

**Things Fall Apart:  
Reflections on the Dying of My Dad**

**Richard Oxenberg**

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**Sun. 9/18/11--8:53am**

I am sitting in an Einstein's Bagels in Coral Gables, Fla. My father is struggling for life in the intensive care unit of Jackson-Memorial Hospital in Miami. My entire family (including my mother) is staying at the Biltmore Hotel here in Coral Gables – the contrast between my Dad's suffering and the opulence of the hotel is a bit grating, but that's another story.

My father has a condition called Myasthenia Gravis which, up until a few weeks ago, had been well controlled with medication. Myasthenia is an auto-immune disease that can affect throat and respiratory muscles. A few weeks ago my Dad had what is called a 'myasthenia crisis,' making it difficult for him to swallow. If you can't swallow you can't eat. Can't eat, can't live. So the condition is serious.

My older sister Jan has been down here helping him by herself until now, when the whole family has arrived. To make a long and very distressing story a bit shorter, Jan took Dad to the Jackson Memorial hospital emergency room on Fri. 9/9 where she thought he would be admitted and seen by a Myasthenia specialist. The resident on duty refused to admit him, apparently judging that his condition was not serious enough. This led to a night of Dad sitting in the emergency room aspirating his own saliva, since he was unable to swallow. Eventually another doctor admitted Dad at around 6 in the morning and Jan went home. The next day, without consulting anyone, the neurology resident ordered Dad to undergo a steroid treatment with severe risks. This, apparently, led to the condition Dad is now in, hooked up to a respirator and feeding tube, restraints attached to his arms so that he will not pull out his various tubes and IVs, barely aware of what is going on, under sedation, with very shaky prospects. When we go to visit him he seems barely cognizant. One eye is shut tight, a result of the myasthenia, and the other seems scarcely able to focus. Last night I couldn't tell whether he was awake or sleeping and, if awake, whether or not he was aware of my presence. We learned on Friday that Dad now has pneumonia.

So this has been a nightmare. That they subjected Dad to this without consulting anyone is simply criminal. It is almost unbearable to watch the suffering he is undergoing.

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**Sat. 9/24/11--12:17pm**

I am in Miami again, staying this time at the Sagamore Hotel in Miami Beach, another choice of Jan's. I flew in yesterday morning. Dad had a tracheotomy done yesterday, which theoretically should make him more comfortable, able to breathe directly from his throat without a tube going

down his mouth. So far we have not seen any gains in comfort. He looked very agitated and in physical distress when we saw him last night.

What is happening here remains terrible. We do not know if Dad is going to recover, and if he does recover what his life will be like afterwards. He seems more alert and responsive now than last week, but the tracheotomy makes him unable to talk, a great frustration for him and us. He does seem to be able to nod and shake his head in response to questions, something he was not doing last week when I was here.

We continue to feel that the hospital he is in straddles the border between negligence verging on the criminal (and at times over the line) and just general apathy. When I arrived to see Dad this morning, for instance, the nurse was giving him Seroquel for pain from his surgery. Last night immediately after his surgery, though, we were told that the doctor wanted him on nothing stronger than Tylenol, which might have added to his discomfort all night. It seems that what he is 'allowed' to be on depends on who happens to be overseeing his care at any given moment, and this keeps shifting. Meanwhile, he is obviously in great distress.

Only my brother Danny and I are here today, but Jan is to arrive later, at 6pm.

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**Mon. 10/2/11**

Dad is talking.

Somehow, even with the tracheotomy, he is able to utter some very gravelly words. On Friday night he spoke of how scared he was and how alone he felt.

“Rick, I always thought that I would be able to deal with anything but I can’t deal with this. Don’t leave me alone here.”

I tried to reassure him that we were all there for him, with him, that we all loved him, and even when we weren’t in the hospital room with him we were thinking about him and attending to all that is going on with him. “Take that love into your heart and hold it there” I said to him.

“Thank you” he said. Since then, though, when I’ve called, I haven’t been able to have a real conversation with him. He has been too tired.

But my sense is that he is touching some very deep existential dread and loneliness. I have been very afraid for Dad because of the degree to which he has lived according to a strategy of ‘tough it out.’ Weeks ago, before he entered the hospital, I suggested that maybe he should start going to synagogue – if only for the social contacts. He was rather scornful of the idea.

I have been afraid for Dad ever since my experiences in the Ashram. It has always seemed to me that he, more than my mother, would have a very difficult time dying. His psychological strategy for dealing with negativity has always been denial – and he is a master of denial. But what happens when denial is no longer possible?

I feel I would like to talk to him about his feelings about death, his feelings about what happens. I have spent so much of my life thinking about these things, about religion, God, death, and I feel like I should be able to offer him something as he faces this – but really I don't know what I have to offer... Maybe talking about it would just make him more frightened.

At the Ashram, and afterwards, I went through some very hell-like experiences, and I wonder if he is going through something like that, or will go through it. I'd like to be able to tell him that it will be all right, that he has to have some faith. Hell won't last forever. But I don't know how to begin to broach this with him, especially in his enfeebled condition.

Anyway, next Saturday is Yom Kippur and I am torn between spending it trying to be with Dad at the hospital or staying here and seeing if it might become an opportunity for Pam and me to try to repair our very broken marriage.

I don't want Dad to feel so alone. Would my being down there make a difference? Jan is there now. My sister Julie is planning to go down for the weekend. I am not sure what I should do.

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**Tue. 1/10/12--6:34am**

Things fall apart.

I am in Florida visiting my Dad for a few days, after spending the week outside San Francisco, in Stinson Beach, visiting Pam's father.

My own father went back into the hospital last Thursday because of swollen ankles. Julie, who was there with him, called to say they thought it might be congestive heart failure. It turned out to be a urinary tract infection. Still, they kept him in the hospital from Thursday to Monday (yesterday), when he was finally discharged.

He is almost totally incoherent. It is impossible to have a conversation with him. I can't even tell if he knows who I am. He talks on and on, in what at first appears to be meaningful thought but then turns out to be totally confused, as if he had begun to say something meaningful but then lost the train of it a few seconds later, only then to start on something else and get lost again.

At times he will seem to be talking to the air, as if there is someone else there. He can't feed himself, he can't stand up, he is totally dependent on his Haitian aide, Lovely.

Jan says this is the worst he has been.

At one point he looked at me and asked where I was from.

"Boston," I said.

"Oh, really? I have a grandchild in Boston."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I'm his father."

“Oh!” now smiling, Of course you are!”

This was actually one of the more coherent exchanges I had with him yesterday.

As for me – I feel as if things are falling apart all around me. I feel horror over what is happening to Dad and at the same time am left wondering if everything is all just meaningless. If a human mind, a human soul, can unravel so entirely like this, what meaning can life have? What, then, is my own mind but a patchwork of elements that will also one day come apart? What, then, is sanity but one variation on madness?

This was my belief in High School, that all is meaningless. I have been trying to find something better to believe in ever since.

But, of course, if everything is meaningless then meaninglessness is itself meaningless. And then you are left free (or at least able) to construct whatever meaning you choose, within the parameters of what you are.

Of the various religions, Buddhism seems the one that comes closest to capturing the truth of all this.

Anyway, compassion, love, still seem to me the most noble dispositions, even in the face of complete meaninglessness, despite how far I am from being able to really embody them.

Why am I so far from this?

Fear.

Fear comes from clinging. That is the Buddhist insight. One might think it would be the other way around, but from the Buddhist perspective the intention precedes and conditions the emotion. Because we intend to have things certain ways we fear they will not be, or will cease to be, those ways.

So give up the intention and the fear will go too.

From a Christian point of view one would say: have radical faith. And yet the language of faith itself creates problems to the extent that it leads one to expect or hope that God will bring things to a happy conclusion. Then, when the happy outcome does not materialize, one is left feeling rejected by God. One ends up struggling with feelings of rejection and resentment.

Is it better to give up on God?

It is paradoxical. To truly have faith in God one must give up expecting anything from God.

And perhaps it is just then that one will come to experience the peace of God.

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**Tue. 1/10/12--9:12pm**

Just returned to my hotel from Dad's apartment. It was a difficult day in many respects, certainly for him. I myself am feeling a bit calmer than I was yesterday, but still very frazzled.

Here is an example of one conversation I had with him this afternoon. I tried to write it down verbatim shortly after we had it:

Dad, turning to me with great intensity: "I want to ask you something!"

"Ok, Dad, what?"

"You...when you to your place...who makes the decision?"

"The decision?"

"Yes. Who makes...last night you went and...almost no one showed up so...wait a minute...I...who makes the determination...?"

"Determination about what, Dad?"

"That's a good question!"

"Are you talking about my job?" (He had mentioned my job earlier)

"No...yes...all right...I don't know...where is the facility...where they make the determination...?"

"What determination?"

Slightly annoyed: "There are determinations that are made...choices...so the question is, how much do they collect for that?"

"Collect? You mean, how much do I get paid? . . . For my job?"

"Yeah."

"Not much."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"No, I think you're wrong about that!"

"Dad, I'm not sure what you're talking about. Are you talking about you? Who makes the determination about your health, your medication?"

"Yeah. No...," then, in frustration, "Oh, I don't know..."

Here's another:

Dad: "Oh, how stupid I am!"

"Why?"

"I have a flight."

"A flight?"

"Yes, the flight...the flight...the flight this morning was...(points to stomach)...one, two, three, four. Four flights."

"Four flights?"

(distressed) "And now we have to go to the airport, right?"

"No, don't worry about that, Dad."

"Don't worry?"

"No."

"But we have to go to the airport."

“No we don’t, Dad, we don’t.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Looks off in dismay, “Oh, God...”

These were exchanges I had with him this afternoon when he was in his day program. Afterward he went back home and took a nap. I returned to see him around 5:30 and he seemed more coherent but depressed, perhaps even in pain.

“Let’s go already!” he kept saying.

“Go where, Dad?”

“Go. Go. Let’s get out of here.”

Lovely and I took him for a walk around his complex. Then, later, he sat at the table in his apartment in great distress.

“Can you get me out of this?”

“I wish I knew how I could help you, Dad.”

“I know you do.”

But again and again he would say, “Can you get me out of this?” “Let’s go already.” “Isn’t there a way out of this?”

I asked him if he was in physical pain but he didn’t seem to be. He had some pain in his stomach, as a result of the replacement of the feeding tube, but that pain, he said, was the least of his concerns.

“The physical pain is bad enough but this...it’s terrible.”

Finally he lay down to sleep and I left for the night.

### **Wed. 1/11/12--11:19am**

I am writing this from Dad’s apartment. He is sleeping on the armchair in the living room at the moment. According to Lovely he had slept through the night. When I arrived this morning he seemed relatively all right, although as the morning progressed he became increasingly distressed.

He will be sitting in his chair and suddenly look at me with some intensity and say, “Okay! Let me get out of here!” Or, with a sigh of deep depression will say, “Oh God...I don’t know what to do.” At one point he looked me in the eyes and said, “What do I do? Tell me?”

“Try to relax, Dad,” I say, or “I wish I knew what to do for you.”

“I know you do,” he’ll respond, “Thank you.”

But it is very difficult. How do I get him ‘out of this’? The problem is that at 89 years old, with dementia and various other physical problems, the prognosis is not good. I don’t know to what

extent his distress is caused by his physical condition, his mental condition, or just the general dread of coming to the end of life. Probably some combination of the three.

I ask, “Are you in physical pain?”

“Nooo, not really. A little. Oh, I don’t know!” and then, emphatically, “Can I get out of here?”

I have been reading a brief book that Jan left here called *Validation Techniques for Dementia Care* by Vicki de Klerk-Rubin. It discusses a technique for dealing with Alzheimer’s patients developed by Naomi Feil. The idea is to try to enter into the feelings of the sufferer so as to help them feel less alone in their suffering. One of the theses is that at this stage of life very old people are struggling to resolve feelings and issues that have remained unresolved until now, so as to die with some sense of peace. The book has been helpful for me to read, if only because it has allowed me to place what is happening into some kind of meaningful framework.

I have been trying to think about how to respond to all this from a religious perspective. The experience, together with my ongoing problems with Pam, have presented great challenges for me in my attempt to develop something of a faith life. What can faith mean in the context of all this trouble and heartache? Where is God? – a question that has been asked by sufferers the world over for millennia. If God doesn’t intervene to make things better, what exactly is one supposed to have faith in?

I am led again and again to the realization that faith cannot mean a belief that all will turn out well (if only one lives ‘rightly’ enough). The simple fact is that things often do not turn out well no matter what one does, and one will drive oneself crazy if one makes of this an occasion for self-blame over not having been ‘right’ enough.

Another thing that faith cannot mean, related to the first, is a belief that God will always bring everything to a positive conclusion. Things are not always, maybe not even often, brought to a positive conclusion. Things fall apart. Human life falls apart.

Will my father be able to come to a sense of true peace with himself before he dies? It would be nice to believe so, but very difficult to believe this when the ‘self’ with which he must come to peace seems to be disintegrating before our eyes. Who is the ‘self’ that is to come to peace with itself? Is there a deeper self, or soul, that is unmanifest and that survives the onslaught of Alzheimer’s intact? Maybe, but it is not obvious. Is one to have faith in this? Well, perhaps, but the phenomenal world provides little to hang onto in this respect.

To try to maintain this kind of faith one must either engage in increasingly virulent forms of denial, or have one’s faith shattered again and again. The world just doesn’t work itself out in a manner that validates this kind of faith. God, envisioned as an all-powerful person who could (if only he would) eliminate such horrors as Alzheimer’s, does not seem to act with the compassion that he himself demands. One is left resenting and feeling rejected by this God.

But there is a second kind of faith, though it is harder to articulate. It is faith in the goodness of love as love, compassion as compassion, and faith that – though believing this too is a struggle –

one's efforts to both express and experience such compassion gives life its fullest meaning and satisfaction.

"God," says St. John, "is love." This second kind of faith takes this statement quite literally, while accepting that God is *not* the power to set everything right, at least not in this world.

(Dad just woke up, so I will continue this later)

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**12:28pm**

Dad woke up in what almost seemed a good mood. He has now nodded off again.

"Hello," he said with a lilt in his voice, and a weak smile.

"Hello, Dad."

"How are you?," said Dad.

"I'm ok. How are *you* feeling?"

"Oh – I don't know...", smiling quietly, "alright, I guess."

"Well, that's good."

"You guys...you guys are doing very very nicely...considering...that it's difficult. This is not pleasant for you, I know. You guys...I give you a lot of credit."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Ok, ok. What will be – will be, I guess. I give you guys a lot of credit. (pause) So what now?"

He motions to get up out of his chair.

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

"I don't know."

"Well, if you would like to we can."

"Ok."

"Ok, so let me help you up."

"Wait a minute...I don't know..."

"Would you rather not?"

"We can... I suppose..."

We walk out into the hallway briefly and then come back. He sits down on the living room chair again and falls asleep.

Today I have been able to open to him and be present with him in a fuller and more centered way than I had before. I have been able to look into his eyes, feeling in myself a sense of peace, and focus on conveying to him love, intimacy, and caring. The book has helped me to find my own center and has helped with suggestions as to how to relate to him. Also, I suppose, it has taken me a couple of days just to adjust emotionally to the situation.

For my Dad, right now, to walk from one chair to another is itself an event, given that it is a struggle for him to stand up and walk at all. The walk is an enterprise that has a beginning, middle, and end. It is something to do. If I think about it from my own perspective I sink into despair. I feel a kind of claustrophobia imagining life confined to these narrow limits. But if I put my feelings aside and just focus on my Dad's I can accept that this walk across the hallway is,

for him, a meaningful activity, even an accomplishment. This is something the *Validation* book has helped me understand. By putting my own feelings aside and trying to enter into his I am able to be present with him – and that is no trivial thing.

And this brings me back to the question of faith.

What one can have faith in is the power of love as a good and an end in itself. That love is itself God's presence. One may hope that, ultimately – in the words of Julian of Norwich – “all will be well and all will be well and all manner of thing will be well,” but one cannot expect this to manifest in the phenomenal world – at least not in *this* phenomenal world. The struggle for faith is the struggle to remain in touch with this love/compassion in the face of the inevitable darkness one must face in our world.

‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’

The promise here is not that the valley of death will disappear or be transformed into a valley of sunshine, but that spiritually, through faith, one will be able to endure it – ‘walk through it’ – in peace.

This, then, is a second form of faith. The problem is that the Bible suggests again and again that one can count on the first form. So one is always having to translate its terms into these other terms. This is one of the appeals of Buddhism. It presents this second form of faith in an unadulterated way.

And yet...I really don't know what it would be like to be a Buddhist in a full-fledged sense, a believer in ‘no-self.’ Is there true joy in Buddhism? Is there ‘Christmas’ – a celebration of the creation? I love the beauty of the Judeo-Christian tradition. I love singing ‘Joy to the World.’ I love the tales of spiritual and moral redemption. I love the drama. I love the happy endings. I love the narratives. I love the warmth. I love the Christmas movies: *A Christmas Carol*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> St.* I love the music, ‘Silent Night,’ ‘The Little Drummer Boy.’ Perhaps most of all (and implicit in the rest) I love the emphasis on the sanctity of the person, the sanctity of person-to-person relations, the emphasis on love.

Still, to steep oneself in the language of the Western tradition is to risk, ever again, getting stuck in the first form of faith and then having to find one's way back to the second when the hardships of life make the first untenable. Then I find that Buddhism is helpful as a way of directing me back to the value of compassion for compassion's sake, with no other expectations. Buddhism understands that the world we live in falls apart by its very nature, and is able to maintain an affirmative stance in spite of it.

But then, as I feel happened with me today, once one does find one's way back into the spirit of peace and love something happens: One experiences its profound power – a power that *seems*, anyway, to conduct one into something greater than the particular moment one is in, something transcendent. Indeed, it seems to be just this transcendent space that makes the darkness of the present tolerable, not by promising a worldly resolution to this darkness, but by placing the present trouble into the context of something greater, something beyond, something redeeming.

It must have been some such experience that led St. John to declare: God is love.

Of course there is nothing simple about this second form of faith. To remain centered in this spirit of love/compassion (there are no good words for it, all words sound feeble and even somewhat fantastical when trying to express it) – to remain centered in the face of life’s darkness, anguish, fear, and many logistical challenges is extremely difficult. One is always losing it and then having to make one’s way back to it, with difficulty. And when one loses the ‘spirit’ of it the mere ‘idea’ of it can seem extremely thin, even Pollyannaish. “Love one another,” says Jesus. These words, *as* words (which we have heard so often they scarcely register), fail to convey the profound reality to which they point, the profound and difficult *task* being asked of us.

It is here that spirituality links up with questions of justice and ethics. It is through the rules of justice that one maintains a world in which the spirit of love/peace (feeble words!) is most fully enabled. Ethical relations are the structure through which the spirit of love is channeled. In an unjust world that spirit fails to flow, and people suffocate spiritually in consequence.

My father just woke up.

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**6:15pm**

I am on my flight back to Boston from Ft. Lauderdale, waiting for the plane to leave. I said goodbye to Dad a couple of hours ago, as he was lying in bed about to fall asleep.

When I told him I was getting ready to leave he said, “Thank you so much for coming. You don’t know how much it means to me. You have no idea.”

“I love you, Dad,” I said.

He smiled, “Thank you. Thank you.”

He lay down and fell asleep but awoke with a start a short while later. He sat up, frightened and distressed.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

“I don’t know...something...”

“Do you want something, Dad? Do you want to stand up?”

“I don’t know...I don’t know what I want, really. The one thing I *don’t* want is to become...”, he waved his arm in the air, “no place.”

He moved to stand up and I took his arm to help him.

“Let me go to the bathroom,” he said.

So Lovely and I walked him over to the bathroom. As he approached it he shivered, “Oh, its...brrrr...cold, cold.”

When he came out I helped him get back into bed. He rested his head on the pillow.

“God bless you,” he said to me, a phrase he uses often despite his professed atheism.

“God bless *you*,” I said.

He smiled slightly and soon fell asleep again. I left shortly after.

So...

Now I am sitting in the airport awaiting my flight.

I wish I had found a way of reassuring him that he would not end up ‘no place.’

A few times over the last days I have thought about broaching the issue of God with him, but I decided that doing so would not have the effect I would wish. His associations with the word are not mine. Every time I have raised the subject over the years he has responded with resistance, a kind of amused cynicism. Religion is a crutch, he believed, for dummies and weak people who cannot take life straight. His impression of religion mostly comes from watching TV evangelists.

Of course I also believe that religion is a ‘crutch,’ if we think of a crutch as an additional support for those who cannot stand securely on their own. The difference is that I don’t believe any of us can really stand securely on our own. I think we do a kind of violence to ourselves by pretending that we can. It is the human condition to require such a crutch, since we cannot be for ourselves our own ground.

Perhaps in the face of what he is going through he would now respond differently. Perhaps now he would be willing and able to see his own need for a ‘crutch.’ But I didn’t want to risk making him feel even worse than he already does, by invoking a God that, in his mind, could only seem malicious – and he was in no shape to enter with me into a theological discourse.

Here, by the way, is why getting the theology right is so important, why it is not just an intellectual exercise: When we get the theology wrong we undermine religion’s power to help people.

I did manage to say at one point, in response to one of his distressed questions about where he was going, that he should try to think about all the people who love him and who he has loved. This was my rather feeble way of trying to evoke in him some sense that he is not, finally, alone. But I don’t know if it registered with him.

I did feel that the inability to talk with him about God – about some good beyond this life – left a gaping hole. What can you tell someone who is reaching the end of his life when he anxiously asks ‘What will become of me?’ if it is not possible to refer him to a good that transcends this world?

I remember that many years ago he once quipped, thinking he was being very clever, “You know, eternity isn’t very long. Maybe 80 or 90 years, depending on how long you live.” The idea was that, since there is nothing beyond this life, eternity for each of us is just the span of our particular lifetime.

But this is not true, regardless of one’s faith. An individual life cannot be eternity, because eternity is limitless, but our lives are limited. They are limited, not only in objective time, not

only when we come to the end of life, but in our own ongoing experience, our own anxious awareness. We are anxiously aware of our finitude, of our having to come to an end, however successful we may be at distracting ourselves from this awareness with the busyness of day-to-day life. It is because of this awareness that, existentially, we can never truly mistake ourselves for God.

So we are not eternal. Either there is some kind of eternity for us to enter into upon death, or there is just “no place.” Those are the alternatives. Becoming eternal in our individual person is not an option. This is a truth my father is now having to come to grips with.

What will become of him? I believe in mercy. I believe in believing in mercy. I believe that when the Bible says “God is love” it means that love is, somehow, at the bottom of reality. One may fall and fall and fall and fall, and feel panicky and helpless in one’s falling, but eventually one will fall into that love. That’s what I believe. That’s what I believe in believing. So I believe my father will find his way into the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The rich man is bloated by his riches, by the power of his ego, by his worldly successes, and comes to believe that he can rely on himself for his existential support. But to enter the kingdom of heaven one must have the humility, the ‘smallness,’ the admission of weakness, that allows one to recognize oneself as but one tiny part of the vastly greater whole.

Humility was never one of my father’s strong suits.

When the disciples heard Jesus say this they were shocked. “If it is so difficult to enter the kingdom,” they asked, “then who can be saved?”

But Jesus answered: “With God all things are possible.”

So I believe my Dad will make his way through the eye of the needle. It is not an easy passage – and until one begins to see the light at the end of the tunnel one can feel trapped in the darkness, the darkness created by one’s own enclosure in oneself.

But eventually one will fall through. This is my faith. The darkness cannot sustain itself indefinitely because, ultimately, it has no ‘itself.’ The darkness is the shadow produced by one’s own self-enclosure, blocking the light. As one grows weaker one’s power to sustain oneself diminishes, to one’s own horror – until, finally, one is forced to let go, to give up, to die. But when one dies to oneself one also dies to one’s darkness. And when one dies to one’s darkness one is opened, finally, to the light.

That’s what I believe. That’s what I believe in believing.

The ‘no place’ my father fears is the darkness of his own powerlessness. But perhaps one’s very powerlessness is one’s salvation – for it means that, in the end, one really hasn’t the power to *be* alone. Precisely because one is not God, one cannot sustain oneself in aloneness.

Somehow I sensed years ago, when I was going through my own very difficult experiences, that death would be particularly hard for my Dad. I feared terribly that he would not be able to manage it, that he would not be able to make himself small enough to pass through ‘the eye of the needle.’ At one point I actually felt that I was going through some of my hellish experiences ‘for’ him, so as to make it easier for him – although this seems a strange and irrational thought. How could my experiences help him?

But today, somehow, I felt comforted for him, hard as it is to watch him suffer. I felt that, though there is doubtless more suffering to come, he will make his way into the light.

As for me – it has been a difficult few days and I am feeling emotionally drained, but not altogether depressed. I am grateful for the connection I felt able to make with him today.

I love you, Dad. God bless you. I am with you. Don’t be afraid. You are not alone.

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### **5/31/12 - Provincetown**

Things fall apart.

Perhaps more than any other religion Buddhism acknowledges this disturbing truth and stares it straight in the face. It is the nature of finite things to fall apart. The Buddhist solution is not to find a way to keep them together, but to transcend within ourselves the entrenched desire, which seems to us a need, to prevent their decay. Our struggle to prevent the finite world from being finite is what leads to our desire to control, deny, distort, exploit, etc. All the many foibles of human life can be traced to it. But these foibles are not chosen by us. We are hard-wired to be attached to the finite.

I agree with Buddhism here. We find this same insight, expressed in various ways, within all the great religions. The Buddhist answer is the cultivation of non-attachment together with a radical acceptance of the ‘emptiness,’ i.e., non-ultimacy, of the finite world. But there is a way in which Buddhism – at least from my perspective now – goes too far in its renunciation of the world. It seems to me the joys of finite life are not simply to be rejected, but to be put in their rightful place under the eternal that transcends them. To be able to do so also involves a cultivation of non-attachment, but not merely as a liberation from suffering, but as a liberation *for* living in the finite world as joyously and compassionately as possible.

We are to enjoy finite goods to the extent that we can without harming others, but we are not to idolize such goods. We are to recognize that the finite is inevitably, unavoidably, imperfect and subject to decay.

And this realization gave me some comfort last night, in thinking about my father’s deterioration, Jan’s breakdown, Julie’s outrage, Pam’s resentments, even the poor fish that Pam and I caught

with our four-year old son Gabriel yesterday afternoon, which we killed and ate for dinner.

I looked at its eyes in the pail after we caught it, as it struggled to breathe the all-too-thin air, and I seemed to see in them all the anguish of this anguished world: my father's deterioration, my dysfunctional marriage, my combative siblings, my sister's death, my ceaseless fears and confusions. I said to Gabriel, "Let's throw it back in the water," but Gabriel howled. He was so excited to have caught it. So I didn't.

How does one say 'yes' to life in the face of all this suffering? How does one say 'yes' without distortion, denial, cynicism, or evasion?

That is the spiritual question.

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**Fri. 8/10/12--6:46am**

In L.A., staying at Jan's with my mother. I am here to visit my father who is at a nursing home here (Sunray Health Center, on Pico Blvd.). Arrived yesterday and will be here until Tuesday.

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**Sat. 8/11/12--7:03am**

I am writing from Jan's house on Eastern Canal in Venice, CA. She has a beautiful place directly on one of the glistening canals running through Venice, just a few blocks from the beach. The weather has been gorgeous, blue skies, no humidity, in the upper 70s, low 80s – the kind of weather you wish you could somehow capture so you can have it with you all the time.

It is an interesting impulse – this desire to capture the beautiful weather – interesting from a Buddhist perspective. Come to think of it, it is interesting from a Platonic perspective as well. It is as if there is something – *beauty itself?* – that we deeply desire and that is somehow reflected in the beautiful day, as in a mirror.

Is Nirvana a renunciation of this desire for beauty, or its fulfillment?

Things are not so beautiful for my Dad. He is now nearing 90, in a nursing home here in L.A., suffering from advanced Alzheimer's. Among the things that makes this so difficult is that he is not totally out of it. He is aware of his incapacity, like a man in a mental prison. Now and then he will grimace and cover his face with his hands in frustration, although I'm sure the word frustration doesn't begin to express all he is feeling and going through. There is little we can do for him. Physically he is relatively healthy.

When I went to visit yesterday I found him sitting in his wheelchair in the hallway outside his room with a number of other patients. The nurse explained that they like to get the patients out of their bedrooms so that they won't feel isolated, even if their conditions keep them from really being able to socialize with one another. Dad was dozing slightly but when I walked up to him he smiled.

Does he know who I am? It's unclear. I think that sometimes he does and sometimes not. It's as

if his mind is in a thick fog. Sometimes the fog fully covers him, but sometimes it becomes less thick and he is more aware and alert. At those times I'm fairly sure he knows me, but a few minutes later he will look at me again, from out of his fog, as if he is not altogether sure who I am. Then he'll remember. That's how it goes.

Part of the problem is that it is all but impossible to have anything even approaching an ongoing conversation with him. Often I will ask him a question and he will not even respond, just stare out. When he does respond it is often with something incoherent that has nothing to do with what I asked. Every now and then, rarely, he will say something that seems related to what I said or what we are doing and then we can have a brief exchange. But this will rather quickly degenerate again into incoherence. And then, at times, it will be as if he really wants to communicate something. But then he will be unable to find the words and quickly become frustrated, and, because he is unable to find the words it is impossible to know and respond to what he was trying to say.

At one point I got him a cup of chocolate ice cream from the kitchen. When Danny had visited with me on Thursday afternoon he had done this. Dad loves the ice cream and opened his mouth for it enthusiastically while I fed it to him. When he finished the cup he opened his mouth for more.

"Sorry, Dad, there's no more. You finished it."

He opened his mouth again, even wider.

"Dad it's done. There's no more."

"What?" Now he looked angry, "No, no, no. More! More!

"But Dad there is no more."

"More!"

"Dad, you finished it. Maybe we can get more tomorrow."

He sat there looking very disconsolate, sulky, almost childish. He was angry that the ice cream had run out. Then I thought that perhaps I could get him another cup from the kitchen. I went back to the kitchen and asked the worker if I could have another, which he gave me. I fed that to him. He ate it, more greedily than happily, but seemed in a bad mood when it was finished.

He still wanted more and I wondered if he would continue eating ice cream indefinitely if it was available. Somehow the childishness of his reaction annoyed me, but perhaps I was just disturbed to see my father reduced to this. But then, why not let him have all the ice cream he wants? It is, perhaps, one of the very few pleasures he has anymore in life. Perhaps with each taste of ice cream there is a moment of escape. Why not give him all he will eat?

For the rest of the afternoon he was in a bad mood. He would suddenly grimace, look at me, and shake his head. Now and then he would bury his head in his hands. What was he thinking? I don't know, I can't know. But I imagine he was feeling the loss – of himself, of the life he'd known, of his dignity, of his hope. He was a man who had always been in charge of himself. He was always so pleased to tell stories about the way he'd overcome life's various obstacles to become a combat flyer in WWII, and then a successful businessman.

From one perspective, what is happening to him is just the natural course of old age. From another, it is a catastrophe of cosmic proportions. His cosmos is falling apart. For the first time in his life he is powerless to put it back together again, or even to flee from the wreckage.

“I’m so sorry, Dad. I’m so sorry you’re having to go through this.”

He looked up at me, smiled very slightly, and patted my hand affectionately.

“Child,” he said, pointing to himself, grimaced.

“You miss your children?” He had said this to me a number of times over the course of the afternoon.

“No. No. Me.” He pointed to his chest vigorously, his voice a mixture of anger and sadness, “Me. I’m the child.”

I don’t know if he was referring to the incident with the ice cream. Perhaps he just meant that he was feeling reduced to a childlike state of dependence and impotence generally.

Life is *dukkha*, says Buddha. We want to hold it in place but it passes away and falls apart. The beauty fades. The ice cream runs out. Eventually we ourselves fall apart. What I appreciate about Buddhism is that it looks at all of this without flinching, without denial or evasion – and offers a path beyond.

**Tue. 8/14/12--8:51am**

Last exchange with Dad before leaving yesterday afternoon:

“Dad, I think I’m going to have to go.”

He looked at me and nodded.

“Did you enjoy the Chinese food?” I said.

“Chinese food?”

“Yes, the Chinese food we had for lunch.”

“Oh, I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember that we had Chinese food for lunch?”

He just stared ahead, not saying anything.

“Ok, Dad. I wish I could do something more to make you feel better. I love you.”

He smiled at me for the first time that day.

“I love you. . . all, all, all, all, all.”

“I’m so sorry you’re going through all this, Dad, I’m not always sure how to help you.”

“Oh, I’m. . . I’m ok.”

“I just wish I knew what I could do to make things better.”

“It’s. . . I’m. . . I’m. . . life is wonderful.”

That last was a surprise. I think he said it as much to comfort me as for any other reason, but I also think he meant it as an assessment of his life as a whole. Life is wonderful. To be able to say such a thing under such circumstances is rather extraordinary. A lesson for me, if I can manage to learn it.

**Tue. 12/3/13**

Received a call from Danny last night, around 12:20, that Dad had died a few minutes earlier.

Many thoughts and feelings – not sure I want to write about them now. From all reports Dad went very peacefully – after, of course, a long period of great struggle beginning two and a half years ago.

It is wonderful that Dad finally died in peace. In many ways, the answer to my prayers. There is so much more to say, but – not now.

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**Sat. 12/7/13--11:45am.**

Thoughts for a eulogy, of sorts:

I have been thinking of what to say about my Dad, and in relation to my Dad's death – and the word that keeps coming to mind is a word that I am not sure is appropriate to say in this funeral chapel or in this context – but it is a word I almost feel I must say in order to express my thoughts and feelings.

The word is. . . bullshit.

I have actually spent a great deal of my own life thinking about bullshit – it has at times struck me as among the most important things to think about.

I remember when I was a teenager, sitting in my friend Izzy's house one afternoon, and asking him something like: "Izzy, what is life? What would you say is the meaning of life?"

Izzy said, "Rick, do you want to know what the meaning of life is? Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," I said.

"Life is bullshit. That's what life is. Life is bullshit."

At the time I thought this very funny, and I laughed and laughed – 'til the tears rolled down my eyes.

But later, I spent some time thinking about this, and what finally occurred to me was that it wouldn't be possible to think of life as bullshit, or to experience life as bullshit, unless one had some idea in one's mind, or some intimation in one's heart, of something that was *not* bullshit, something that was, in some sense, true or real or honest or good that the bullshit obscured.

I realized, in other words, that the idea of bullshit could not stand alone, it could only stand in some relationship to some idea of genuineness or truth, however vague.

So, though life as we tend to live it might indeed be bullshit, it couldn't be *simply* bullshit. That would make no sense; it would be like an up without a down, a right without a left, a closed

without an open.

I have spent a good part of my life trying to figure out what lies *beyond* the bullshit.

Now why am I talking about this at my father's funeral, of all places?

It is because of a feeling I had over these last days of my father's dying, and that I felt very strongly once he had finally died.

It was the feeling of missing my Dad. It was the feeling of wanting to talk to him again, "one last time," as people sometimes say.

But what was strange about this was that I also thought of all the many times while he was alive – he lived, after all, to the age of 91 – when I did not avail myself of the opportunity to talk with him, or be with him, and, beyond this, of all the many times when, even though with him, I was not *really* with him, at least not fully. And it struck me quite powerfully that the Dad I was now missing both was and was not the Dad I had known all my life. What I was missing – and now very powerfully – was some inner essence of my Dad, some inner core of my Dad, some Dad I had only managed to catch a glimpse of over the course of what, in human terms, we call 'a long life.'

It was this inner core of my Dad that I was missing, that I wished I could have one last talk with – or maybe, really, one first talk with.

What stood in the way? What kept us all our lives from touching each other at this level?

It was all the . . . bullshit.

But now, upon his death, in my heart, in my mind (it's hard to know how to put this into words) it suddenly felt as if all the bullshit was really very small, and that the essence of who he was was really much, much bigger – all the bullshit just stains darkening the surface.

Somehow, during life, these stains obscure the essence, but not because they are bigger or more powerful than the essence, but precisely because they are more on the surface. They obscure the essence the way a thumb held up in front of one's eyes can block out the sun.

And I remembered a story a Rabbi once told me of some Jewish tale of what happens after we die. He said that when we die the soul reaches God covered with black, thick, tar. God takes hold of the soul in one hand and hurls it across the universe, only to catch it in the other. He throws the soul back and forth in this way until all the tar burns away, and what remains is the soul in its original purity: a luminous, bright, crystalline sphere, joyous and at peace – which is who we all really are, beneath all the bullshit.

So why all the bullshit? It is there, of course, to protect the crystalline sphere, which feels itself imperiled in this scary world. My father liked to believe that he could be in total command of his life. He liked to believe in his own self-sufficiency, his own invulnerability. He took a quiet

pride in his superiority to the mass of people who required what he called the “crutch” of religion, or of social approval. The philosopher Nietzsche once wrote: “If there are gods, how could I endure not to be a god? *Therefore*, there are no gods.”

My father could have related to that remark.

And all of that is bullshit.

It is not in the nature of human beings to be self-contained and self-sufficient. It is not in the nature of an individual human life to be a whole unto itself. Rather, we are relational beings, deeply dependent upon the world in which we live, and the others with whom we live. The religious quest is but a reaching out for the ground, the home, the loving support that we, in our littleness, cannot provide ourselves. *If* we can learn to touch this ground – so, anyway, I’ve come to believe – then, perhaps, we can finally stop feeling so imperiled in our smallness and free ourselves from the need for all the bullshit.

And then, finally, we can stop missing each other. Then, finally, we can come to love one another.

Life without bullshit: This is what Jesus calls ‘The Kingdom of Heaven.’

So, since my Dad’s death I have been feeling how much I miss my Dad, and regretting how much I missed him even while he was alive. And yet, I could not miss him if I had not known a ‘him’ to miss. Beneath the surface, and really not so far beneath, was a man of great honor and integrity, courage and love, conviction and heart, obscured, but not altogether eclipsed, by the need my father felt to be his own support.

My father emerged into adulthood with a fairly clear idea of who he was supposed to be. He looked a little like Frank Sinatra in his later years and had something of a ‘Sinatra-like’ sensibility. His theme song might have been Sinatra’s “My Way.” The irony, I suppose, is that my father never really got to have things quite “his way.” He married a woman with very different social and political sensibilities than his own, and ended up having a bunch of kids who were very much children of the sixties.

When I was a teenager and young adult I tended to see my father as representing the “establishment” that I was rebelling against. He took pride in being a successful salesman and businessman. And yet, now that I think of it, he took even more pride, I think, in being, for years, the Chairman of the Long Island Better Business Bureau, an organization dedicated to business ethics.

And I remember one story my father told me, also with great pride, of how, as the young manager of a New York City appliance store, he arranged for a celebratory dinner to be given in honor of an old black janitor who had worked there for many years and was retiring. He was a person, my father told me, who had never really been honored in any way over the course of his lifetime. When he came to the restaurant and saw the long table that had been set up for his dinner, with its pristine table cloth and fine china, and saw all the people stand up to applaud

him, he burst into tears. My father told me that story numerous times. This was my father's heart.

And on the subject of heart, I remember another story my Dad told me about his relationship with *his* Dad, a story I will conclude with.

My Grandpa Louie, apparently, was a gambler. He gambled with bookies in Brooklyn on the horses. Dad told me that every now and then, not all that infrequently, Grandpa Louie would gamble away his weekly paycheck and then would be too ashamed to come home. It was Dad's job, he told me, to go find Grandpa Louie and bring him home.

Grandpa Louie was never hard to find. Dad could count on finding him, as if by prearrangement, on the same park bench on Utica Avenue every time. He would always be sitting there, in great remorse, waiting for Dad to show up. It was Dad's job to convince him to come home.

Now Dad knew, and Grandpa Louie knew, and they each knew that the other knew, that Grandpa Louie would eventually agree to come home. But still there was a ritual they had to go through. Grandpa had to say something about how worthless he was, and Dad had to say something about how they loved him anyway, and Grandpa had to say that he couldn't face the family, and Dad had to say that everyone wanted him home. And this would go on for a while. Eventually, though, Grandpa would stand up and the two of them would make their way back home.

Now I should say that when Dad told this story there was never the slightest trace of anger or bitterness in his voice. He had the greatest love and affection for his Dad. Everyone, he told me, loved Grandpa Louie. And I always got the impression that there were two lessons my father took from this experience, two lessons that may have been in some tension within him throughout his life: The one was that there was a *proper way* to do things, that it wasn't good to be as weak and undisciplined as Grandpa Louie was, that it caused all sorts of pain and hardship and was, somehow, contemptible. And the other was that you had to love people anyway, no matter how much they failed to do things in this proper way.

My Dad loved his Dad, despite everything. He saw through him, through the bullshit, to the goodness beneath, to the frightened goodness beneath. And as I think now about all the horror my Dad went through in his last years, I wonder if this wasn't life's way of forcing him to face his own fears, his own vulnerabilities, his own weakness, to cut through the bullshit of his well-fortified ego so that he could touch the core, the luminous, though fragile, core of goodness beneath.

Anyway, that's what I'd *like* to believe. And I'd like to imagine that as he makes his way into that after-death realm – whatever its nature – somehow he will find Grandpa Louie waiting for him there, maybe sitting on a park bench, gazing out upon some celestial Utica Avenue. And he will walk up to him, and sit down next to him, and they will talk, perhaps more simply and honestly than ever they could in life – and when they are done they will stand up, shake off the dust accumulated through two long lifetimes, and, gathering themselves together, the two of them, arm in arm, will make their way back home.

I love you, Dad.