

## **"Today is a Good Day to Die"**

### *Up Up and Away*

The union between life and death is a great paradox. For it seems to me that life and death are two sides of one coin. Never are we more fully alive than when we enter into death-not the last death, but the many small tastes of death we are often forced to sip as we drink from the cup of life. The Buddha teaches that "one who doesn't die a thousand deaths dies in misery." It's the idea that life is preparing us for death along the way so we can go into the final death more willingly because we've gotten use to it. Those, on the other hand, who avoid death, can be shocked and suffer greatly when it finally catches up to them all at once.

Facing these little deaths builds stamina and strength, the way a weight lifter's strength increases the more he or she lifts. Lifting several hundred pounds would be impossible for most of us, unless our bodies have first gotten use to doing so by gradually lifting more and more, continually putting our muscles through the routine of breaking down and rebuilding tissue. Each time the broken muscle, worn down from the stress of bearing a heavy weight, rebuilds itself, it comes back stronger than it was before. There is a Native American saying, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger." How often in your own life have you felt worn down from the stress of bearing a heavy weight? Would you go back and change the past if you could? Or did it make you stronger?

There is another Native American saying, "Today is a good day to die!" Most of us would argue that tomorrow might fit our schedule better, and if we could possibly put it off another fifty years, it would be just great. The point being that we seem to want to avoid death as much as possible. Again, by death, I'm referring to the many stages of death we experience during our lifetimes-pain, loss, grief, and separation in any form. In this avoidance we see the other side of the paradox, that those who live by avoiding pain, loss, grief and separation are already as good as dead. They are as good as dead because the only way to avoid these common life experiences is to become disconnected from the earth-leaving the earth is death.

The way we leave the earth prematurely is by ascending into our heads, into the realm of ideas, where we don't have to deal with reality. There are several ways this kind of departure from living manifests itself. One way is through intellectualism. The idea is that if one thinks about life one doesn't have to deal with life. If confronted with two choices, two doors, one that says "Heaven" on it, and another that says, "Lecture on Heaven," the intellectual will go to the lecture, rather than experience the reality.

Intellectualism is usually a departure from emotion and desire. Emotions can be painful and desires can be disappointing or go unfulfilled altogether. By going into the head we can become cold and rational, dealing with mental constructs and mathematical precision, undisturbed by the heat of passion and emotional let downs. Thoughts and ideas can free us from pain, because, like birds, they can fly around freely, moving about wherever they want, ungrounded and disconnected from reality.

Another manifestation of the ascent into the head is idealism. You don't have to be terribly smart to be an idealist, you just need a grand or lofty idea about how things ought to be. Idealists are often rather utopian in their thinking. They don't wish to engage in the real world, so they'll create a better world in their heads, then try to make everyone and everything conform to it, without concern for the facts, or the experiences and opinions of others. Hitler and his ideal for Nazi Germany is an extreme example of just how dangerous this sort of ascent into the head can be.

A less extreme example involves the group PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. In the real world, animals have few rights, if any. PETA wishes to change this by creating a new world which conforms to its ideal world in which animals are treated equal to human beings. While I certainly respect their opinion, and likewise feel we don't appreciate and respect animals the way we ought to, I have some trouble with the way PETA goes about making its point. For example, they're engaged in a campaign to convince Christendom that Jesus was a vegetarian. If you don't believe me, you can log on to their web site at [www.jesusveg.com](http://www.jesusveg.com). Their elaborate arguments are completely absurd and ungrounded in honest and genuine regard for the facts. They posit, for example, that Jesus actually fed seaweed to five thousand hungry pilgrims, not fish. They support this argument with a ridiculous and unfounded interpretation of the Greek word for fish. This is an example of how an idealist attempts to force the real into the ideal, in order to avoid what is real.

Another manifestation of the ascent into the head, closely related to idealism, is the kind of extreme judgment expressed in fundamentalism, which quite literally means "mental foundation." In this head trip life is reduced to a system of rules and regulations from which oneself and others must never stray. Again, they don't have to experience life as it is, because they can force their environment and those in it to experience life as it exists in their heads by making them obey the rules. By doing this they can simply ignore the life experience and refuse to question authority.

Many people, for example, believe the Bible is the word of God. They often believe this for no better reason than their parents told them so. Even though the world is full of other religions that also claim to have the truth, the fundamentalist refuses to question the unexplored beliefs stuck in his or her head. Again we see that idealism chooses to ignore experience while clinging to ideas. Fundamentalism is a form of ignorance because its proponents choose to ignore what they don't wish to experience.

Finally, another kind of head trip, which may surprise you, is ungrounded spirituality. Spirits, like ideas, are in the air, ungrounded, just as the Greek word ?????? means both wind and spirit. Because they don't have a necessary connection to the earth, spirits can lift us out of our pain so we don't have to feel life. This can be seen quite literally in the use of alcohol, a form of spirits, which can numb us to our pain. Other forms of spirituality can do the same kind of thing by giving us the feeling of floating, of being "above it all." Like intellectualism, idealism and fundamentalism, ungrounded spirituality accompanies a certain arrogance that says we are above the pain of living, the grief of loss, the fear of uncertainty that are the companions we mere mortals, those stuck down here in the land of the living.

We've all met people like this, and have, perhaps, even allowed ourselves to be raptured and rescued from our emotions by dwelling with the spirits for a time. What we don't realize while we're up there floating around in our heads, with our lofty ideas, dizzy and intoxicated in the absence of pain, is that the world of the living, real human beings see us as flakes. We think we're offering them spiritual enlightenment from our fount of wisdom, so they too can become so light that their feet don't have to touch the earth and they can stick their heads in the clouds. But those who are well grounded can't connect with those who are disconnected from the earth. Marie Louise Von Franz says, "The one thing dreaded throughout by such a type of [person] is to be bound to anything whatever. There is a terrific fear of being pinned down, of entering space and time completely, and of being the one human being one is."

But, like Icarus, whose wings melted when he flew too high, too close to the sun, eventually these folks come crashing down to earth. How, then, will they survive such violent contact with reality if they haven't been working it out all along, testing the waters, getting use to it, dying a thousand deaths?

***Dust to Dust***

Don't get me wrong, there is nothing innately wrong with using your head! It's just that we must let our ideas be balanced and grounded by experience. I like to consider myself somewhat of an intellectual. I love to play with thoughts and ideas. But the humility I've achieved in recognizing my connection to the earth, my limitations, my lack of control over the forces of nature, and the uncertainty of it all give me grounds to question my ideas and, therefore, respect the ideas of others.

As for being a fundamentalist, we all start off that way. Children learn to think in very fundamental terms-hot and cold, good and bad, black and white. Children are also stuck in their heads a lot because they have to use their abstract ideas and imagination about the world to make up for their lack of experience. Similarly, most of us go through an idealistic period during our youth. But as we begin to gain more experiences of our own, our ideals become less certain and we tend to use our imagination less.

We are also most spiritual when we're children. Children are like little spirits running around spreading lightness wherever they go. They really do run everywhere too, in the house as well as outside, because they're so light it's still easy for them to quickly fly over the face of the earth. But, again, as they grow and gain more experience their bodies become heavier, weighted down by the gravity of their situation, and it is not so easy to run anymore. Hopefully they will discover that walking can be just as rewarding, taking the time to feel the earth under your feet as you walk the path of life.

My point, again, is that using our minds is part of our initial experience into life. But, as James Hillman reminds us, we grow down, not up. We start off in our heads, then deepen ourselves by letting our roots penetrate and connect us to the earth. But the pain associated with life makes us want to stay up there in our heads so we don't have to feel it. If this is the case, however, our mind doesn't have the opportunity to mature, our thoughts are not broadened and balanced with experience.

Growing up, maturing, can only happen if we're willing to experience life, in all its variety, with all its pain and its pleasures. I love in the Genesis story when Yahweh tells his children, Adam and Eve, they must leave Paradise, symbolic of the child waking up to reality. In the story he tells them what their relationship to the earth will be;

...through painful toil you will eat of it of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; from dust you are and to dust you will return.

If you'll pardon my crudeness, to paraphrase here, Yahweh is telling his children, "Life's a bitch and then you die!" Isn't this what a loving parent does? Life is hard work! If you're going to survive you've got to get use to it! By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground! We mustn't shelter our children from life but help prepare them for it, help them grow down, make the connection to the earth, become well grounded.

One of the greatest compliments we can give is to say a person is "down to earth." Isn't it refreshing to be around such people. Their not flighty or terribly energetic. Rather, their usually quiet and calm because as they've matured they've mellowed and become use to the difficulties of life. Nothing really gets to them anymore, there are few surprises. The wisdom of age, is the wisdom of experience. We cannot mature, complete ourselves, unless we're willing to experience life.

### ***Earthbound***

I'd like to take some time now discussing a few of the social ramifications of being stuck in our heads. I don't believe being disconnected from the earth is merely an individual problem. In fact, it's probably passed on to individuals through the greater culture.

I learned recently that the Greek word for Pagan comes from the word meaning farmer. Christianity was originally the religion of city folks who looked down upon their country cousins because of their close connection to the earth. So, inherent in our culture is this idea that working the earth, and letting the earth in work us, is a bad thing, something evil that we must avoid at all costs. Instead we should dwell in heaven, in the clouds, with our lofty ideas, work toward our goals "up there," rather than work the ground "down here."

Where has this kind of thinking gotten us? In always moving toward an ideal goal we'll have abandoned the very earth that sustains us. The disregard for and destruction of our environment has reached critical condition. We must come back down to earth before it is too late! Our technology allows us to build taller skyscrapers so we can dwell high above the earth, and faster computers so we can send our thoughts anywhere in the world in an instant. The entire time we're leaving the earth behind, treating her as an object for our use, a cold dead thing, a resource, rather than as a living being with whom we are intimately connected. We need to all settle down, become grounded like the Aborigine who sings;

Tree...

He watching you.

You look at tree,

he listen to you.

He got finger,

he can't speak.

But that leaf...

he pumping, growing,

growing in the night.

While you sleeping

you dream something.

Tree and grass same thing.

They grow with your body,

with your feeling.

As a society we have also become disconnected from each other. Our rigid ideas about the way things ought to be won't allow for diversity of opinion. We don't like those who are different, who have a different way of life, a different idea about how life ought to be lived. But if we could begin to appreciate the earth for what she is, our great

mother, then we would begin to see she has given birth to all her children and loves them all equally. To respect the earth is the beginning of respecting others, as well as ourselves.

Finally, as a society we are disconnected from ourselves. This can be seen in many ways, in the superficial way we are taught to live our lives, in the pursuit of money and things and power. It can also be seen in the way so many of us shun our sexuality. Nothing is more earthy and gritty than sex. Yet we continually have the need to make it something else, something transcendent, as if it can't have meaning in the simple fact that it is pleasurable. It must be a form of love, of intimacy, of spiritual connection, of holy matrimony ordained in heaven. If it isn't these things, it is wrong and something we must be ashamed of.

Just last week, as I was listening to New Dimensions on the radio, I heard the guest say we must be extremely careful of who our partners are because of energy exchange. The more we have sex with someone the more of his or her energy we take on, therefore, we must make sure we're energetically compatible with our sex partners. I looked over at Peggy and said, "I think the ladies full of poop!" It's not that I don't believe in the subtle energy body. As many of you have heard me say before, I believe we're mostly energy, that we're energy beings. However, the woman's comments seemed to me to be just another cover up of sexual shame. We feel we must have a lofty excuse before enjoying sex.

Some of you may remember my mentioning Priapis in the past. He's the Greek god of the garden. He's depicted as a short potbellied fellow who always goes about with a rather prominent erection. The Greeks use to place a statue of him in their gardens to scare away the birds. Being connected to the earth, not trying to transcend it and make it something it isn't, helps us scare away all the lofty ideas that keep us in our heads.

The point is, we mustn't try to transcend our earthly experience by ascending into our heads, forsaking our own passions, emotions and experiences, or rejecting and hating others simply because we can't seem to connect with them, and finally, by injuring the great mother who sustains us all.