

## QUESTIONS THAT MATTER: STORIES OF COURAGE AND GRACE

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### Wayne Muller

As a therapist and minister, I've spent more than 20 years in the company of people who suffer. As I listen more deeply in each encounter, I notice something happens in a moment of suffering, something that can be quite precious, a moment that simultaneously breaks us down and also breaks us open.

At such times, we can respond to suffering by bringing everything we have—body, heart, spirit—as a sacramental offering into the company of others, be they friend, child, parent, lover, family member, or community member.

If we allow ourselves to be awake, an almost inevitable fountain of grace begins to open. Certain questions begin to arise in our hearts and our minds. One of the first questions, of course, is, "Why did this happen to me?" But beyond that other, deeper questions arise: "What does this all mean about the nature of life? What do I hold to be sacred? What can I touch, that when I hold it in my hand will make me feel safe?"

Over the years, I and others have wrestled with some deep questions, questions that don't have pat answers and whose answers change from year to year, often from hour to hour. The questions are like mantras or koans; they're something to hold in our hearts as we make our way through life.

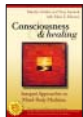
### Who Am I?

Most spiritual traditions begin the process of pilgrimage with this question, whether it is in the form of a vision quest, a naming ceremony, or some other way of beginning to listen to the names we call ourselves. This is because our identities color everything we do. Whom I believe myself to be will influence the paths I choose to walk, the friends I take as mine, and the enemies I choose.

For example, if I wake up in the morning and call myself a Christian, then I will look with Christian eyes at a world that seems to be moving from sin to salvation, and perhaps I will remember the teachings of Jesus about the lilies of the field: "They neither toil nor spin, and yet I tell you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. . . and therefore I tell you do not worry about tomorrow." And maybe I heed his prescriptions to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison.

If I wake up in the morning and think of myself as a Jew, then perhaps I feel my life as part and parcel of an enormous sweep of history from slavery to liberation, and I recite the covenants that God has made with my people. I vow to do those things that are necessary to walk humbly and do justice.

If I wake in the morning and see the world through Buddhist eyes, then perhaps I'll be thinking about the Four Noble Truths, the nature of suffering, the origin of suffering, alleviation



## Consciousness and Healing

### Integral Approaches to Mind-Body Medicine



of suffering, and escape from the wheel of birth-death-rebirth. Perhaps I take the vow as a Boddhisatva to alleviate the suffering of all beings.

And so it is with every name that we take: Democrat or Republican, mother or father, employer or employee—every name we use as our identity colors and shapes the way we walk and the way we feel about ourselves and the people we meet.

I've noticed a distressing trend in this regard during the last 20 years or so wherein people have named themselves using psychological terminology or diagnostic names such as "adult child of alcoholic" or "manic-depressive" or "multiple personality" or "incest survivor." Although these terms may apply to some aspects of our lives, they're not names that are large enough to hold the true nature of who we are.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." The Buddha said, "You are saturated with Buddha nature." Jesus did not say "You are the light of the world as long as your parents were really nice and you lived in a nice neighborhood and you got a red wagon every year for Christmas and you go to church every Sunday." He simply said "You are the light of the world."

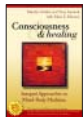
This means that regardless of what sorrow or suffering or ache or loss or fear that travels through your body, there is this light of the world, this Buddha nature, this still small voice, this kingdom of God that will not leave you uncomforted.

Where I live in New Mexico, Native Americans often take their names from nature, perhaps from the color of the sky, the way an eagle seems to defy gravity as it makes its way into the air, or the way an animal exhibits its power as it walks across the face of the Earth. And so, when they speak their name, they remember their strength or courage or wisdom even when frightened, lost, or confused. Their name calls forth what doesn't break; it keeps them company. However, if I take as my name Adult Child of Alcoholic, for example, it doesn't touch that place that can't be named even though it may be true of some aspects of my experience.

Telling stories about the way people treated us may be useful up to a point, but there is another way of looking at this. A wonderful parable by the Buddha expresses it so well: Imagine coming to the edge of a river, and you need to get to the other side. You take grasses, sticks, and branches; lash them together to make a raft; and paddle across the river. When you get to the other side, you're so grateful to the raft that you carry it with you for the rest of your life. This would be rather silly, wouldn't it? Of course, what you would do with such a raft is tie it on the bank and let someone else use it or just let it float down the river. So it is with the story of our life, and even with the Buddha's teachings certain things have usefulness to a point; to carry them on our back for the rest of our life, however, is just silly.

As circumstances change, what we need and what is useful in life also change. Curiously enough, our names actually change as we grow because as we ourselves become deeper and more spacious, our names get larger. Another wonderful Buddhist parable captures this insight: Imagine taking a hefty spoonful of salt and stirring it into a cup of water. It would be very unpleasant to drink. But if you took that same hefty spoonful of salt and stirred it into an enormous, clear-blue mountain lake and drank a mouthful, it would be sweet. The problem is not the salt; it's the size of the container.

And so as you take your name, when you say who you are, I invite you to begin to investigate what kind of name can be large enough to hold the truth of who you are.



### What Do I Love?

The Chinese say that when a teapot has been in use in a family for over a hundred years, after a while you need only pour hot water into the pot and the pot itself will make you tea. In other words, if we do something day after day, year after year, generation after generation, our lives will come to hold the fragrance of that thing. If we hold something in our hands, day after day, year after year, our hands will come to hold the shape of that thing.

And so it is that if we do what we love, day after day, year after year, generation after generation, then we become what we love. This is not magic, of course; this is simple "spiritual physics." So, like our names, it is important to know what we love. What do you love? If God is love, as most of the spiritual traditions seem to suggest in one form or another, then if we follow what we love we will be led inevitably up the steps and onto the doorstep of the divine.

Many of us have spent perhaps quite a bit of time getting rid of the things we don't love—part of our histories, our stories about the aches and struggles we've carried. This is useful work. Yet at a certain point it will bring us back up only to zero. All of the poets and mystics and saints of the world have indicated that a human life can go higher than zero. And what star we choose to follow is the star of what we love.

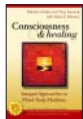
What opens our hearts? What excites our spirit? What galvanizes our passion and our curiosity? "Curiosity," of course, shares the same root as "cure," so in a way what we love and what captures our curiosity draw us forward into some place of great destiny.

Another reason to pay attention to what we love is that it will live in our eyes: What we love will actually change what we see. I'll give an example. A couple of years ago, in the Santo Domingo Pueblo, I joined a family of close friends on an Easter-egg hunt in the hills. Now, when you picture Easter-egg hunting in northern New Mexico, it's not at all like it is on the White House lawn. Wind and dust blow into your eyes and on your teeth, and you're also competing with cactus, gophers, and rattlesnakes. It's a different sort of Easter experience.

I was with my son Maxwell, who was about 3, and we had found a few eggs. Timothy, the son of our host family, had quite a few more, obviously having much greater success. We asked him where he found the eggs and whether there were any left. All of sudden, Tim looked down and said, pointing to some yellow sand on the ground, "You know, I need that yellow sand for my pots." Tim's a potter, from generations of potters, and loves making pots. His family, of course, doesn't go to "Clays-R-Us"; they get their clay from the earth. Tim's eyes know to look for those colors that he loves, and because he loves that particular color yellow, he stopped in the middle of a conversation about the egg hunt and said, "I need to go get a plastic bag and the pickup and bring some yellow clay back for my glazes."

Because Tim loves pots, he could see that yellow in a way that I, standing right next to him, could never have seen: What we love lives in our eyes. What we love actually changes what we see.

It is important, therefore, to be mindful of what we love. Do you love dance? Do you love God? Do you love color? Do you love beauty? Do you love justice? Do you love children? Those things that you love will guide your steps, and they will also live in your eyes.



### How Shall I Live, Knowing I Will Die?

What kind of people shall we be, knowing that we have only a short period left here on this Earth? Shall we be courageous? Shall we be playful? Shall we be loving? Shall we be quiet people? How shall we live, knowing that we will die?

A friend of mine had a son, Forrest, 4 years old, who used to keep a journal. He didn't actually keep the journal, of course. His mother would sit down on his bedside every evening and ask him, "Forrest, do you have anything you would like to say about how it was for you today?" And she would write down what he said, so as he got older he could have this journal as a memory of his childhood. She read me some of Forrest's entries when he was 4:

Thursday, May 5: "I love dinosaurs, I love 'em, love 'em, love 'em. I love sharks. T. Rex is the most fierce hunter. It's Thursday today. My days are getting different now because we're doing different stuff. I don't know why my pterodactyl's sick for 3 days. I love my dinosaurs."

Sunday, June 12: "I'm happy today. I wish we'd go out on a hike. I wish there were butterflies in rainforests. Is there a rainforest in Micronesia? I played on my tricycle. I slipped and almost fell, but I didn't. I ran over Sissy's tail and hand. Sissy growled, I said I'm sorry. I want to go to the rainforest sometime."

On June 24, Forrest was killed in a car accident. His mother was driving. Forrest and his brother Bryce, who was 1, were in the back seat, and both were killed—her only two children, along with her father, who was in the front passenger's seat. Forrest's mother somehow survived.

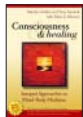
I was blessed to be in the company of Forrest's parents for quite a period after that, trying to listen along with them for what doesn't break, for what still lives in the midst of such unspeakable grief.

Knowing what we know, now, about Forrest's life and death, pay attention again for a moment to some of the things he had to say: "I love dinosaurs, I love 'em, love 'em, love 'em. I want to go to the rainforest sometime."

We listen to Forrest's words differently when we feel his life framed by his death. I would like to suggest that the difference between Forrest and ourselves is really quite small, that our lives, like Forrest's, are also brief and also framed by death. There's a kind of poignancy that we ascribe to Forrest's life because it seems somehow unnaturally short. And yes, our lives as well are simply naturally short.

When I'm in the company of people dying of cancer or AIDS or other terminal illnesses, one of the things that happens, not always but often, is that people begin to feel the preciousness of what it means to breathe and to be able to love one another, to be able to put one day at the service of someone who is in need or to be able to be in the company of other beings in love or kindness. Every touch of the hand becomes a miracle; every word of kindness shared is a symphony; every day that the sun rises miraculously and bathes the Earth in sunlight is an epiphany because this could be the last time I see this unspeakably magnificent event.

Those of us who believe we will live for a very long time tend to get sloppy, and we live by accident. Yet every breath we take, every prayer we speak, every conversation we have can be a moment of great healing, or grace, or creation, or birth. Can we be that awake? How do we live, knowing that we will die?



One of the things that happens, paradoxically, to people who are close to death is they become grateful, which makes no sense from the outside. Yet from the inside there is sometimes this deep pool of gratefulness. Thank you for coming to see me. Thank you for this cookie that you baked for me with your loving kindness. Thank you for sitting with me on this bed.

I remember sitting with a man close to death who said, "You know, I've done an awful lot of spiritual practice; I've prayed, I've meditated, I've taken vows, I've taken initiations, and I think I'm ready to die. But to be perfectly honest, I wish I had just 10 years of cancer-free life, just 10 years." So I said, "If I could grant you that boon, if I could give you those 10 years, what would you do with them?" And without skipping a beat he said, "I would be kind. I would teach children everything I've ever learned about how things work, and how to be strong, and how to be courageous, and how to be loving."

### **What Is My Gift to the Family of the Earth?**

All of the practices we do-every prayer we speak, every meditation, every invocation, every vow, every ordination-is not for our own healing alone. We do this work for the healing of all beings.

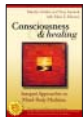
One of the most painful things for me as a minister and therapist working with people who have been given some suffering or some illness, some poverty, some injustice, or some violation is that they feel so hurt or broken-down or ripped open or defective because of the depth of the ache they carry in their body. They believe they have no gift at all to bring to the family of the Earth. And this, to me, is a suffering perhaps even greater than the one caused by the original abuse or illness.

What is your gift to the family of the Earth? One of the first things that happens to us when we think about our gift is we think that it must be something large and magnificent. "If we're going to be truly spiritual saviors of the planet, we must have something terribly impressive and dramatic to offer to the world." But our gifts need not be dramatic or magnificent. In point of fact, they can be quite small and unobtrusive.

Sometimes we wait until we're quite certain that our gifts will be useful. And this of course is a trap because we never really know whether our gifts will be useful. We cannot wait until we know the results of our gifts before we offer them. The Buddha in the Eight-fold Path speaks quite passionately about right understanding and right mindfulness and right effort and right action, but the Buddha never speaks of right result. We do not know what will happen to what we bring, and we can't hold the world hostage waiting for the promise that what we bring will do some good. As a matter of fact, sometimes our gifts will at first blush seem as if they do nothing at all.

A good friend of mine, Sharon Salzberg, wrote a book about 8 or 9 years ago. She was studying with a particular Buddhist teacher, and she and some friends decided to collect his meditations and teachings into a book. Wisdom Publications published it, and it sold a couple of thousand copies.

Many years later, Sharon was reading about Aung San Suu Kyi, who was imprisoned in Burma for her work trying to lead her people to freedom and democracy. She was placed under house arrest for many years. She was alone and frightened and mishandled. When she was eventually released, some people asked her, "What sustained you during that time?" And she



## Consciousness and Healing

### Integral Approaches to Mind-Body Medicine



said, "Well, I learned how to meditate." They asked her how she learned. She said, "I had this little book, and it taught me everything I needed to know in order to survive my imprisonment." And, of course, it was Sharon's book.

We don't know where our gift will bear fruit, but we do know that our gift is required. All it requires is for you to listen to the impulse that arises, as it does in each and every one of us not because it's dramatic, not because it's particularly spiritual, but just because it's yours.

You are the light of the world. What permission are you waiting for before you feel as if you could offer your gift with ease and playfulness and grace? What is your gift to the family of the Earth?