
NON-FICTION | SPRING 2014

Hey Hey Hey Hey

By Steve Street

suddenly I realize
that if I stepped out of my body I would break
into blossom

--James Wright

I am nobody, but I need to tell you that after fifty-six years of trial-and-error, just within the last two weeks, I may have figured out how to live. No doubt if I make it through many more months I'll fall back into old habits of doubt, frustration, and complaint, but often over the last two weeks, and more and more strongly, I've sensed the shimmering rightness of all the familiar Buddhist-like dicta my culture's co-opted about moments, and how to live in them.

This seems to have come on after the interruption of my latest cancer therapy, which after a year of variously effective others I guess I'd developed high hopes for, in spite of myself. Or maybe it's been due to lack of sleep--although that seems less like pathology than a symptom of newfound joy: three o'clock in the morning, and my day's all planned.

Like Lyle Lovett, I love everybody now, even when they don't love me. A guy behind me in the donut shop line, the beleaguered woman who slid over my burrito order for minimum wage—I chirp at them. They both scowl back.

I understand because among other things, I'm free: I taught last semester and will later in the summer, but for now don't, thanks in part to money my mother left me when she died mid-way through my first treatment, which at that point was working. In other luck--including my own foresight and fortitude, to be fair to myself--I have none of the health-insurance worries that aggravated my first onset, twelve years ago. HR personnel wondered why I wanted to retire but keep working, which no one on my campus had ever done before, but I insisted, as if subliminally aware of what was brewing in my body. Luck, foresight, and ESP, maybe.

Because yes, spirit is part of this new sense of well-being. I've always liked the notion of faith but never had any, in spite of trying. When news came to me via Facebook the other day of a childhood friend whose son was hit on a bicycle and is in a coma, one of the family's posted requests was for prayers. Horrified as anyone, I posted my best wishes only after deliberating over my wording to avoid the hypocrisy of agreeing to pray: "I'll keep a good thought for you." Now I wish I'd just posted, "I'm praying. My God."

I was a bicycling kid myself, never in a helmet. There but for the grace—nevertheless, I still lack the basic concepts allowing “I love Jesus” to compute: “have a blessed day,” said a clerk at the 7-11 just now. I ground my teeth.

However, it’s the clichés that capture my new outlook. Raymond Carver’s characters were “at the end of their rope but doing wonders with the last few inches,” as I recall a blurb on *Will You Please Be Quiet Please?* Nevertheless, unlike a Carver character, what I’m doing with the last few inches has less to do with desperation than with its opposite: this is about the small, the quiet, the unexceptional now, those moments that bored, frustrated, embarrassed, or angered me for years. Now I see them for what they are.

Actually, it’s more complicated than that. I’m speeding up and slowing down at the same time. I have a million things to do, and one by one, I’m getting them all done: errands, will arrangements, getting a tattoo—small, tasteful, inside left forearm—so the phlebotomists have something to look at when they draw my blood.

And I moved to a new apartment: even signed a lease. *Prepare to live* is my two-week old motto, and possibly another tattoo (larger, around the elbow).

I still get down. I remind myself that at any moment the pleura around my left lung, where the primary tumor has been, can fill with fluid again. I recall the chest tubes from ten months ago, the talc injected in the lining to close it up and leave the fluid nowhere to go. “Well, it must be tempting to overthink it,” said my brother to a recital of options and contingencies I trotted out while deciding on a course of therapy. He’d offered to listen and had done so helpfully before, but I was stung: he was doing what I’ve sometimes suspected my overworked oncologist of doing too: going for the quickest, lowest-common denominator answer.

So then I get angry, suspicious, susceptible to all my old bad attitudes. But nothing like the days, weeks, months—hell, years—when I was stuck in one mind or another. Now it’s about facing the light; so easy to do I can’t believe all that time I couldn’t distinguish where the sun rises from where it sets. “Combat strips away the bullshit,” thinks James Houston in Denis Johnson’s Vietnam novel *Tree of Smoke*.

It’s like grace: floating over. Stripping away. Now everything’s interesting but my own regrets. And everything works out. There’s time, so many moments.

Of course, time is exactly what I might well not have much of. That’s the paradox that illuminates, the conundrum that clarifies, but it doesn’t feel urgent or frantic; it’s not like that.

So, really. “Have a nice day.”

Today I’m walking true, my back straight, but with monkey mind, as the Buddhists say: swinging and grabbing at thoughts and images as they pass. However: who’s more at home than a monkey in trees?

Concepts and terms from religions click for me now, while theological principles, the standard injunctions, admonitions, and reassurances, all remain worn out: *glory*, for example, spoken with a tremor and shine I never previously could fathom--I get it.

The vocabulary of faith might be Greek and algebraic to me, but moving from my old apartment on a recent Sunday morning, I listened to the station broadcasting services from an African-American Baptist church. The radio was white noise for me while I wrapped dishes in newspaper and fit them into boxes, culled things to leave behind and throw out.

As I was listening, after the announcements and the guest speakers and I'd moved on to the bathroom's medicine cabinet, I became aware that one voice had been talking for an extended stretch, a man's, and I began to pay attention.

"We have been so drunk, many of us, that we didn't know where we were when we woke up."

Only after I'd returned from a second trip to the dumpster outside did I realize the voice on the radio had risen with new urgency to full-bore faith talk about the power of worship. Pure algebra, but I listened: "The power of worship. The *power*." By now the voice was crashing like surf, reasoning beyond reason, explaining but celebrating, then, in the middle of a sentence: "Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!"

The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I forgot the point he was making--but dusty and tired in my barren apartment I was in tears, sobbing, not born again or cleansed or loving Jesus but brand-new, glad. Awake. Awakened. No longer drunk.

Reporting symptoms to my oncologist, I described feeling great, in many ways the best of my life.

"Oh, that's the steroids," said his highly informed nurse. "That'll pass as you taper off."

Even euphoric, I know the odds. I know what they say, that the possibility's a probability. I think in Ralph Stanley's mournful voice, suddenly mine: "Oh, Death. Won't you spare me over for another year?"

Every thing is so sweet. And here, for the year of this minute, right now, the shadow goes, disappearing in singing.

Steve Street, a well-known supporter of adjunct faculty rights and a leader of several organizations working on behalf of adjuncts, died in 2014 from cancer. He was 56. Street taught writing and literature as an adjunct at several colleges since 1980. Street was part of the New Faculty Majority, the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor, and the United University Professions, the faculty union at the State University of New York. Street also wrote about the precarious situation for adjuncts in several publications, including *Inside Higher Ed*.
