safe on those streets and continue to breathe trust as a witness to MORE for all of us.

Lots if love,
Georgene

Sarah Bullitt — Apr 10, 2014 11:28am

In my experience, tender compassion and gentle touch is all we really want. We are all so vulnerable, needing reassurance and to feel safe. The grace as I see it is to see through the hurtful behaviors in ourselves and others as a poignant expression of this need.

Rob Hirschfeld — Apr 10, 2014 11:59am

Dear Jonas,

As usual, you bring light to my day, even as you share your experience of darkness. As I get more involved with the efforts to repeal the death penalty in NH, I am becoming more and more attuned to the courseness, brutality, and unkindness of our world. You may feel yourself covered in BandAids, but in spite of that, your true self, and your deepest light, seems to shine ever more brightly. Love, R

Sue Mosteller — Apr 10, 2014 12:01pm

Your insights are compelling and inspiring. Beat-a-beat-a-beat and it's so precious and so long and so short. What does it all mean? This amazing, full, spectacular journey that is but a instant in the heart of our loving God. Mystery and comprehension and mystery again. Much love and thanks for all of it and the way you choose to be IN it.

David Frenette — Apr 10, 2014 4:40pm

Jonas,

I will recognize you by your bandages.

Love, David

Jeff Utter — Apr 10, 2014 10:00pm

Jonas,

I'd like to quote a few of the sentences in this your latest journal entry when I preach to my congregation on Sunday. As you may know, the lectionary epistle for Palm/Passion Sunday is Philippians 2: 5-11. I've had many fine spiritual friends and mentors. Yet none of them has taught me as much, over the years, as you have about the kenosis, the self-emptying, to the point of being able to sport only bandages, after having what is inessential torn away and burned off. Then I also recalled I Peter 4, where the ordeal is spoken of which comes precisely to the faithful: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed." I know that biblical words

like these can be taken as easy pious rationalizations and even self-glorifications. But what you write, and who you are, removes such far from you. Thank you so very much for sharing your bandaged self so completely with us.

Daniel Shanahan — Apr 11, 2014 3:56pm

Hey Jonas,

I identify with you completely on the traffic and pace there...why I headed out here in '98.

Hope you find the pelting song of new spring rain refreshes you. The space between each drop the one Heart of the One Who Is Always Open. The earth is as thirsty as my soul for these waters of the spirit that fall without hesitation into each empty cup.

Miss you. SEE you Sunday I hope!

Erik Hoffner — Apr 11, 2014 7:31pm

Well said.

Margaret Bullitt-Jonas — Apr 11, 2014 9:20pm

Jonas, I am glad that you know that you are wrapped in kindness, and I pray that those gentle, healing cloths will protect you every step of the way. I am glad that we're back in the Pioneer Valley tonight, relishing a spring rain and knowing that above the clouds, the stars are shining.

Die Before I Die

Richard Borofsky — Apr 15, 2014 9:32pm

Breathing in, I hug
our suffering--yours, mine.
Breathing out, I weep.

John McDargh — Apr 15, 2014 9:32pm

Dear Jonas: As ever I am moved by your clarity about what your soul needs, even if your body says "not so much". As I read your account with this sense you have shared that what is being burned off at the least is the protective outer shell so that you are wounded and grieved by all the expressions of pain or anger around you. Then I thought of these lines fro the desert Abba Isaac the Syrian:

What is a merciful heart? It is a heart on fire for the whole of creation, for humanity, for the birds, for the animals, for demons, and for all that exists. By the recollection of them the eyes of a merciful person pour forth tears in abundance. By the strong and vehement mercy that grips such a person's heart, and by such great compassion, the heart is humbled and one cannot bear to hear or to see any injury or slight sorrow in any in creation. For this reason, such a person offers up tearful prayer continually even for irrational beasts, for the enemies of the truth, and for those who harm her or him, that they be protected and receive mercy. And in like manner such a person prays for the family of reptiles because of the great compassion that burns without measure in a heart that is in the likeness of God.

Joel Russell — Apr 16, 2014 4:25am

What a beautiful and moving meditation on the inner workings of the soul facing the death of the ego that must precede the death of the body. May you far outlive your ego! Your honesty and courage burn brightly - without the testosterone and the ego in the way, the purity of your soul pours forth. Your will is God's will and your meditations are God's gift to all who witness your sharing.

Judith Eiseman — Apr 16, 2014 5:55am

No words come, only a feeling of compassion to be shared silently with you, others, all.

Sarah Bullitt — Apr 16, 2014 6:30am

Dear Jonas,

Sending you boundless creativity to find the moves that will keep you flowing like seaweed with courage and love through this experience.

Sue Mosteller — Apr 16, 2014 7:39am

Jonas,

Yours is the most inspiring reading so far this Holy Week, so I thank you for your efforts - not only to 'live' it, but also to 'express' it for the rest of us. This morning at 5am, six of us - Sisters living together in a convent in Toronto - said "Goodbye," to one of us who is presently in surgery for a mastectomy. So her dying before she dies has begun anew, and are in solidarity with her in our own experience of the same - more or less - but real.

Thank you. Know of my love and prayers, and solidarity with you during this last month of the blue table. You are very close,

Sue

Steven Charleston — Apr 16, 2014 8:37am

Reading your words made me think of something I heard, something I think most people have heard: the brave person dies only once, the coward a thousand times. That came into my mind because I was drawn into your question of dying before we die; and I was seeing it through the lenses of your exhaustion. Isn't it courageous, and act of great willpower, just to get up and out the door? For men fighting what you are dealing with, the loss of even the most basic energy, that must be true. But it is not the testosterone courage of Rambo. It is the testosterone-less courage of the human heart, the desire to live into dying, to be present to the transformation, to be able to walk toward what is holy, to receive any blessing or offer of love in an active way, not passively waiting for it on the sofa, or even the Blue Table. I don't know if that saying about the brave man is true, and I don't think people are cowardly if they feel fear, but your writing always stirs up my mind to let these kinds of questions blow around like autumn leaves. How often I have felt like the panther in the poem. Being trapped in our own bodies, that's what it does feel like when we are sick or worn out...the body let's us down, it ceases to do the expected and we are cast into confusion and frustration. Isn't it a form of courage to walk? To climb stairs...to get out of bed...when we are carrying our bodies with us? What muscle is it that helps us to lift the weight of our own body...the heart? The mind? The soul? I think it is a strength, a courageous strength, that we have not named yet, something deep within us, something we identify as life. So if that is true, then you are filled with the courage of life. You have the strength of life within you, even if your drug dazed body

does not want to cooperate. You are as kind as you are brave, reaching out to help even your own weak self to rise up and see the love walking toward you. The love in the music that day in the cathedral. The love of your friends, your family, your God. Yes, I think you are an inspiration of courage to people like me because you remind me to stand up, as best I can, and to walk forward, as best I can, to welcome the light I see shining so clearly in your words.

Sally Popper — Apr 16, 2014 1:07pm

Thank you, Jonas, for a lovely post, written from a difficult place. Your self-emptying is profound, as you move towards transparency. What an opportunity, and during Holy Week, no less. That process can never be easy. Even Jesus felt abandoned. But I'd say there is no sense in which you are stuck! And perhaps the most any of us can hope is that when we die we are moving--towards light, towards the holy, towards transparency, towards the incarnation of love even as we lose the incarnation of physical life.

Robert Jonas — Apr 16, 2014 4:04pm

I just want to say Thank You to you, my dear friends, who give me courage when you see my courage, knowing that my courage comes from seeing your courage! I love you.

Daniel Shanahan — Apr 17, 2014 12:31pm

Jonas! A hard road this week. Know that I am thinking and praying for you, your name echos off the walls of the Edwards sanctuary.

So glad you found refuge with your flute and musicians at St. John's ...Park and Tremont...a pathway to joy in the midst of a dark day.

Old Stone Soup poet brother of mine, James Van L o o y, poet and mime has held labyrinth meditations there for decades. He is a servant of the poor. If you go back ask for James, tall, long haired brother of compassion.

Hey, have you gone to the Arboretum? The quiet grounds, bird choruses and early budding time may provide antidote to the machine and high tech blues. I am sure the magnolias, apple blossoms will be happy to see and BE with you. Could you stop in after Dana Farber? Play your Shaku ha chi to the flowers and plants of the earth in resurrection?

We love you. Your light scatters the darkness.

Danny

Linda Michaels — last edited Apr 18, 2014 9:00am

Dear Jonas,

Your friend George, your strong will to exercise, the chanting, your flute, the seals...thank you for sharing your reflections, your truth, your vulnerability. I offer in return my thoughts with love and these two prayers from Adam Bittleston:



the empty bell

“Blind is the soul
imprisoned deep
in weary flesh.

And spirit-will
is wrenched away
from living good.

But we may tread
the road the Christ
did follow then:

when all the wrong,
and all the pain
were gathered up

that He, the Lamb,
might bear for man
the bitter load,

and meet with man
the prince of hell
in the soul’s night.”

“Spirits of the Heights
have sent their messengers:
stones under our feet.
Upon the sustaining earth
may we be upright.

Spirits of the Heights
have sent their messengers:
flowers and trees around us.
Upon the living earth
may our hearts waken.

Spirits of the Heights
have sent their messengers:
birds and beasts about us.
Of all earth’s offspring
may we be guardians.

Spirits of the Heights

have sent their messengers:
Light and dark, life and death.
In all earth's changes
Christ may we find.”

In peace, love, faith, hope, solidarity, smiles, Light and everything good! Please ask Margaret to give you a hug from me Jonas! :>):>)
Linda

Bill Labich — Apr 20, 2014 11:07am

Jonas, through your open-warmheartedness, transparency, and courage, you help me see me (and the bigger we) in your experience. To be alive and in love with life and with the bigger whole and yet feel the loss at the same time...it's a kind of happy-sad Chris and I were actually describing to G this morning. I see in your writing, a will to keep the light of love in life so bright despite indignities (the blue table, zip testosterone, and your leaden-feeling legs). Thank you for taking the time to share and teach.
heart

I am You and You are Me and We are All Together

Judith Eiseman — Apr 22, 2014 5:25am

Yes.

Don Pachuta — Apr 22, 2014 6:23am

Profound and beautiful and inspiring as always. Of course, I can't resist tweaking you a bit to remind you that there are other Catholic priests in apostolic succession that are not Roman. :)
I look forward to seeing you in May
love and blessings, don

Ellen Bernstein — Apr 22, 2014 6:26am

Every time there's a caring bridge posting indicating an email from you, I get very excited, and wait till I have the time to really enjoy it before I settle in to read--like a kid squirreling away some decadent chocolate desert--to savor each bite, tucked away where no-one can see. I feel a little guilty enjoying your story so much. . . like how can derive so much pleasure in your words and heart when you've had to suffer so much through this cancer?
Each reading is somehow healing for me; your words open up my heart and i fill the fullness of life coursing through my body.
Thank you so much for offering yourself up and for sharing the intimacy of your experience; through you I get to live more deeply.
Sending love and prayers for a long full life; and looking forward to spending time with you and Margaret once you settle home again in NOHO--when all the flowers will be in full bloom..

Margaret Bullitt-Jonas — Apr 22, 2014 7:24am

Yes, what a priest does at every Eucharist -- lift up before God the ordinary, simple elements of life and receive them back as holy, as the very body of God -- is what everyone does when we offer our selves and lives to God: we give ourselves in love. At our best, when we feel most alive, all of us are priests, standing at that doorway between heaven and earth which is everywhere and nowhere. Thank you, Jonas, for keeping that doorway open in your own life and for encouraging us to do the same thing in our own lives. I hope that my day today will feel more like gifts placed lovingly on an altar and less like a miscellany of items heaped carelessly on a table.

David Frenette — Apr 22, 2014 7:29am

Your words, Jonas, give beautiful sound and texture to the quiet hallways of the cancer monastery. Your cry that you want to live is loud and clear. I, like Dawn, am with you in prayer, and grateful that your PSA readings are better. Love and blessings, David

Georgene L. Wilson — Apr 22, 2014 8:15am

Dear Jonas,

“You in me. I in you. We are one.”

This has been a mantra for me for the past 8 years. It was given to me while I was living through a 5 year journey of surgeries and procedures and medications to rid my body of MRSA. Thank you for using your limited physical energy to send this soul energized reflection/sharing/teaching to all of us. It is a precious personal realization that you offer as Eucharist to each of us. You are Eucharist! Your choice of title, “I am You and You are Me and We are All Together”, is a gift that further bonds you, in itself, to me. Thank You. Bless you.

May all the healing energies of earth pour into you body, enlighten your mind and wisen your spirit, now and forever.

Love,
Georgene

Sue Mosteller — Apr 22, 2014 1:18pm

Jonas, your reflections are so real, so human, so experiential, and I LOVE them. Thank you. Just as are the readings these days in Scripture - where Jesus rises without too much fanfare, without needing to prove he was right and the other guys were wrong, not needing to hear apologies from his disciples, but simply encountering people quietly in unsuspecting ways to say, “ You won’t be seeing me so much longer in my body, but my presence is ever with you, meeting you along the path, following all your life with interest and loving you every minute.”

Alleluia! He is risen and He is present. My love to you, brother Jonas. And love to Margaret.
Sue

Sarah Bullitt — Apr 22, 2014 5:10pm

Thank you, beloved Jonas. Amen. Alleluia!

Steven Charleston — Apr 22, 2014 7:19pm

Sometimes reading your words is like watching petals fall from a flower, one thought, one experience, one memory at a time. Or maybe its like falling leaves, Drifting images, coming down to Earth, each one holding a story of life within it, a moment in your life, full of hidden meaning, things you did not see then, not in the same way, but can see now, so clearly that it almost hurts. The face of Henri at Mass, the lean days as a grad student, the Blue Table. They are leaves, impressions, petals, pieces of a long story, a deep story, and each one is telling you (us) (me) something. The people at the cancer sanctuary are real people, they are the living parts of the story you are in now, but in the days to come, they will become the falling petals, the drifting leaves, of your next story. And I believe that story will go on, especially because you are seeing it so honestly now. Like you I have walked in different spiritual traditions. I am a Native believer; I have had my encounters with things for which there is no word in English. I have followed The Buddha and come to be blessed by his peace and wisdom. And I trail along with the Jesus followers, still trying to understand how such simple words could mean so much. Like you, I have tried to keep my eyes open. Like you I think I have seen a beauty in every tradition I have embraced, even seen it in some I have not followed. All of these combined spiritual visions are part of your healing; I think that is true. As much as the radiation or the acupuncture, they are healing you, making you stronger. Like Milk Thistle. Like bread and wine. Like the sutras. We are healed every day, in so many ways, if only we could see it. healed without effort, without energy. Just healed by touch, the feel of falling petals, the nearness of memories of life that become life, even when we think they are lost to us, dry as autumn leaves, faded as a flower.

Richard Borofsky — Apr 22, 2014 11:58pm

A Rilke poem for you, dear friend:

The Earnest Hour

Whoever is crying right now, somewhere in the world,
for any reason crying in the world,
cries for my sake.

Whoever is laughing right now in the night,
for any reason laughing in the night,
laughs with me.

Whoever is walking right now, somewhere in the world,
for any reason walking in the world,
walks toward me.

Whoever is dying right now, somewhere in the world,
For any reason dying in the world:
is looking at me.

--Rainer Maria Rilke, The Book of Images,
(translation by R. Borofsky)

Joel Russell — Apr 23, 2014 6:13am

Your vivid and beautiful experiences of letting go of the miscellany of life and its many stories, memories, and details to join in the unity of all that is - and your sharing of this with such an open heart - is a priceless gift and inspiration.

Daniel Shanahan — Apr 29, 2014 7:09am

Jonas, this passage is a guide book for body and soul, it brews a strong tea I can sip again and again. Surrendering, letting go, dissolving into the heart of hearts...Thank you for sharing.

Hope you catch some blooms and bird song at Arboretum. Treat the body to the aroma - therapy after the Radiant Light Therapy today.

Carla and I send our love live from the Valley!

The Red Cross of Laser Light, an Undeserved Grace

Rob Hirschfeld — Apr 30, 2014 11:23am

Dear Jonas,

What an amazing meditation! Thank you for your generosity in sharing these stunning insights into God's grace brought on my this journey into the wilderness. As I read about the women in the back of the chapel as you are being prayed over, and the pronouncement by one of them that you are healed, I immediately went to John's gospel account (Luke's as well) of the two angels at the empty tomb. You clearly have been having so many visits. The other image that comes to me is the rarest of artistic expressions. I know of only one (!) depiction of Jesus actually coming to Life within the tomb. It's Andrea del Sarto's "Cristo in Pietà," and it shows a man with head lowered, watching the life come back into his arms, legs, body. The fresco is muted, but I see it as a companion to the poem by Symeon the New Theologian.

You are rising anew, like wheat that springeth green. Love is doing that miracle all over again.
with love,
Rob

Sarah Bullitt — Apr 30, 2014 12:20pm

Dear Jonas,

Your last 3 sentences are what touch me most. Remembering a state of heightened consciousness can be so elusive, and so easily I have gone back to living as I did shortly after God has invaded my soul and radically changed my perception. My prayer for you, Jonas, is that you remember this experience for the rest of your life - well after this period of radiation is over and you resume "normal" activities and routines again. Very much love.

Richard Borofsky — Apr 30, 2014 12:42pm

OMG!!

With deep thankfulness for your sharing, your iridescent reflections of love in the form of Jonas.

Here is another Rilke poem I translated evoked by what you wrote:

I live my life in widening circles
that stretch out over all things.
Perhaps the last I will not fulfill,
But for all that I will try.

I am circling around God, around the immemorial tower,
and circling for a thousand years long;
and I still don't know: am I a falcon, a storm,
or a colossal song.

Georgene L. Wilson — Apr 30, 2014 12:49pm

Dear, wearied and enlivened Jonas,

You are so very alive to each day's experience within yourself, around yourself, beyond yourself and because of YOUR SELF!. Thank you for using the bit of energy that you have by sharing some of your ponderings of incarnational grace with us. I hold them as icons for gazing into and find them mirroring back to me gift, light, red crosses and burning fires and cooling blessings.

Holding you dearly,
Love,
Georgene

Steven Charleston — Apr 30, 2014 5:09pm

I want to share a simple image with you. I thought about it when I read all of the names that we give to that mysterious but very familiar Person who always seems to be around us, but also just beyond the light of our imagination. The image is the one I have for God. To me, She is our Grandmother. So I call her, Grandmother God. She is a being of infinite compassion and wisdom. She has seen it all, watched generations pass before her, carried heavy burdens, given life to others, helped her family through good times and bad.

Grandmother is an image in keeping with my Native tradition. I am from a tribe that traces our lives through the mother; children take the mother's name; families revolve around the elder matriarch of the household; women are called the "doctors" of the people. So seeing God as our Grandmother comes natural to me.

I wanted to share this thought with you because I believe it is the Grandmother who is watching over you now, leading you gently to deeper understandings, whispering in your ear at night, rocking you in her arms when you are afraid, showing you that life goes on far beyond the firelight vision we have in this place.

I know that you have a great deal of awareness of the sacred from many different traditions. Like you, I find the women saints of old Europe to be “doctors” of the people too. But I hope that my simple idea of picturing God as your great maternal power will be helpful to you, especially if you have had a hard time with members of your own immediate family. She can help you with that pain; I know because She has helped me in the same way.

So please know that in my own Native way I am sprinkling corn for you. I am drawing a circle on the Earth. I am turning to call out for you to all four sacred directions. And I am asking our Grandmother to show Herself to you. She is already there, but I want you to see Her as clearly as I do.

She has helped me in more ways that I can say. She has brought me safe through so many storms, and been with me in the long and lonely times when I sat alone with Her alone. She is love. She is healing. She is the sound of wind and rain. Her eyes are ancient fires. Her hair like first snowfall. Her hands are old like the Earth, strong, but gentle.

I hope you will see Her that way soon. I am praying that you will. I know God comes in many shapes and sizes, but for me and for my people, there is only one Grandmother. She made the heavens and filled the oceans. She calls all the tribes of living things Her children. She wears a shawl of starlight.

Let me know if you catch a glimpse of Her. You will know when you do. And you will feel safe then, in a way that words cannot convey.

Margaret Bullitt-Jonas — Apr 30, 2014 9:44pm

Who knew that an online exchange of words would create such a sacred field of awareness or such a community of blessings? I am always glad to read your meditations, Jonas, and glad to hear of the music they play out in your readers’ minds and hearts. Until your diagnosis I never understood so clearly how a desire to be physically healed can awaken a deep desire to be healed, period -- healed in every aspect of ones being, healed into a new freedom and fullness of life. I hope that my own desire to be fully healed and alive will be renewed every day, so that I, too, keep turning toward the Divine as surely a sunflower turns toward the sun or as an iron filing heads straight for the magnet. I’d like to drop into God’s embrace as simply as a leaf lets go from a tree. Thank you, Jonas, for encouraging our own desire to be fully alive and awake by making that journey yourself.

Sue Mosteller — May 1, 2014 8:26am

Jonas,

I follow you with every line and every word. And I also pray your prayer, “Please don’t leave me! And help me to remember, always remember how amazing you have been and are and always will be.

Loads of love with only 15 more days to go. Close. Very close and grateful.

Sue

Debbie Little — May 2, 2014 7:10am

Jonas, thank you. What shines through to me is the clarity and purity in Love, of our beings. Much more to add, but that’s the gift you give me this morning. I continue to hold you both heart

Nina Scott — May 2, 2014 3:21pm

Dear Jonas, I usually write to you directly instead of in a public forum like this, but now I’ll break

through my inhibitions. You and I have done the journey on the blue altar with the cross in the ceiling together, only my laser beams are green while yours are red, and my radiation stopped two days ago. I wish you continued strength and insights as you near the end of this stage of fighting what I call “the beast in the body.”

I thanked my radiology team on my last day, and, knowing that they, too, minister to about 25 patients a day, asked them if it was hard for them to work so closely and intimately with many people and then have them leave. One of the women told me that a.) she loves her work, and b.) she does it As a kind of mission in remembrance of her mother, whose life was taken by cancer. “For me it’s a way of honoring her to work in this field, “ she said. “It gives my work a spiritual dimension.”

I thought you would like to hear that.

My father died of lung cancer,too, when I was 11. I’ve spent my life regretting that we did not know each other better and longer.

Our love to you and to Margaret, Nina and Jim

Margaret Schwarzer — May 4, 2014 4:37pm

Dear Jonas,

I am thankful for your wisdom of many kinds, and thankful, today, for the wisdom you share about love and healing in your writing, and the purity of desire that can feel almost as if it is burning within us. (The way this morning’s gospel reminded us of the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, with their heart’s burning.) I suspect you already know the poem I would like to offer you, but it brings me such freedom, that I want to share it anyway:

The Avowal

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

Denise Levertov

Peace, blessings, healing, love, power to you.

Your friend in Christ,

Margaret

(Margaret Schwarzer)

Erik Hoffner — May 7, 2014 9:22am

Beautiful, Jonas. Keep it coming.



Be a Man: But In Whose Image?

Georgene L. Wilson — May 7, 2014 12:51pm

Dear Jonas,

Thank You for YOU, as you are, and for sharing the inner vulnerabilities. You are YOU and you are always enough because you are Trinity.....

I await the creation of the Japanese Tango on your Flute.

Blessings and Love,
Georgene

Bob McGahey — May 7, 2014 1:17pm

Once again I am floored, deeply moved. I think each time of my dear friend in NCGeeta and I are in Alaska for r and r) who is fighting metastatic prostate cancer, anchored in his struggle by yoga, pranayam, and meditation. Bult like you , it's never quite enough. But his spirit is optimistic and almost indomitable. You and Tom, and some of the men you meet at the Center, are deep inspirations for me. Thank you Jonas, who I take the liberty to call Brother.

Sue Mosteller — May 8, 2014 2:37pm

Oh, Jonas,

It's so deeply compelling and human. It reaches down, down, down to the essence and the unanswerable! My heart goes out and words simply don't cover it. In any case, thank you - and I'm glad you were born, have loved, are loved, and want to love. You have courage and you give me courage.

If I calculated correctly, I'm hoping you'll be finished next week at this time. Here's hoping that this stage is done!

Gratefully,
Sue

Rich Fournier — May 8, 2014 4:05pm

Wow Jonas, you are such a gifted writer. Love your humanity and vulnerability, insight and courage. You are modeling exactly the kind of man we need more of in this world, if we are ever going to stop all the "testosterone" violence and wars. Your sharing is so deeply transparent to what is so truly human- but it doesn't stop or get stuck there, it continues being transparent till it gets shot-through with the spirit (or maybe I should say "Trinity). Anyway, I love you and I am holding you in the source of the same light and love, of which you already partake and share with others. Rich (though I do miss football! Wait the NFL draft is tonight..and Bruins... :)
heart

Sarah Bullitt — May 8, 2014 6:01pm

Beautiful, Jonas. Thank you.

Much love to you.

Steven Charleston — May 9, 2014 9:13am

So many things to think about. So many images and ideas. Helpless in traffic, helpless in the doctor's waiting room, helpless in conversations that are so intimate they leave us speechless. I think I know what you are saying. And it does make us feel embarrassed and angry. We are of the same generation and I know that programming to be a man. It is still there, even after we took a long bath in the 60's. Confronted with the need to ask for help, I go inside. I shut the blinds and pretend I am not home. If the phone rings, don't answer it. But the need remains. The helpless feeling. So frustrating. Like being stuck in traffic. But your mentors, including Eckhart, are right. We are not really helpless. It just feels that way. Like being in the womb and not being able to get out. It seems like a trap, like confinement, but it is (thank you, Buddha) an illusion. We are never help-less. We are in a place that hurts or makes us afraid, but we are not without the presence of help because we are never without the presence of love. Even if we cannot make love, we are in love, in the place of love, surrounded by love, receiving the signals of love ("what's wrong?") at the kitchen table, seeing it in the eyes of the other, the beloved other, and feeling it, out there, in that strange, mystical space that is both within us and just outside our envelope. You have given me so much to consider here. So much to think about. Your experience is far from the lament of a helpless man, but rather, the testimony of a man learning to recognize the Presence, the constant state of help, the eternal now of love, the endless support of a life that never ends but only moves. I am very grateful to you for sharing these writings because they make me stretch to get to where you are. What I write in turn is that effort, my only way of showing you that I am sailing right behind, like flashes of light in the night, a reminder that we are not alone on this voyage, but nearby, two men of a certain age, 60's veterans, spiritual nomads, looking in the same direction, but seeing from where we each stand. I have been a monk for many years but have never experienced what you discover in the waiting room or on the table. You are far from helpless. You are getting stronger every day. You are radiant with a health of the soul, a bright and vibrant spirit, reaching out through the fluid of life before birth to sense the Presence, to trust it and then, through faith and curiosity, to be born again, lifted out into a new world of love. Helpless. Yes, like you, I get so helpless in this life and it still makes me a kid who cannot have what he wants. I kick the floor. I cry. But on the flip side, on the mystic side, the spirit side, I am not without help because I am in the tribe of life, I am connected, balanced, held safe, protected, embraced, at one. Look at Margaret and see that map in her eyes. Listen to your friends and hear that song in what they say. Even read these few words and know that it is true. You are going through an experience, but you are not overwhelmed by it, you are not lost in it, it is not bigger than you. You have the Presence. You are in the Presence, a part of it, as much as any of us, more than most of us even realize because you are now acutely aware of its truth and its power. You are now our helper. A gift to those who love you. You are that strong now, that conscious, that real. Thank you. Thank you so much for helping me.

Mark Burrows — May 12, 2014 12:31am

Thanks, Jonas. Tender, heartfelt, true. Dancing with you, in prayer and affection, over the distances. . .
Mark

Becoming Known in the Dance-Around of Love

By Steven Abdow — May 27, 2014 12:58pm

Jonas- I'm so happy to hear about your good prognosis. Thanks for sharing your journey. I'm reminded of the quote from Victor Frankl- "What is to give light must endure burning." You are a light to me and to many others.

By Nina Scott — May 27, 2014 2:08pm

Jonas, dear Jonas: I am so happy that you and I have shared this journey and that we are where we are. My beloved late older brother said to me years ago, on the birth of our Down Syndrome son Christopher, "Well, Nina, this will probably make a bigger person out of you, not that you wouldn't have preferred being a smaller one." But like you, that and this experience have deeply enriched me and I am acutely aware of that..

Like you, however, I am also still struggling with impatience in traffic - why are there so many bone-heads on the road? As though I were not one of them as well... enlightenment is a hard path!

Becoming better in spring time is another gift. I am so happy that you are home again here in this lovely valley. Our love to you and to Margaret.

Nina

By Georgene L. Wilson — May 27, 2014 6:19pm

Dear Jonas,

Thank You for this post/sharing/witnessing/love-letter. I feel blessed and changed, like a sacrament has fed me, wed me, loved me into more.....that sacrament is the real presence of YOU. And we are one in our FarNearness One. Fitting that you end this love letter with the BODY OF CHRIST!

Thanks be to God.

Love and Gratitude,
Georgene

By Erik Hoffner — May 27, 2014 7:54pm

Jonas, distill all of this into a little book, or an e-book. It's really good, people would love to read your thoughts and learn about your journey...

By Joel Russell — May 27, 2014 10:15pm

Wow, so good to hear that you have come through this experience so well, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Your courage and openness throughout this journey have been inspiring and have led me to a deeper appreciation of life and the gifts that we all have for one another, ourselves, and the Divine. Your deep reflections and honesty and your gift for describing what it's like to be on the blue table, to be a

man facing mortality, to engage with the fearsome and the holy and yet be open to the moment - that is Grace. Thank you for being you, Jonas. You have attracted so much love that you so richly deserve.

By David Frenette — May 27, 2014 10:18pm

Jonas, I echo Erik's thoughts. Your writing touches my heart and spirit. I am grateful about your prognosis. I hope you get the coffee, too. Love, David

By steven charleston — May 28, 2014 8:51am

Hi Jonas,
your good news made me think of a sort-of Koan...why is Buddha Nature like an open door?
I think you just answered that.
God continue to bless you and Margaret,
Steven

By Sue Mosteller — May 29, 2014 9:02am

Thanks for the deep and inspiring reflections Jonas. And I give thanks for your deep human insights shared with us. I'm so grateful that you had good doctors, good friends, a good artist, a wonderful wife - all to accompany you into the depths of your soul and heart.
Many, many thanks.
Sue

By Karen Pascal — May 30, 2014 1:29pm

Jonas,
"I will sing you as no one ever has" Out of the solitude and anguish of this experience - I hear your voice of child-like trust and I am so deeply encouraged and inspired. God has his strong arms under you - you are his beloved! Is earth our 'Blue Table' and the sun circulating it transforming us with its powerful light? I will be praying and trusting with you as you continue the journey. I sense that the rich value and joy of life has intensified for you in the midst of this experience. May you know the sweetness of God's presence, healing and love hour by hour.
Karen

By resa pearson — Jun 3, 2014 2:11pm

Dear Jonas,
I'm just learning of your cancer journey. What a gift your insights and journal of the Blue Table are! I agree, it would make a wonderful, helpful guide as a book for others who will walk this way. I hold you in prayer and love.
Resa

By Ed Lennihan — Jun 8, 2014 10:53am

So Beautiful. Thank you for including me as a reader!



Refreshing honesty

By Judith Eiseman — Mar 29, 2014 12:29pm

Honest and/or just fun loving--nothing like a fellow with a sense of humor. After all, if you can't laugh(or at least smile) about something every day that's a real loss.

By Sarah Bullitt — Mar 29, 2014 12:49pm

Dear Jonas,

Oh, I love these vignettes.

How about starting to think of a title for this new book?

Abundant blessings,

Daniel Shanahan — Mar 29, 2014 1:19pm

Jonas, your 'radiant light therapy' illuminates the glaring reality of cancer treatment with such compassion, tenderness, walking with Jesus into the underworld of Dana Farber.

Love, Danny

Anne Scarff — Mar 30, 2014 4:03pm

I have been so touched by the whole hearted curiosity and transparency in your writings, dear Jonas. Today's reflection has the subtlety and simplicity of a haiku. Love and Blessings my friend, Annie

Guestbook

Daniel Shanahan — Mar 25, 2014 1:14pm

Hello Jonas, thanks for embracing us with these amazing stories of your journey seen through the vision of your open Heart!

I am sending this with the intention (also see photo) that it might serve you in your journey this week. I refreshed my meditation altar (a.k.a. puja) last night and wanted to share these moments with you.

Journal entry:

As we refresh our Pujas and meditation altars for Spring may the inner Puja of devotion awaken in us the peace of spacious quietude.

I had a sudden impulse to refresh my altar last night. This "place" is always a homecoming for me, a refuge and sanctuary of silence and the nourishing Bread of the Presence. Nothing to do, nowhere to go,

just being In Love with the Beloved. The Buddha (see attached photo) is hand carved from India, made of resin rather than wood to save the wisdom kingdom of the forest. Two orchids, my 40 year coin (40 years in the oasis/desert of recovery), the blessing gaze of my lineage and a puja cloth---a gift from a friend. When I renew my puja I experience an inner renewal, a sensation of grace awakens, the mind slows and bows its busy head beneath the lintel of love.

During the day I had been sipping from Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Peace Is Every Breath*. In the chapter *Contemplating Singleness, No Birth, No Death*, I experienced a serene spaciousness expanding within me, a spontaneous letting go and letting out of the boundary line of my awareness. This Buddhist teaching i.e. no birth, no-self had always eluded me and seemed to be at odds with my understanding of The Great Self or Soul; the no-self idea left me only with the Void. Yet yesterday I saw that what is meant here is that the Beloved, who exists before and in time, manifests all heavenly and earthly bodies, including my own. Suffering for me is identifying only with the body as my self, this is where most or all of my fear comes from, and doubt and insecurity. So I just kept breathing and relaxing into the hammock of His compassion, allowing His breath to breathe in and out of the little *shakuhachi* of this body. Surrendering my identity like this with each breath moved me beyond the body as self to a gracious spaciousness swelling with quiet joy.

Reading your posts I see you are the altar, a place of refuge and love where you attend to each person with kindness, even the machines in the hospital!

God goes with you!

Danny Shanahan



Daniel Shanahan — Mar 25, 2014 2:29pm

I am sending this with the intention that it will serve you in your journey this week.

As we refresh our Pujas and meditation altars may the inner Puja of devotion awaken in us the peace of “flawless quietude.”

Hi Jonas, had a sudden impulse to refresh my altar last night. This “place” is always a homecoming for me, a refuge and sanctuary of silence and the nourishing Bread of the Presence.

Nothing to do, nowhere to go, just being in love with the Beloved. The Buddha is hand carved from India, made of resin rather than wood to save the wisdom kingdom of the forest. Two orchids, my 40 year AA anniversary coin (40 years in the oasis of recovery), the blessing gaze of my lineage and a puja cloth---a gift from a friend. When I do this a sensation of grace awakens, the mind slows and bows its busy head beneath the lintel of love.

During the day I had been sipping from Thich Nhat Hanh’s book *Peace Is Every Breath*. In the chapter *Contemplating Singleness, No Birth, No Death*, I experienced a serene spaciousness expanding, a spontaneous letting go and letting out of awareness.

Doug Albertson — Mar 31, 2014 7:22pm

Jonas,

We think of you often, probably several times a day - you have that effect. I’m thankful for your quiet peace; your example of letting yourself feel life and the glory of existence and the wonderful presence of what is so much more than anyone could ever understand. I believe that is grace, but it is also more. It is the confidence that you are with your god, the greater force of love and existence. See? I really can’t not think of you when I contemplate...

Find some good restaurants out there and savor the sensory experience.

Prayers,

Doug

Ginny Vreeland — Mar 27, 2014 11:55am

Thank you Jonas....

how profound to begin this journey in Lent...the long walk into darkness andresurrection...!!

John McDargh — Mar 28, 2014 1:02pm

Thinking of you offering your heart on the Blue Table today Jonas, and the metaphor of the rescuing eagles ,then those familiar words: “*An I shall lift you up on eagles wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of my hand..*”

with love, John

Ellen Bernstein — Mar 30, 2014 9:27pm

Dear Jonas,

Thank you for inviting me into this intimate space of yours and your fellow travelers. Your words are beautiful and precious and I am also moved to see others' poems and thoughts. And to see Daniel Shanahan as part of your circle too--we have met not infrequently on meditation walks around the Holyoke reservoir.

I am thinking about your eagle. . . and all of your metaphors. In Gen 1.2, God merachephets over the face of the waters. Merachephet is translated as hover. . . its what the eagle does over her young: according to BDB, to move gently, cherish, brood (fertilize)--more images and words for you to play with in your journey.

. . . Look to see if there are pomegranates on the linen tunics of your priestly attendants.

My favorite psalm is 118.5: Min ha-metzar karati yah, anani, b'merchav yah. (pardon the transliteration) From the narrow place I cried out to God; God answered me with SPACE.

I will make a point of singing this for you in the days of your treatment.

Sending spacious love,
Ellen

Doug Albertson — Mar 31, 2014 7:22pm

Jonas,

We think of you often, probably several times a day - you have that effect. I'm thankful for your quiet peace; your example of letting yourself feel life and the glory of existence and the wonderful presence of what is so much more than anyone could ever understand. I believe that is grace, but it is also more. It is the confidence that you are with your god, the greater force of love and existence. See? I really can't not think of you when I contemplate...

Find some good restaurants out there and savor the sensory experience.

Prayers,

Doug

Judith Eiseman — Apr 3, 2014 8:51am

As you know, I've been in a similar place--29 years ago this month. Others seem to have all the words. I have only this to share: spring sunshine, daffodils easing up out of the soil, birdsong, abounding and abiding evidence of rebirth, continuity and joy. Confirmation that my autumnal faith was well-founded.

Don Pachuta — Apr 8, 2014 6:48am

Dear Jonas

Indeed you are very dear! I and the Community of Saint Luke - the dear and glorious physician, hold you dearly and in the Light.

blessings, don

Steven Charleston — Apr 10, 2014 4:01pm

Hi, and thank you for welcoming here. I have a little catching up to do in reading your journal, but I have been thinking about the image you shared yesterday about becoming transparent. I am sure you have heard it said that some places, some spaces in the natural world, are “thin” places, where we draw closer to the holy than ever before. I had always believed this, but I never associated it with ourselves... with the idea that we could become a “thin” space...a place of living contact between the earth-bound and the spirit-sent. Now you have given me that impression. Perhaps you are a link now, a place where the power of the sacred touches the all too fragile space we call our body. Bless you for that.

Daniel Shanahan — Apr 12, 2014 9:58am

Hi Jonas,

Great description of traffic. I remember when I lived there my mind would already knot up expecting Monday traffic on Rte 128. And I actually went to the W B Z traffic report every 13 minutes known as “traffic on the threes” even when there was no traffic. This continued even after moving out here. Traffic on the “threes” was like entertainment, and the narrators voice was full and dramatic---the basso under of the rotor blades on the helicopter whipping in the background. Millions of us suffer from what I call “commuter gut.” Once on a trip back to Beantown I felt the energy tighten in my body, and I was about 45 miles away.

Here in the valley the Brooks are singing, last night a spring rain pelted the earth, softening the garden, infusing roots and bulbs with a language only water and minerals understand.

An aviary of blue birds, thrushes and cardinals also pelt the plant world, their songs awakening buds, seeds. Last night I stepped outside and listened to the peepers in the marsh reveling, their chant dense, deep and so charged with desire. In the thick of this music the miraculous and strange tongue of the skunk cabbage unfurls silently in the night.

Come home, the Valley and it’s creatures (all of us included) miss you and love you.

DANNY

Mark Burrows — Apr 18, 2014 5:31am

Dear Jonas,

With you on this pilgrimage, only only distant by miles.

With blessing, Mark

Lawrence Edwards — Apr 30, 2014 8:41am

Dear Brother Jonas,
Walking heart-to-heart with you.
Love and prayers,
Kalidas

Rich Fournier — May 8, 2014 3:40pm

Hi Jonas. Thinking of you....looking forward to reading your journey entries. Love, Rich

Daniel Shanahan — May 16, 2014 9:55am

Hi Jonas,

Thinking of you in the home stretch. Thank you for opening up so freely and honestly about what is going on around you and inside you. I echo the superman thing. Part family DNA, part cultural imprint and pre-ice age hunter patterns pulsing through brain, bone, blood. And yet in the silence of prayer and mediation at the Empty Bell, we are allowed entrance into the flyway of the Holy Spirit.

I do not know what year it started for me, perhaps when I hit sixty, the brain and body started a low grade riot about its mortality. And at some point each day I can hear the two of them muttering as they assemble the barricades. There are the two of them, and there is this one listening to them, holding them both.

I reached up for a maple leaf last night just before it rained here in Northampton. A very brief time during the leafing period maple leaves are so young and soft, flexible, stretchable like latex. And in a few weeks they will rigidify to deal with what is to come. You are blessed with such love and grace, and a deep longing for God.

It is always good to SEE you and BE with you when you return.

Love, Danny

Larry Maze — May 25, 2014 3:18pm

Hi Jonas,

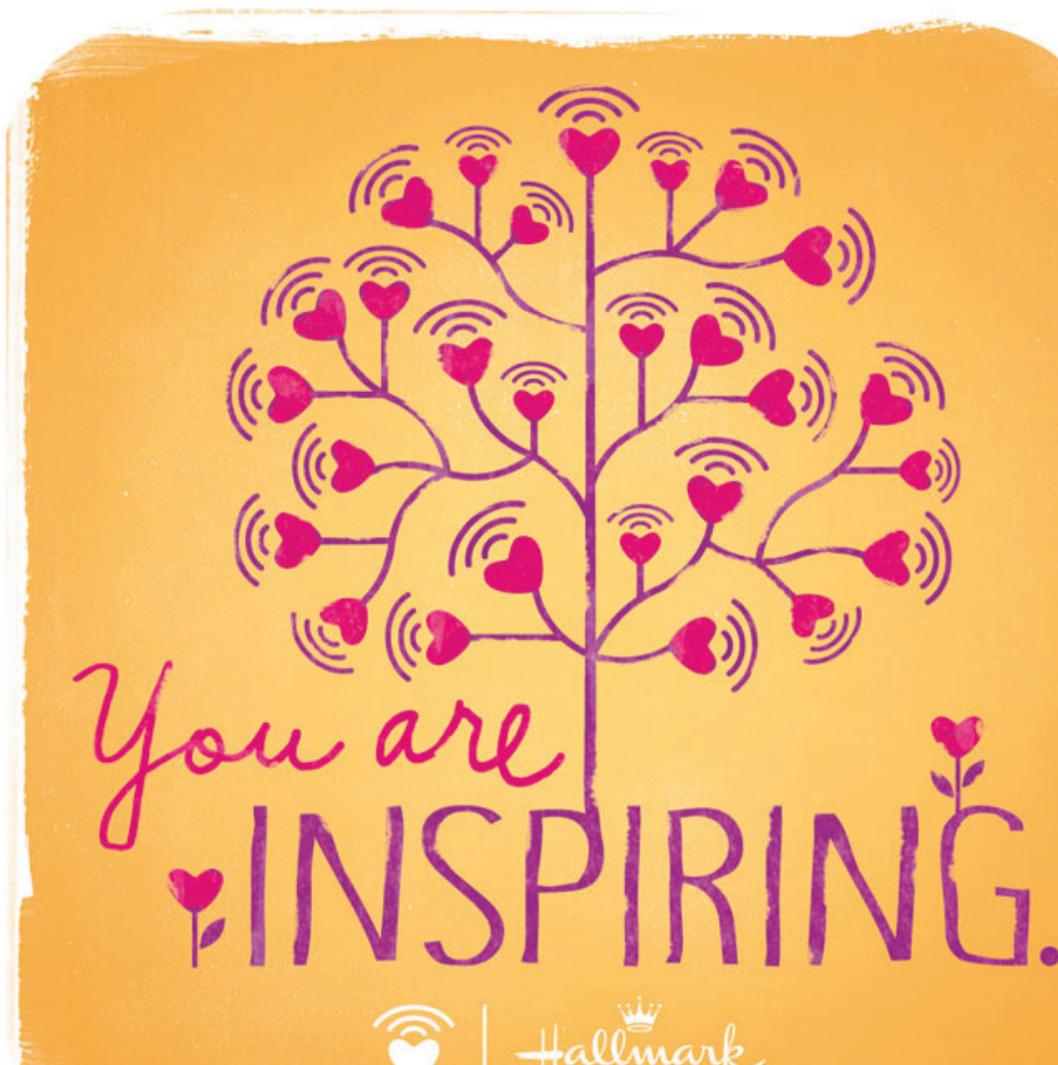
Im slow to get around to things but finally I've been able to read your posts. As you know, we're on very much the same journey. After about nine months I continue to have good days and bad days which I finally accept as the rhythm of cancer treatment. I have given up all my teaching gigs for awhile because I can't think quickly and creatively, as you mention as well. I read to Beth your section about you and Margaret talking. It was a gift to us. But the way you express your journey is an amazing boost to me. Over and over I find myself saying, "Yes! That's it! That's what I can't always find words to say out loud." Thank you for that. I try to keep Jeremiah 29 in focus (not always successfully)... "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for good and not for harm, plans to give you hope and a future." Because our journey seems to be in somewhat a parallel, it's easy to remember you in my daily prayers. After a couple of years we'll all be celebrating!

Kate Stevens — May 27, 2014 2:40pm

Dear Jonas,

looking forward to seeing you. Thank you for your Blue Table reflections right up until today. hearing about radiation will never seem the same, after hearing about your response to that experience. Thank you, Jonas, for sharing it with so many of us who care about you. blessings, kate

Maureen Wright — May 30, 2014 12:55pm



Dear Jonas,

Love and prayers for you as you journey toward health and renewal.

Maureen

Karen Pascal — May 30, 2014 1:00pm

Dear Jonas,

My thoughts and prayers are with you. May you experience a return of strength - all you need for the day you are in. Much love, Karen

