

Tastes of Existential Trust

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Never thought much about dying growing up. Oh, at 7 or so there was the time I went on a boat ride in a new boat built and driven proudly by Kent, our neighbor's son-in-law. My dad, Kent, and I were docking the boat after a brief ride on the Mississippi River, when I had a taste of something new, a strangely unconscious experience of danger. Kent was tying the boat up at the dock while Dad stood nearby on the dock and looked on. As I was getting out of the boat, I grabbed a post on the dock to pull myself up... And then all I could see was green. I was not panicked. Rather, I had no awareness of where I was – just green, pea green all around me. I did not try to breathe, fortunately. I just took in the experience. The next thing I knew I was on the dock, dripping wet, having been pulled out of the river by Kent, who hoped beyond hope that I would be under the red cap he saw just below the surface of the water. I was. Dad was planning to jump in to help – but Kent warned him that we were in 16 feet of water, and since Dad could not swim that would not be a good idea. Kent never got over this incident, and soon after sold the boat he had spent so many months constructing. I can just imagine how Dad was affected by all of this also. Retrospectively I am amazed that never did I experience panic or fear in regard to this incident. The only impact I remember was my brother Paul and I having to take swimming lessons at the Y – I hated swimming lessons, even hated water, but learning to swim became a requirement by Dad, and understandably so.

As I grew up death visited some of my relatives – including two grandpas and one grandma, but I did not seem much affected. Then just a month before my thirtieth birthday I got the call from Jane. It was Saturday, September 23, 1972. I was at work, not at all unusual for me. “Hi Gary, Aunt Edna just called from Quincy.” Pause. Then, “Your mom and dad were driving to visit grandma in the nursing home when their car went off the road and crashed head-on into a bridge abutment. Both were killed.”

Eight hundred attended the funeral at St. James Lutheran Church – a full capacity gathering. Mom's and Dad's coffins were at the front of the church. Uncle Len, Mom's brother, had flown in from Chicago on his way home to Portland, Oregon. He shepherded my brother and me through this trying experience. By the time of the funeral, though, I remember the peace I had – Mom and Dad were in Heaven now, away from pain and suffering. A few months later on a visit to the cemetery I noticed the words “Asleep in Jesus” on the back of their fresh tombstone. That seemed strange to me at the time. A little overstated for what I had experienced of their faith. The impact of their sudden death on me was for me to take far more seriously my Lutheran, rather, my Christian roots. After Mom's and Dad's deaths I was under the tutelage of Uncle Len who now sent me sermons – and ones to which I quickly subscribed myself. Sermons by the then-becoming-popular Evangelical preacher Chuck Swindol, and by John Mitchell, Founder of Multnomah School of the Bible in Portland Oregon. I took in bible in a big way.

I did not think much of death in my plunge into Evangelical Christianity. I just enjoyed the bible study, teachings and discussion. The central message was the familiar: Jesus dying for my sins, bearing the punishment for my sins, so I could go to heaven when I died – but this was mostly a head thing and not a heartfelt experience. In fact if push came to shove I probably did not really *believe* all this in a sense of inner Knowing – the punishing God piece in particular. It stood simply as a piece of the dogma. And in the end, the dogma did not stick. I left the church in my 57th year.

Leaving the church in 1999 was not a big deal when it happened, but just a more honest reflection of where I was with God, or rather with the Lutheran Church. Still upon leaving there was an anxiety about life – mostly psychological stuff, beliefs about how life worked, the old familiar Lutheran unworthiness that plagues many folks brought up in these more conservative Christian traditions.

So where am I today – now twelve years after leaving the church and eleven years into Pathwork, my spiritual path of choice, and many years also into other psycho-spiritual practices and teachings?

I find I am quite comfortable with the Pathwork notion of death. Simply stated, the Pathwork Lectures would say, “So Gary, how would you know about death anyway since you have not yet experienced it?” That feels most true to me. Oh I could cling to beliefs about reincarnation (which the Pathwork Lectures say is true). But, wisely it seems to me, the Lectures go on to say that this reincarnation is not some dogma we should believe in for pseudo-comfort just because Pathwork says it is true. Or I could cling to ideas about resurrection and life with Jesus in heaven, words that comforted me after my parents died. Any of these ideas could be true enough, but would my *mind*’s “claiming” and grasping onto these ideas deliver me from existential fear about death that may come up when I actually face death? I doubt it. It seems to me that whatever happens in death is part of our human experience – and as such, is to be lived through in honesty and integrity, not anticipated or faced by holding onto a body of dogma that says we will be “OK” because we *believe* thus and so or have *done* thus and so.

Faith, to the extent it exists in me, seems to have emerged slowly – and continues to emerge. Faith seems to be for me just *a gradual trusting of what is* – whatever “what is” may be. I know that at present I cannot, in integrity, cling to outside ideas for inner peace. A pastor friend of mine said, after I left the church, that if I were on my deathbed he would come to share with me the Gospel that would transcend understanding and give me comfort and peace for my facing death. I am grateful for his care and love, but would I reject him in my stubbornness, or succumb, finally, in a sense of truth in it all?

In a coffee time with Pat this past weekend she suddenly became emotional about something I was saying, something about “We didn’t die from the experience.” The experience was some risky sharing. But her thoughts went elsewhere. On a felt level she was experiencing what I had shared with her long ago – the trauma of my birth. I was Mom and Dad’s firstborn. They had gone to the hospital around 6:00 AM on Thursday, October 15, 1942. All was to be a normal birth, but things went off plan when it became obvious to the doctor that I would not fit through Mom’s pelvis. The result: an emergency C-Section around 6:00 PM. This morning at our coffee sharing Pat said she felt like she was experiencing my terror in the womb at birth – “I would die if somebody did not do something!” Just feel into that, she invited. And, she surmised, Mom would also be traumatized by this experience, the unexpected shock to her body. And I remember being told that in all of this commotion at my birth Dad nearly fainted in the operating room. “A field of terror all around,” Pat sensed. According to my aunt, the attending nurse, I came out screaming bloody murder. As I did, the anesthetist said, “Es ist vollbracht!,” a familiar German expression, Christ’s words on the cross as expressed in the German bible: “It is finished!” Perhaps, Pat observed, this terror of death was imprinted on each of my cells at birth as I came bursting forth. Perhaps. But was this all that different from a natural birth many have?

Steve Jobs died on October 5th. In a recent article in *The Week*, Steve Jobs’ sister was quoted by one of the editors. Steve Job’s sister was sharing Steve’s last words when he gradually slipped away into his own death. His last words? “*Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.*” After elaborating on these words of Steve’s exodus, the editor reflected, “In the end we will all find out what Steve Jobs was talking about. Meanwhile it’s somehow comforting to know that he was impressed.”

And yet I do not see the need to cling to Steve’s words as comforting. They may have been comforting for Steve. At that point, however, Steve was beyond needing comfort -- he was taking in his experience of death. By his last words he was perhaps just reporting on his experience. But that was his experience. And some day I shall have my own experience. Some day. And when I do I’ll finish this writing. Or not, of course. Maybe I’ll just be taking in all that is. And maybe that will be an “Oh wow!” Or maybe not. I can feel myself at peace as I reflect on these words, peace in my great unknowing. Perhaps a taste of existential trust – trust in Life, in God, and in the Essence of my being.