

I Nearly Died For This. Was It Worth It?



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Bio

Jonathan travels, writes, creates media, and meets with people to share what's been received. His essential function is to help remove blocks to awareness of our deepest being and live from the peace that pours forth. You are warmly invited towards this.

Jonathan has led an outwardly ordinary life, during which a long series of inner events pointed him towards relinquishing much of that life in favor of awakening and a radical falling away of egoic self.

Like to contact Jonathan with questions, read more of his work, offer comments or suggest topics? You're invited to be in touch with him at AssistTheSpirit.com/contact/. Thanks for reading!

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It's a bit arbitrary but we could say it started, roughly, when one of the docs said "You are going to be one of the few men that know the pain of birth."

But c'mon. How would *he* know?

The surgeons were preparing to remove a large amount of soft tissue from the back of my mouth and throat: soft palate, uvula, tonsils and other adenoidal tissues, as well as a few chips of bone from the skull behind my nose to solve a significant sleep apnea problem. The procedure is well known to involve an exceptionally painful recovery, which was high among the reasons I'd been discouraged from having it.

And no, this did not become one of those operating-table near-death experiences. It lasted much longer than that.

Other standard solutions to the apnea issue had been tried, including a CPAP breathing machine. Which...

Imagine you're already terrible at sleeping. Yet now, you're asked to strap an apparatus entirely around your head with a respirator clamped

over your nose and mouth. This is connected via bendy-but-still-kindastiff corrugated tube to a vibrating air pump, whining right next to your head on the bedside table. It is forcing air down your throat at a pressure and volume similar to sticking your face out a car window at 70 miles an hour, and makes your breathing sound like Darth Vader just ran up three flights of stairs. If this works, you'll be going to bed like this for the rest of your life.

Good luck. And as a 29 year-old single male, let's not even bother with the implications of getting someone else to sleep next to this.

Anyway. Despite taking a prescription drug to ease the nightly transformation into part-man-part-machine, I woke nearly every morning with the CPAP apparatus gone... having torn it from my head and flung it to the other side of the room in a dazed half-sleep tantrum I could barely remember.

Three weeks later I crawled into the doc's office so fragile and desperate from sleep deprivation I begged the doc to just cut my head off.

It seemed reasonably clear to all surgery was the only real solution.

The pain in recovery, I was told - using an appropriate metaphor this time - would be akin to breaking my leg, and having to walk on it. The body parts affected are in very nerve-rich areas, apparently, and you have to continue to use them - to breathe, to swallow, etc.

They were right.

I was released from the hospital after four days, into the care of my father who insisted on hauling me out to the farmhouse two hours away, to personally watch over my recovery. This was one of the most charming acts of love I will remember him for.

The hospital staff had made many suggestions: jello, pudding, popsicles, ice cream... that was the kind of stuff we should have on hand for the next week or so. This recovery should come with party hats and cake!

There was also a battery of narcotics, which barely touched the pain. They would take a certain fuzzy, foggy edge off, but it was like buffing the tip of an iceberg. The massiveness of what lay beneath crushed any possibility of normal functioning. So I mostly sat and stared in whichever direction I was pointed. A little drool here and there.

There was a generalized pain ever-present from the neck up, punctuated with a much, much sharper hammer-blow at the slightest twitch of jaw or throat or face. But the worst was if I tried to swallow something. There's just no way to describe it without sounding ridiculously hyperbolic, but here is, truly, the closest I can come: Imagine a trident - you know, the three-pronged fork usually pictured with a cartoon devil - and it's heated to 2000 degrees; glowing orange. Now, open your mouth... The middle prong is going to be shoved slowly down your throat, while the other two bend outwards, splitting your skull and bursting through your ears.

That's about right. I was barely capable of speaking at all; a whispered word or two at most. But a few days in, I was absolutely determined to eat something. I remember my father's face... I stocked up on the pain meds, and tried to swallow a bite. I saw the pain wash over him, helpless as he watched... as I contorted and buckled in silent, scream-less agony over a teaspoon of pudding.

But that wasn't the problem, even though I consumed only a few hundred calories or so over the week, quickly losing 12 pounds from an otherwise fit, healthy frame. My father couldn't eat for me, bless his heart. Having been sent home from the hospital under these conditions was absurd, but sometimes that's healthcare in America, I guess.

About four or five days into his care, in the middle of the afternoon, something shone through the haze with startling clarity on an inner level that was somehow apart from the haze; apart from the narcotics and pain. It was simply an inner "click," and as soon as it happened, I knew my body was starting to die. Clear as day... I understood, and felt in my bones, that the animating life force had just begun, slowly, ebbing away.

Strangely, this did not concern me. Not even a little. And it wasn't the drugs talking... How do I know? Maybe I don't. All I can recount is my direct experience: In the same instant as the "click," at the recognition of my body beginning to die, I saw with perfect clarity, *I was not my body*.

I was watching my body, but whatever was doing the watching - the "me" part; the observer - was still *not* my body. "I" and my body were two different things! This didn't even come as a shock... just as a quiet, obvious fact. The "me" part - the observer - was *not dying*.

This observer I identified with was an aliveness that reflected through this physical form, somehow, yet was a vitality so thorough and complete that it transcended the body entirely, which clearly, ever so gently, rendered the physical form a simple, neutral, clay. Whether the body was in pain had no effect whatsoever on this fundamental aspect of being... it was as vital as ever and totally separate from any pain. Whether the body was dying had no effect on it either. If the body remained, I'd be fine! And if the body were to die? No problem at all. This... alive beingness - this witness - couldn't be perturbed by any bodily condition. My "sense of self" was an aspect of consciousness that existed beyond the body; regardless of the body.

How freeing! There was more to come, but in this moment I experienced myself as this observer aspect of consciousness, freed from the suffering taking place in this body, and by extension, freed from the vagaries of *everything* taking place in the time and space in which the body appeared. Ordinary life still appeared to be happening, of course. My dad was in and out of the farmhouse throughout each day attending to home and orchard chores as he watched over me recovering. And as of this afternoon, my body had started to die. There was mind-bending pain in that body. To the physical perspective it wasn't pleasant at all. But I knew I wasn't the body.

Secondly, it appeared the life force was leaving this body at a relatively slow rate. It seemed there would be at least a few full days before the cessation would complete. This was already coupled with the

recognition that the body wasn't particularly important anyway, which made it impossible for any fear whatsoever to arise over these circumstances. So... I wasn't worried at all. Plenty of time to do something about this, if I wanted! Watching my body die was like watching the mercury slowly recede in a thermometer. Fascinating! And... absolutely no big whoop.

And again, my "sense of self" had been revealed to be grounded in this non-bodily, observing consciousness, that vitally "lit" this physical body, while the body itself was simultaneously seen as rather irrelevant. Understanding that the vagaries of the body had no impact on this non-corporeal "self" conferred a freedom of mind-altering proportions.

But then came the third recognition which blew me away, in a very literal sense, even more: As each iota of bodily life force drifted away, there was an equal, growing awareness of melting into an infinite vastness, in which even this non-corporeal "observer-me" - this sense of self that was separate and individuated but not physically embodied - *was losing its individuality*. The completion of this merging-into-the-infinite was obviously at least a couple days off. And breathtakingly beautiful.

This merging was not experienced as a loss in any way, but rather as a gaining of such proportions as to match this infinite vastness... The individuated sense of self dissolving into an ineffable whole of allness, without limitation of any kind. An overwhelming Oneness, one could say, in which there could be no sense of loss whatsoever because it was All. Nothing was missing.

It is essentially impossible to wrap one's mind around what is infinite; around what is all-encompassing peace and One without limitation. But that isn't really a problem, as it absolutely *can* be experienced directly, and from this perspective it was clear that this absolutely *would* be experienced by every seemingly separated soul that ever was or will be. Including you. At some point. Nobody can avoid the truth forever, it seemed.

Was the body in enormous physical pain? Yup. On heavy-duty pain killers? Yup. But again, this inner experience seemed to take place on a level totally apart from the pain and the haze. Everything else about existence seemed a little hazy, *except this*. Which finally made sense! The seat of the experiencer was entirely separate from the experienced. The staggering physical pain was present in a body, but because the body wasn't "me," it couldn't possibly disturb this overwhelming peace.

The pain didn't disappear, it just no longer mattered much. It had no real effect. Likewise, narcotics were fogging the brain and numbing the senses, but this observer was completely beyond the body; completely untouched by narcotic effects, which is why this aspect of being could remain so crystal clear.

In the midst of the pain and the dying body, a simple, quiet joy was the natural, default, response. How could it not be? If suffering of the body of any kind is irrelevant; if any bodily limitation at all is rendered moot, and one is steeped in the infinite from which nothing is missing, then how could there be fear? How could anything other than quiet peace be at hand? The body was tired, so the decision was made to go to bed. Sleep occurred, with a sincere restfulness that had been entirely absent since the surgery.

Whenever I awoke in the night and finally in the morning I "checked in" with this inner experience... Still going? Yup; the mercury was still dropping. The life force was ebbing away faster now, too. There was an impulse not to let it drop to zero, but I wasn't in any big hurry to stop it, either. As the body died a little more and a little more, merging with the infinite happened more and more. The exquisite, gentle peace... it really is quite beyond description. Lovely beyond belief. And yet, I felt for some reason, it would be turned around today.

It didn't even occur to me that my father should know my body was dying. More shocking to the conventional perspective, was that I was barely concerned about it myself. Explaining an "infinite merging" or that "myself" and "my body" were two different, unrelated things, one of which was basically irrelevant would not make any sense to my

very well-meaning father. I felt it impossible to articulate how the peace and beauty of these things were so all-encompassing.

Yet it made perfect sense to me. There was no urgency or concern in any way. Everything was fine, as every moment unfolded. And, as if happening on cue, when my father came to check on me again late that morning, his eyes narrowed and his face pursed... he took a longish look and said: Somethin's not right, Jonathan. I think we'd better load up the car. We're headin' back over to the hospital."

I dawdled for quite awhile, and assured him I was on board with the plan, but was not in a hurry. I had decided the mercury would not be allowed to fall to zero, but we still had plenty of time. At least until tomorrow, for sure. But we loaded up for the two-hour drive anyway.

The mercury was dropping further and notably faster as we drove. I could feel my body physically slowing down. Merging with the infinite was speeding up, which was delightful. I was in a fabulous mood... smiling, trying to crack a quiet joke or two, making fun of myself and this ridiculous predicament, trying to get my dad to laugh. When we got to the emergency room, I believe I asked how long the wait would be, and whether or not we could order a pizza. I thought it was hilarious. (drugs talkin?) Never mind I couldn't possibly have eaten one.

But I was in a great mood! This whole ride, since the day before, had been marvelous!! Before my body had started to die, this was pretty much hell. But since then... extraordinary!! This process of physical death was wonderful!!! (There... I said it.)

When it was my turn, the docs confirmed my body was, in fact, dying. And for the dumbest reason on the planet: dehydration. I'd barely eaten for over a week and drinking had been the same. It was the middle of August. I was never outside, but an air conditioned house out in the desert farmland where daytime temps easily reached toward 100 was dry as Mars. Narcotics apparently dry the system out too.

The fix was simple: they hooked me to an IV and pumped at least a liter of fluid in, maybe more. As soon as it started flowing, I felt the

mercury begin to rise. I felt that exquisite merging begin to reverse... The life force began to flow in, rather than out. And I was content with this.

The number one benefit was that the pain went away. Just because the pain had been rendered irrelevant over the past 24 hours or so doesn't mean it wasn't nice to be without it. It turns out, being extremely dehydrated causes pain to be more pronounced, and narcotics to be less effective. Within 10 minutes, I felt physically stronger, less narcotized, and more pain-free than I could believe. I was happy to be "coming back."

As we drove back to the farmhouse later that evening, I reflected... I was glad to be here. I liked being here, in this life. But wow... dying was marvelous too. Extraordinary. Exquisite beyond description. The door had been opened, these last 24 hours, and I had a clear choice to step through, if I wanted. Walking through that door could be seen as the most natural, easiest, most blissful choice one could imagine. Peace beyond all understanding. But I had decided it just wasn't time yet. I wasn't finished here, yet. So I didn't walk through the door. Simple as that. A clear choice.

I thought of my Grandfather as we drove. There had been a powerful hint of something warm and shining and radiant in his quietude at the very end of his life, a few years previous, but I hadn't been able to grasp at all what it hinted *of*. It tended to ignite a quietude and stillness within me, which we would share, and had evoked this feeling in me that "this is the right way!" even though I couldn't understand what that meant, at the time.

I instantly recognized his absence when I entered his room, two steps ahead of my grandmother. He had died peacefully in his sleep, and in his bed, innocuously and innocently remained the simple lump of clay. I barely understood.

But now? My goodness... Clearly, it was through him I had first come close to this warm, shining, limitless vastness, radiant in its quiet perfection, as it poured increasingly through his frail, disintegrating form.

Calling it light, or love - though apt - barely hints at the reality of its true scope.

I came to think of it as “The Great Rays shining through,” even though I wasn’t sure I’d actually seen something with my physical eyes.

I mentioned none of this to my father.

Over the next two days my recovery felt like it quadrupled. Pain was down to manageable levels. I was finally eating a little, and definitely drinking. I had to relearn how to swallow since so much tissue had been removed from my throat. If I did it wrong, whatever I drank would come dribbling out my nose. But that just seemed comical... and I got the hang of it quickly.

The choice had been made! I was intent on returning, and each step towards recovery and daily functioning was therefore a happy achievement, while yet pushing the bliss of limitless vastness and perfect Oneness further away.

Three weeks later I left the farmhouse for my own home and returned to the regular work-a-day routine. “Infinite merging,” “limitless vastness” and “all-encompassing peace” were no longer my frame of reference at all. I was once again operating from the mind-set that this body of mine should be guarded jealously... that it *was* me. This “merging into the infinite” business became a faded memory, much like a dream, easily forgotten and even more easily dismissed.

On the few occasions I recounted this story to others, I always left out the “merging into the infinite” part. I never spoke about knowing that “myself” and “my body” were two very different things; totally different orders of being, one of which was very nearly irrelevant. I’d largely pushed the notion out of my own mind. I certainly never tried to explain how one’s individuated sense of self could dissolve entirely into an all-encompassing oneness of infinite peace.

Especially that last one... I couldn’t figure out how to put it into words for years, and conveniently assumed most folks wouldn’t be able to hear or understand it anyway. In retrospect, I can see I wasn’t ready to embrace

it either. It was destined to marinate a long time, tucked away at the furthest fringe of my awareness.

I got busy being an adult. Perhaps you can relate. How does one reconcile the perspective of an all-encompassing oneness of infinite peace when running late to work?

I had no idea the power of these experiences would re-emerge over the next decade; that more challenges, experiences, and answers were coming.

Seven years after my grandfather passed, my grandmother had made it clear to all she was desperately tired of this dimension. She was 92 and had been in the hospice ward for a couple weeks. She had also opted to refuse food or water recently. Like me once - although for the opposite outcome - she had made her choice. I insisted on being present. Sometimes I held her hand; sometimes put a hand on her shoulder. Sometimes I just sat by. Her speech was nonexistent, but her eyes were open. She would respond with a look to my voice, so I spoke soothing words. She was obviously suffering. Though resolute, she also appeared afraid and conflicted, with every movement a torture and every shallow breath labored, quickening, and pained. Somehow, despite her clear choice, a part of her still resisted giving up the body.

I had pushed my own experience of dying so far away. It seemed so strange to actively wish death would find her, and never before had such a wish seemed like such a sincerely powerful, positive movement of heart, which stood most notions I still carried about death squarely on their head. Death is a horrible outcome? To be avoided at all costs?

Nope. Turns out, sometimes it's exactly what's needed. The very best thing that could possibly come to a person.

Wasn't expecting that. Not like this.

The other lesson clearly communicated by her was very, very simple: more resistance = more pain.

The beauty came in seeing her finally relax, out of that pain. She had to leave the body entirely to do it which, again, she had been clearly conflicted about, but when that conflict ceased, her moving on seemed to embody a release of pain and suffering so complete, so total, that only perfection and bliss could result. Absolute peace.

It is the peace that “passes all understanding” - to quote a popular source - and despite her condition typically described as one of great pain, suffering and drama, the sheer radiance of that peace - as she let go into it - made it impossible not to experience a touch of it directly, with her. I was filled to overflowing with an all-encompassing “Amen,” from a source I felt a kinship to, yet still couldn’t fully fathom.

Waiting at the eternal gates with someone; sharing a bit of their passage, had proved to be a remarkably beautiful experience. But it’s not like I *sought* to meet my friends and family there. It’s just what life brought.

My friend Lee was a little older than I - in her forties - but the gap wasn’t enough to remotely impact our friendship. We had met and shared some adventures during foreign travels, which created a bond that happily transcended distance, having never lived in the same state once we had each returned to the U.S., though we stayed in touch and occasionally visited each other when the opportunity arose. And now, life brought something unexpected to Lee.

Three or four months might be all she had, said the docs. Cancer. Despite debilitating treatments, she made a list of the things she must do and started hacking away with gusto, beating many odds in the process, ultimately squeezing three more years onto this earthly plane. She moved across the country to a small town in Oklahoma to be near family. She reconciled with her mom and sisters, renovated a small Craftsman home the way she liked, bought a new BMW for cash and drove it straight off the lot... She gathered many friends around her, held many dinner parties, arranged many photos, laughed much and loved many people. She witnessed the birth of her granddaughter. I had the pleasure, the honor; the

gift of basking in it: this incredible rush of life energy. Once again, that gnarled specter - death - an unexpected gift!

Lee wasn't frail like my grandfather had been. But I understood his lessons much more clearly, as Lee articulated them again for me. I saw again the Great Rays, shining through her... as her body cracked and groaned and faltered in her last months.

One day we were out on her back porch, overlooking the wooded creek she was so fond of and her reflections bubbled up: "Angry at my mother? My sisters? My ex-husband?" (There were stories... of abandonment and subterfuge and...) "I just don't have time! I can't see anything to do, nothing makes sense... except to drop it all. I know they don't understand... I just love'm how they are; *now*. It takes a lotta energy to be angry and I don't have it. I don't have time. Being angry is such a bother."

"This is why, Jonathan, as odd as it sounds, I'm grateful to this cancer. ALL the useless stuff... I know I wouldn't have seen it otherwise. To drop these burdens... I knew they were burdens, sure, but I didn't realize how burdensome, until I began to drop'm. And it's easy once you start, it's not forced. It's so darn nice to be without... you can't imagine how you were so inclined to hold on all those years."

"I wouldn't trade this for anything."

She said it.

"I can tell you... these last three years have been absolutely the best years of my life. I'm so sorry to go... I will miss so many people! And yet, I am shocked to say, going out this way... if this is what it takes to understand, then I can tell you without a doubt, cancer and all, it has been worth it."

And even when she wasn't saying it, you could see it. The Great Rays; bursting through. Radiant.

She died two months later, in her sleep, at her home.

I'd gone to a friend's house, to help her with a passion project she'd been working on for a year or two, which I'd done numerous times before. As soon as she opened the door, I knew something was afoot. Her husband just waved his hand in welcome, unusually perfunctory, and we wordlessly went our way downstairs.

Once settled in her basement studio, my friend started to completely unravel, to cry, and it was in that same moment that... there is no reasonable way to put this...

...I was overwhelmed by the perception my grandfather had just flown through the basement window, coming to rest slightly behind and to my side. My mind raced. I actually turned around to look. My balance was so thrown I nearly toppled off the chair I'd just taken. Yes, I'd heard of this sort of thing... This sort of nonsense! Visitations by dead relatives... But that doesn't happen to ME, my mind asserted, because IT'S RIDICULOUS.

Yet on the inner plane I was reeling, panicked and confused, unable to reconcile what was happening. My mind was throwing up every possible argument against this but it was failing... because of one unassailable problem: It was so real it absolutely could not be denied, *despite my vehement denial*.

Inwardly dazed and tearing up like her... My friend was trying to explain why she was having a meltdown and I was having an extremely hard time paying attention, except for the crux of her problem, which stood right out: Her aunt had just died.

As she explained this, she watched - clearly perplexed - as my left hand came to rest on my right shoulder, not knowing that my grandfather was standing right here with us, and had placed his hand on my shoulder. My hand came to rest on top of his.

I still couldn't believe it either. I resisted it - I did NOT believe... but my hand moved, and his was felt, as plain as day, as plain as anything I'd ever, undeniably, felt before. Him. Here. His warm, elderly hand on my shoulder.

I was frozen with confusion, but also knew I was busted... when my friend said, “Jonathan, is something going on with you?”

A long moment of silence passed... as my reeling mind tried to find a center, debating whether it was possible to answer her question.

Words spilled unaccountably from my mouth: “My grandfather’s here. He’s sitting right here, now, (I indicated the other chair at the table). He flew in through that window... I don’t know how to explain this.”

“He had just put his hand on my shoulder, that’s why you saw me do that. I put my hand on his. He was comforting me.”

“And he’s here to comfort you! He wants you to know that your aunt is totally fine, great in fact... that she’s as happy as anyone could possibly be. Everything’s fine. He’s the same... terrific... has been for years. In any case, you need not worry about a thing. He promises... she is doing absolutely great. All is well.”

I don’t remember what my friend said in response, though she appeared to genuinely gain some comfort from this. I was starting to relax a little too. I knew I had been grateful for my grandfather’s appearance from the start, even if baffled. But now I was starting to really enjoy it. Then things got even weirder...

“Um... was your aunt about five-foot-four? Kinda curvey, a little Rube-nesque?”

“Yes.”

I’d never heard of her aunt’s existence, much less having met her. She lived in a city I’d never visited, halfway across the country.

“Did she have sorta mousy brown hair, about this long?” I raised my hand just off my shoulders.

“Yes,” my friend said, with a quizzical look on her face...

“How about colors... did she like bright primary colors? Did she like to dress in bright colorful clothes? Polka dots... things like that?”

“Yes! Jonathan...?”

“Did she love the color purple?”

“No!! She hated purple!”

“Well, she’s standing about 8 feet behind you right now. Her overalls are covered in big bright colored spots, and she’s pointing to a little purple dot with a huge grin on her face, like she thinks it’s the funniest joke in the world. Even purple doesn’t bother her anymore... and she’s telling you... that’s how you can know... even purple is fine with her. Everything’s fine. She’s as perfectly happy as could be.”

My grandfather just sat there, radiantly delighted by all this. I looked at him, questioning reality, and he looked back at me, confirming that what had just happened, had in fact, just happened. And that everything was totally cool.

Holy mind blowers, Batman.

How could a reasonable person even begin to parse this? Is there anything to be proven by it? No. Does it confirm life-after-death? No. Extra-sensory perception? No. How about astral travel or the existence of ghosts? No. Is there any reason to formulate a beautiful story about the transmigration of the soul? None that I could see, that made any enduring sense, besides being a lovely story.

I can prove nothing. No rational mind can derive anything rational out of this. There was nothing rational about it. Besides, lest we forget, we are barely rational creatures. Our powers of rationality are merely a thin, fragile smear - an oily slick atop the roiling waters of our emotional, sub-conscious minds. But that’s another topic I suppose...

All I can attest - is to the experience itself, and to the change towards which this experience shoved me; startled. Now in the light of my mind, still somewhat grudgingly, were the notions that death was not what I had considered it to be. That “the end” was not quite how I’d envisioned; that there very possibly might be dimensions extant, about which I had previously scoffed, and that the persistently delightful, though usually

derided notion that my grandfather knew exactly what I was up to at all hours of every day, might be true.

In general, the notion of death just seemed a little less dark, a little less awful, a little less terrifying. As far as I could tell, her aunt and my grandfather seemed to be enjoying death immensely. That, as a general possibility, had never occurred to me. Not like this.

Death. Possibly... just possibly... not so bad. Possibly terrific!

And the world we live in? Possibly a lot weirder than I'd given it credit for.

A few years later, I received a call from my step mom that had me racing to the airport. I had been told what to expect, and went immediately to my father's bedside to find him hooked to all kinds of machines, drugs, and monitors, his body long into septic shock; unconscious. His sensory responses to touch, sight, and pain were all zero; his most basic vitals propped up by the machinery of modern medicine, yet still steadily eroding over the past 12 hours. He had gone through other significant medical issues of late - the details not particularly important - but this turn was still an unexpected left hook out of nowhere.

The nurse described him as "half out the door already." Yet he was about to teach me a lesson about how life and love, and the choices we make about them, are stronger than death.

It was obvious to anyone how alike my father and I looked, and that we definitely had similar quirks of expression, but there were also aspects each of us had long had a hard time understanding about the other. Like many young men, in my teens and early twenties I had struggled mightily with our relationship. But I had long since looked across whatever chasm divided us, with an increasingly clear awareness I didn't have to understand him completely to love him fully. I'm certain he felt similarly - that he was often baffled about how I looked upon the world and made choices about my pathway - but he just decided he was gonna love me anyway. We had been involved in each other's lives only sporadically during the

most recent years, but our connection had been one of genuine warmth for a long time.

I knew well that my father had grown and changed profoundly over his life, though I acknowledged this directly to him only a few times during my own adulthood. His second marriage to Elizabeth was Exhibit-A in this - a genuinely beautiful partnership of 25 years - unlike his long-tenured but disastrous union with my mother. He persevered in raising and educating his blended family of four wildly different kids. Though ultimately rather ambivalent about his career, he had been successful by the standards of his day and enjoyed a pleasant retirement. He had embarked on some passion projects (such as the farm) and enjoyed the pleasures of his chosen recreations.

He finally finished his book. It was the culmination of decades of self-reflection, deep study, endless rewriting, and the quiet yet absolutely inflamed pursuit of answers to his deepest questions about what one should do with their life. It was published when he was 70 years old, and titled *Casting Out Fear: Shedding Your Fictional Self, Awakening Your Authentic Self*. A year later, he was invited by his alma mater, Williams College, to teach a course based on his book.

Once you've done everything you set out to do... Once you've finally answered your own deepest questions, learned how to love, and even taught those lessons to others, is there much more to do?

Elizabeth and I had a conversation about him one day after he'd returned from teaching his course, each of us quietly aware his sense of purpose was drifting in the void left by the completion of this nearly life-long project. "I was thinking about getting him a puppy..." she said.

I couldn't help speculating that on some level, perhaps very subconsciously, maybe he also knew his earthly work was complete, and the natural next step was... simply the natural next step. Perhaps it really was just... time?

Roughly a year later, here I was at his bedside. (Even though he still got the puppy!)

My older sister was coming. One of two younger step brothers was coming and a cousin that shared a particular bond with my father; but I had been the first to arrive. My step mom needed some time to herself, and so I had hours to spend by my father's bedside alone, if I wished, which I did. I was also the one providing updates to others and fielding a steady stream of calls from all corners.

But most of my time was quietly spent just being next to him. It was a meditation to watch the monitors for his blood oxygen level and respiration rate and listen for the rather feeble beeps of his heart rate. All of these signs were very gradually yet obviously declining.

My phone rang with travel updates from family members urgently wishing to be there already and I couldn't help wanting to pass the messages on to my father. His lessons to me began to unfold as I whispered gently into his unconscious ear: "Dad... Vanessa is coming... she should be here in a few hours and she'd really love to say hello to you." A tingle rippled through me as I watched his vital signs immediately stop declining. The respiration leveled off, the blood oxygen climbed slightly and heart rate stabilized...

My father's body had bloated from the failure of its systems. He'd been in septic shock for nearly 24 hours, and been medically deemed totally unconscious for just as long. I had watched a nurse gently lift his eyelid and touch his eyeball to demonstrate how there was absolutely zero response.

After a little while, the vitals began to erode again. But I had another update to whisper into my father's ear: "Brian's plane was delayed, but he's coming... " And later, "Jeff is coming... they're all coming, Dad... and they should be here in a few hours. They would really love to say hello to you. Hang on Dad, hang on a little longer." ...every single time, with every update I whispered in his ear, those tenuous and eroding vital signs leveled off. Eventually they would start to erode again, and I would say something similar again. The vitals would level off again, or at least erode at a much slower pace. There appeared to be, somehow, a shred of will or awareness still associated with this totally unconscious body, and it appeared to make a clear loving choice, to hang on just a little longer.

I felt immensely comforted by this. Life was not being taken from him, violently against his will; he was at least partly complicit in it. He was

exercising some choice in the matter! Life presented as stronger than I had usually thought of it... and death, smaller and weaker. Death was not all-powerful, but could be shaped and formed to the whims of the living.

I couldn't help also recognizing that whether he opted to stay or go, the love he had shared with Elizabeth - and with many others in his life including me - would remain, in all its depth. Absolutely unchanged.

When someone we love says "this is the best path for me and I'm going to persevere and follow where it leads," does our own higher self not wish to support them? To encourage them on their way and feel warm on their behalf? Do we not feel spurred and encouraged on our own path, by their bravery?

Perhaps it really was possible that this seeming calamity was merely my father's next logical step; that he might move beautifully onward in his journey, radiant; successful. What's not to cherish about that? How could that not be a comfort?

There were a few hours yet until the other family members would arrive. I still sat alone with him, and in a wholly unanticipated moment, I felt myself join with him on an inner level. This was so vividly, viscerally real to me... much like when my dead grandfather had come for a visit. Together, we gently left behind the earthly limitations and traveled through the veil of these ordinary dimensions out to the very edge of that vast silent infinitude - that very same "place" I came to know a decade before, when I myself was dying. It was clear that without this prior experience, I couldn't have found my way back here, with him.

Words were irrelevant to our communion with each other in this liminal place, where the all-encompassing Oneness was before us yet also infused us; both fully aware that in a very short while he would continue on into the vastness and I would remain here. But not just yet.

My mind returned to that time when my body was the one that was dying, and I was gently overtaken by a gratitude overflowing in such unspeakable magnitude as to match this infinite vastness. Immense pain had been part of finding this place back then, yet that pain and suffering was irrelevant now. Like it never even happened. There was nothing but gratitude in its place; peace beyond any measure.

So we sat for a long moment of eternity, and gazed into the inexpressible beauty of the infinite, all-encompassing Oneness, together. It was perfect.

And then my phone rang.

I put it to my ear and spoke, yet didn't leave this place on the edge of infinity with my father. Family members were here and already crying. More would arrive over the next hour.

There was consoling to do on the earthly plane, yet more calls to take and return, and logistics... there would need be groceries for many, and soon...

I met arriving family members with long hugs and ushered them through the halls. Still, despite outward appearances, I remained joined with my father, in silent communion, drinking in the infinite on the edge of the vastness with him. Eventually, a doctor appeared; Elizabeth beside him, untethered to her usual composure more than I'd ever witnessed; raw, nearly shaking, as she shrieked through burgeoning tears, "you have to take care of this! I can't do it!" ...and rushed out.

I understood immediately the task I had just become responsible for. In retrospect, this may have been the first moment when ALL the experiences recounted here came more fully back into my awareness, that all the dots were connected and their collective impact felt and understood.

We gathered together around his bed, and once our little community of love was set, I wordlessly asked my father if all was ready now. His answer was a fulsome, beautiful "yes." Now a simple formality, I gave the order that had fallen to me to give: the machines were unhooked.

His breathing faltered; his heartbeat began to fade, and at the same time, he arose from this perch we'd shared on the edge of infinity and stepped forward, into the vastness.

And I didn't grieve for him, because I knew where he had gone.

(Yet... oh!! The tears streamed down my cheeks!!)

