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MOON
CIRCLE

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Journal of the SZC Sangha

Dear Friends

Thank you so much for your rich outpouring of ideas and creativity in response to the theme, Transition.

The process of change and transition is with us always but the events of the past six months have, perhaps, brought a special focus to it. I am grateful to all of you who have shared your thoughts and feelings on these pages to bring us work that is moving, provocative and uplifting during a time of difficulty.

Thanks especially to Ameli, for applying his great artistry to crafting the layout and final production.

Warm wishes, Zoe

The theme for the next edition of MMC is Zen and Equality.

'I can't breath'. These three words echo in our hearts as footage of the tragic death of George Floyd continues to shake the world and the sensibility of many people.. The subsequent Black Lives Matter protests have brought awareness to the world's minority groups facing long histories of racism and bigotry. Truths about slavery, black deaths in custody, massacres and genocide have long been minimised, denied and silenced. The courage and determination of many people of all races to stand up as one for equality is opening up well needed dialogue. By deeply listening to their stories, acknowledging the truths of history and bearing witness, we may begin to understand the extent of racial inequality with open hearts and minds.

We would love to hear your reflections on this complex and critical issue.
Please send contributions to Jill at jillianball@bigpond.com

Closing date Friday 14 August.

Warmly
Jill Ball & Janet Selby



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Recently a close friend in Minnesota sent me a box of letters I had written her over a period of two decades. They date from my first year at university in California through to the birth of my second child here in Australia. It has been intriguing to revisit that younger me and to see her negotiating major life transitions—going to study in another state, dropping out of academia and entering the workforce, moving in with Tony, emigrating to Australia, having children, losing a parent to a violent death. Not that there was necessarily an awareness of “transition” at the time. It just was as it was. If change was difficult, I coped—or didn’t cope. The most challenging passages were the ones when my identity, my secure sense of “who I was”, was suddenly thrown into question, when I was in unknown territory. Leaving home and becoming a mother were two particularly hard transitions. These periods included deep depressions. And by good fortune, the dark times were generative. The letters reveal that I emerged from them with a little more awareness, a little more at ease with being myself.

I had rather expected to meet a different person in these writings, at least in the earliest ones—someone I could feel for but had in some way left behind. Instead, what appear are concerns and joys, emotional tendencies, thoughts and speech patterns, and modes of relating to the world recognisably belonging to the person I am today. Even some of today’s “original” insights turn up on a page from forty years ago. Life’s trajectory seems less linear than circular, re-traversing old ground at different times and in new ways.

The biggest transition—not included in the letters—was not a physical change or an event but an interior shift, a change in perspective. Zen practice is the significant before and after in my life. (Disclaimer: this is not an advertisement!) “Before” included an endless drive to improve this small person and the continual failure of that project—the linear fallacy again. “After” came with the realisation that essentially no improvement is necessary. Life is one continuous mistake.

Buddhist traditions have imagined the universe in a circular form. The Tibetan and esoteric schools especially refined and elaborated this form visually as a mandala. Some mandalas depict the Wheel of Life, otherwise known as samsara, literally meaning “wandering or cycling around.” They demonstrate an endless transition through harmful passions, countless rebirths into the six realms of existence, unrelenting suffering, with no way out. There’s visible anguish in the figures portrayed. The details are vivid, highly colored and ornamented. Like you! Like me!

But then the mandala form is likewise re-configured as nirvana, filled with beautiful Buddha realms and flowers. Like you! Like me! The iconography is gloriously symmetrical so that one cannot lose one’s way. In the tantric practice of transformation such a mandala is visualized, incorporated, and understood as one’s true self. Perceived follies and errors are subsumed in the perfect whole. Nothing outside this universe. “Only I, alone and sacred,” in the words of the baby Buddha as he took his first step.

The first step on the Eightfold Path is Right View. Essentially there’s only one view and it is encompassing. The first step is also the culmination, what is realised in the last step of the Eightfold Path, which is Right Meditation. It is a beginningless circle, the wheel of the Dharma which we vow to turn. What then comes to my mind is the ouroboros, an ancient symbol of infinity pictured as a snake eating its tail. Like an ensō. The ensō is our Zen tradition’s contribution to this circular logic. Interestingly, it is always slightly irregular. Its line changes width, or texture, or has a small opening. Its virtue is unique, perfect in its “imperfection.” Like you! Like me! One brushstroke creates it, the matter of a nen. This moment! And it’s empty. The medium is the message.

Everything changes. Isn’t each nen a transition? A wide open opportunity? May I remember this to the bottom of my toes. Now, where was I? Recently a close friend in Minnesota sent me a box of letters I had written her over a period of two decades. She paid forty-three dollars to post them. It was an act of love.

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IN GORRICKS VALLEY
GREW A TREE

Sally Hopkins

*Old chestnut tree,
green and fruitful,
gold in Autumn, bare in Winter,
a miracle in Spring:
speaking in a foreign tongue.
This land then knew only
Aboriginal words,
birdsong, frog and wombat,
rain, wind, gum tree songs.
How huge and green you grew.
Great leafy boughs fluttered above us
as we sat, shoulder to shoulder on the ground,
chanting together,
listening to teishos.

Now year by year,
your old stump
shrinks,
becomes again earth.
Now
you speak in every tongue
wordlessly
LOOK! LOOK!*

• • •

STAY AT HOME # SESSHIN

Subhana Barzaghi

For two weeks every piece of the stable rug of daily life had been thrown up into the air due to Covid-19. I had felt discombobulated and disorientated in having to re-organise everything at my fingertips. There were fully booked retreats that had taken months of prior planning that now needed cancelling or rescheduling. Clients were reluctant to transition away from the familiarity and intimacy of our face-to-face connection to a flat screen on-line interface. At least my home office study got a jolly good clean and spruce up as this would be my workspace for the coming months ahead. After the initial rupture and whirlwind of change my body settled back down into a slower and deeper rhythm into the Song of Zazen, 'This very body is the body of the Buddha'.

The call of the Eastern Banjo frog rises up from the pond below my study. It's one of a number of frogs that hang out amongst the tall reeds. It is colloquially known as the, 'Pobblebonk' frog as it sounds a bit like a banjo string being plucked. Their bonk ... bonk ... croaking is loud and clear and calls me back home, to the Earth as our great body. Each moment, unrepeatable, each sound an expression of our essential nature.

The turpentine and angophora gums in the gully below my house are glistening, kissed by the morning dew and gentle rain. I am relieved to see the trees emerging in their bright coats of green after the severe summer drought and devastating bush fires. While their spritely resilience is heartening, ecologists warn us that the bush will not regenerate back to what it was. Our global community has lurched from one calamity to another; such is the dramatic and disruptive nature of this ecological crisis. Ecologists warn us, "Do not be lulled back into a wistful delusion that things are returning to normal now that the rain has come." Our planetary home is under threat. The forests have irrevocable changed. Farmers, locals and whole townships are still sifting through

the ashes. It is a scared and traumatised landscape. The bush is trying to heal but the death of a billion species is irreplaceable. It is regenerating but has transitioned into a different type of ecology and forest.

As Buddhist teacher, dear friend and writer Joyce Kornblatt said, "There has been such a deep bearing witness, first of the fires and now the pandemic. Beyond humbling, our hubris is now undone. That is a good thing however dire the catalyst." In this brief window of time, perhaps we will realise what we have been missing? We have a chance to make a formidable, urgent re-set of our priorities one that forges a loving, harmonious and sustainable relationship with our planetary home.

The chorus of birds can be heard throughout the day now that the jet planes have toned down their frequent roar to a bare minimum. Flights into Sydney airport one of the busiest airspace corridors in the southern hemisphere are now sparse. Rather than the booming drum-roll every five minutes overhead it is about one hour between flights. "This plague time is a different kind of time", what New Yorker cartoonist Emily Flake called, "the non-time of airports and waiting rooms."

There is however a silver lining to their absence. The skies have a brief reprieve from the fleets of beautiful, shinny, metal capsules hurtling along with their trail of toxic emissions. It shocked me when I heard that some children in Beijing have seen blue sky for the first time in their lives. The formidable ice capped backbone of the Asian continent is very present but normally hidden by smog. The pollution blanket over India has thinned to reveal the breathtaking showcase of the snow capped Himalayas for the first time in thirty years.

The original beauty and wonder of clear skies reminds us and reveals our own clear, vast and spacious nature. The Japanese kanji for sky is also the word for shunyata

depending on the context. Shunyata means emptiness, the lack of an immutable intrinsic nature within all things. That's the beauty of Kanji it conveys two significant meanings both relevant to each other. Perhaps we can take the time for gazing into open space, sky gazing, star gazing and know that the first sky is within you.

The pandemic has made this uncertain time a 'waiting room' a feature of all of our lives. Attempts to look forward and plan for dinner dates, hang out at our favorite coffee shop, enjoy the cities cultural highlights, visit the art gallery, sit retreats, attend workshops or resume some work/life normality disappear into a big question mark. I grieve the loss of these simple normal pleasures. I miss my favorite barista and wonder how his small café is fairing. Yet loss and absence highlight what is truly important. It has brought home our vulnerability and our common braided humanity. We are relational social creatures; we find our deep roots embedded in kinship narratives, in belonging to a tribe. It is these personal and community relationships that shape who we are. Often it is through the arc of loss that its true meaning is brought into sharp relief.

The teachings have always brought home the truth of impermanence and the insubstantiality of all things and we learn how to sit with equanimity in the midst of uncertainty. 'Not knowing' is a gateway to liberation from the hallmarks of the known. The Bodhisattva Peacemaker Vows stand us in good stead. As a Peacemaker "I commit myself to embracing the openness, receptivity and spaciousness of the not-knowing mind free of rigid dogmatic views". Entering the cloud of unknowing is humbling for the most part but particularly for the part of us that loves to be in control. Not knowing is a gateway into the Way of Peace.

I find myself dreaming of the wild natural beauty of Kodo-ji our beloved Temple of the Ancient Ground and feel that pang of loss. There has only been a few times over the past forty years during the Easter break that we haven't exited the city and headed for Kodo-ji. Traditionally on Good Friday we have trucked supplies and ferried people over the Hawkesbury River and up along the winding dirt roads of the upper MacDonald Valley to sit sesshin in our peaceful paddock surrounded by sandstone cliffs.

Running parallel to the awakening of the spirit that sesshin holds for Zen students, Christians around the globe are celebrating Easter, the pathos and marks of suffering, death and the resurrection of the Holy Spirit. These are universal themes for Christians, Pagans and Buddhists alike. Jesus too was a wandering wayfarer, a holy man who had revelations in the dessert, descended the mountain and tended the sick, poor and suffering. He too found the divine liberating spark of God within, declaring "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life - In God there is the light of the world" (John 14:6). Like the Buddha's awakening that intimate personal realisation paved the way for ordinary souls to find freedom and liberation from suffering. I also find it a curious overlay that the Christians named Easter after the Pagan Goddess Eostre who was the Goddess of fertility, the giver of life and the bringer of the dawn light.

Heading to Kodo-ji is a joyful extraction out of ones daily routine to set up camp under the vast southern sky and enter sesshin. One of my much-loved metaphors is in Dongshan's Five Ranks on 'The Phenomenon and the Universal' which speaks to the hearts longing. "How we all long to leave the mundane stream not just to live in harmony, yet finally you return and sit in the charcoal heap." The five ranks express the varying relationships between essential nature and our contingent realm of life and death. 'Heaps' also have resonance with the 5 aggregates of; form, feeling, perception, mental formation and consciousness that constitute our human experience. The whole universe runs through this charcoal heap when it is freed of its delusions and passions. Those coals are alive in our belly, the embers warm the heart; we are made of this stuff. We come home to the sensory transient world of this very body and mind right here.

Even the word 'sesshin' sets the tone; it is a call to wake up, to touch the heart-mind, to convey the heart-mind, to embody the heart-mind. In the spirit of renunciation we shed, simplify and retreat from the eternal flux to calm the chattering mind and sit in the consummating fire of silence. These have been ancient and noble pathways practiced by sincere men and women down the generations for spiritual awakening and transformation.

I picture my silent companions of the way sitting silently on the knotted pine floor of the Kodo-ji. During the lunch break we all keenly wait while the old-fashioned wood fire, hot-water heater is stoked up. There is an art to managing the temperamental puffing belly. The kindling must be carefully stacked, the fire lit. It spits out sparks and splutters out hot water. Plumes of smoke pouring out of the chimney signal to the weary bodies that it is shower time. Buckets of hot water and people line up on the verandah. We graciously receive one precious bucket per person. Behind rustic wooden cubicles figures strip down expectantly, haul up the bucket, toggle the ropes, unscrew the sprout as a blissful bucket of hot water shimmies down one's back to the floor. Other reclining Yogis lean up against the grey timber camphor boards; legs sprawled out across the wide dojo verandah like lizards hanging out for the sun. Their gaze captured by the strands of white gums standing tall against sheer sandstone cliffs, bathed in ochre. The natural world's simple plain face comes forward to confirm our original face, so vividly apparent here.

The deep practice arena of sesshin pulls us out of our comfy sleeping bag of old habits. It urges us to rise up in the dark, walk across the paddock to the dharma hall to sit and meet the first light of dawn. The tock, tock of the Han calls us to sit whole-heartedly in zazen. Zen master Yun-men asks, "See how vast and wide the world is! Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?" (Case 16, p. 107, Gateless Barrier). Why do we practice if the great light has been here since time immemorial? Sadly we fail to see our vast and wide plain face that has no name. Yun-Men is asking us to embody the way right where we stand, to discover that vast freedom in the simple acts of sitting, walking, dressing, bathing and cooking. The Buddha too continued to sit and walk the plains of India for 40 years after his great awakening until he lay down to rest in deep Samadhi under the brilliant green Sal forests of Kushinagar. Aitken Roshi asks, 'Why' do we practice? An intellectual answer is not sufficient for awakening.

In the Miscellaneous Koans, Zen master Tossotsu's asks us to contemplate, "The purpose of going to abandoned grassy places and do zazen is to search for our self-nature. Now at this moment where is

your self-nature?" These koans are perennial age-old questions that speak of the pilgrim's search, the longing to come home to our essential nature.

But it is Easter and we are in 'lockdown' and the road to Kodo-ji is temporarily closed. It's has been several weeks now and most folks have been adhering to the 'Stay at Home' message to flatten the curve of infections. I, like many, now live in an endless largely housebound present. I am both amused and bemused at the ground hog day it has become. Rather than be oppressed by the self-isolating regime I decided to embrace it and turn it into a 'Stay at Home' sesshin. Years of practice have laid the ground for this homecoming.

Perhaps the disorderly unwanted viral guest roaming the globe is clearing our house out for some new delight? It is a time of upheaval and transition and like most transitions they are disruptive and jolting. I spent 7 years as a homebirth midwife assisting women through the birthing process. At the end of the first stage of labour is the 'transition stage'. The word transition means that her body is making the shift from opening the cervix to the beginning of the baby's descent down the birth canal. But transition is best known for its emotional challenges. She may feel panicked or scared and nothing seems to help. Moans, sighs, flaying arms along with the occasionally swear words erupt out of even the most polite mouths. At this point, I have heard women yell out, "I can't do this" or "I want to go home now" when it is blatantly obvious they cannot go anywhere. I encourage her to breathe or sing loudly. Grasping hands tightly our eyes locked into an intense gaze as she rides the waves of pain with each breath through this transition to the miracle of birth.

At least this 'stay at home' sesshin time is a time to unplug and unhook from the normal treadmill of obligations, busyness and responsibilities. It has opened up a breathing space to slow down and listen deeply. I drop into a mindful presence and seek refuge within familiar walls. However just like a birthing transition, I consider it a bit more emotionally challenging to find that same 'sesshin mind' at home. Home is such a relational hub surrounded by the things that tug at my heartstrings and the endless

to do lists and house maintenance. There is no Jikki ringing the wake up bell at 5.30am to rely upon. We have to hold the call and response the 'wake up' intention for ourselves. I call to myself each day, Be Awake. Yes!

Guidance comes down to us from a collection of unearthed Zen stories in the 'Kahawai Koans' and 'Hidden Lamp' - Stories from Twenty-five Centuries of Awakened Women. I take heart that women have often found awakening around the hearth, pouring tea or right in the midst of their daily chores.

A woman who lived at the station called on Zen master Hakuin. In a lecture she heard Hakuin say, "The Pure Land of mind only is the Amida of one's own body - once Amida appears mountains, rivers, and earth, plants, trees and forests all emanate a great light. If anyone wants to know this, you should look into your own heart. Since it is the Pure Land of mind only, what kind of embellishments does it have? Since it is the Amida of your own body what kind of distinguishing marks does Amida have?" Hearing this the woman said to herself, "This is not such a hard thing." Returning home she practiced zazen day and night, bringing this to mind. One day as she was scrubbing a pot in the kitchen, she suddenly broke through. Tossing the pot aside, she rushed to see Hakuin. She said, "I've run across Amida in my own body, everything on Earth is emanating a great light. How wonderful!" She danced with joy. Hakuin said, "So you say, but what about the outhouse, does it also emanate a great light?" The woman went up to Hakuin, gave him a slap and said, "This old man still hasn't penetrated." Hakuin roared with laughter. (Kahawai Koans)

The Pure Land sect emphasises the important role of faith in Amitabha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Light. That light as Hakuin declares and the woman realised is not found in some ethereal otherworldly place however. The pure land is right here when we 'forget the self' by just scrubbing the pots. Amitabha's light then comes crashing through and we realise that that the great empty world of no distinguishing marks was right here all along.

I once asked Aitken Roshi what his practice was now as we were having breakfast? He just continued mindfully slurping up his porridge. Slurp, slurp was his full embodiment of Amida savouring the moment.

In the Covid-19 house bound sesshin my daily routine starts at 6.00am with a pilgrimage to the kitchen. I perform a hand washing ritual the first of many that day. Tea-tree oil fragrance oozes out of homemade disinfectant. I chuckle as I think of my OCD clients with their obsessive hand washing rituals. For the first time they would feel vindicated and normal.

Attention to hygiene makes me think of all the brave front-line nurses and paramedics scrubbing up, donning what protective gear they can find, to nurse the sick and try to save those ordinary yet sacred lives. I hear that a Barzaghi family member in England who is a midwife with 2 children has tested positive for Covid-19. Frighteningly, she said, "There is not enough protective gear for midwives to go around our overburdened English hospitals". At the days end ICU staff in troubled hot spots around the globe are white faced, shattered and crestfallen by rolling out the dead. Their compassion has not gone unnoticed however. Perhaps you too were touched by the coordinated mass applause throughout the UK, as people hang out their windows and clap for their exhausted health care workers. How about those Italians who play music and sing from their balconies at sunset, as an act of togetherness! Surely this is a reminder to open our hearts and feel grateful for this day, the beauty of this planet, the people we meet - and simply the gift of life itself.

Back in my kitchen, it's the God of Small Things that I appreciate in this stay at home retreat. The breakfast ritual tends to dance around the black stoned kitchen bench foregrounding the fridge, kettle and the sink. I mindfully empty the dishwasher place each item back into its usual square inch of cupboard. I scope two teaspoons of organic Rosentea that comes all the way from Germany into my favorite red china teapot. I slice bananas that come from plantations in Queensland and prepare my favorite muesli that was baked in ovens in the

Blue Mountains. My coffee comes from Brazil and the shirt that I am wearing was probably made in a sweatshop in China. By the time I have finished breakfast, I have touched things that have come from half way around the world and realise how interconnected we all are.

My feet map out the territory of a housebound day. Lunch comes with sliced organic carrots and quartered green apples from Tamworth are shoved into my old trusty juicer. It is such a blessed noisy old machine. I am constantly amazed it is still working after 20 years. Carefully sliced avocado slithers lay across fresh stoneground sourdough bread and I am grateful for this daily bread. Each tasty mouthful reminds me of my privileged life of abundance and the abject poverty and desperation of so many. It spurs me on to make of my life something of value and to reach out and help others where I can.

My one big exciting expedition per week is a shopping trip to the grocery store. However rather than a quick dash to the shops it turns into a trepidatious affair. I don my facemask that then tends to fog up my glasses so I walk around a bit bleary eyed. I try to keep a 2m distance adverting other shopping trolleys down narrow isles and stand on the designated 'x' spot on the floor lined up before the check out counter. The checkout woman standing behind a screen also wears a mask, yet we smile at one another. That silent smile seems to transcend the craziness we are all in.

I have a roster of a few dear friends who I ring. They are lonely and need support through these closed-door self-isolating times. Loneliness is only made worse if you live alone, especially if it is imposed and one cannot exercise ones freedom in the normal social arenas.

Italy, Spain and the US are knee-deep in death, sirens hurtle down their streets, their suffering is great. It's is a massive upheaval of the ordinary way of life. Many older people are stressed by the threat to their health by an invisible virus with a strange name. Children and parents feel overwhelmed and claustrophobic living on top of each other. Others wonder, "Will I have a job and income tomorrow? Will we be able to pay the mortgage? Will Year 12

students graduate—and into what? Will our parents live?" I worry about my father who is 92, also in lock-down in a high care facility. No visitors. It has brought the world as we know it to its knees but hopefully a bit closer and more connected. It has and will change us; the contingencies of life will never quite be the same.

Hungarian philosopher Ervin Laszlo, a theorist of quantum consciousness writes: "A global pandemic is an opportunity for global change—for rapid and effective change to a better world. Even if some people are depressed and do not see the light at the end of the tunnel, the pandemic we are experiencing is temporary; it will pass into history as all the previous pandemics did. But the change it could bring may be lasting. It can be a change for the better, or a change for the worst. Making it a change for the better is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss."

While on Facebook, I stumbled across a page called, "Kindness Pandemic" an online repository for all things joyous. A kind-hearted soul, Dr. Catherine Barrett, recognised how acts of kindness soothed her own stomach churning anxiety, a condition that she was all too familiar with. After listening to too many depressing health reports she switched her focus to stories of love, hope and simple acts of kindness. From her small studio in St. Kilda she started a Facebook page. People post stories of simple acts of kindness. At first she got a few dozen followers then a few hundred and within a week it grew to 250,000 (SMH Good Weekend). It's inspiring in these dark times.

A dear friend of mine drove half way across town to give me several rolls of toilet paper. I kept missing out because the shelves were empty for weeks. We made a rendezvous in the middle of the street, exchanged the bag of toilet paper, gave virtual hugs and I drove back home deeply grateful for her simple act of kindness. It is acts of kindness, compassion, humor and connection that make a difference to someone's day. Through this transitional time and space we can make a difference.

Evolutionary psychologists have long attested that our survival as a species throughout history and the social fabric that

holds us together is - kindness, compassion, empathy and altruism.

As Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem, 'Kindness' so beautifully articulates:
"Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread".

Despite the circumstances whether favorable or unfavorable even in an ecological crisis or pandemic, the person we long to be, the person we already are, deep down is already at home. We find our true home in the kinship relational narratives, the ancient koans and stories that give life to a timeless present. Despite the conditions of our lives, droughts, bush-fires and pandemics, there is that which does not change. Once Amida Buddha appears, the earth, mountains and rivers, friends, the smile of the unknown shop assistant, the worker in the sweat-shop and the garbage collectors all emanate a great light. The light of our true nature is always here, no matter where we go there we are. The truth of our original dwelling place, the body that has no distinguishing marks, the formless field of benefaction is where we can truly rest and take refuge.

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A FISH WITH ARMS AND LEGS

Caroline Josephs

Clovely ... a long, long cove reaching to the breaking waves. On either side man-made concrete ... and fences, a boardwalk, a lap pool, and rocks, grassy ledges, a small kids' playground. In the distance, ocean, stretching to horizon now blurring with rain.

I have my swimming costume, caps and goggles on already for the allowed swim during Covid 19 lockdown in the city.

I walk past the Council Officer at the one entrance allowed at this -- the beach end of the cove. The first transition to the littoral zone of the shore. She is dressed in her yellow distinguishing jacket. She smiles as I walk down the concrete ramp to the sand. It is quite a length of sandy beach. Today is cloudy, rain threatens, so the beach has only a few people on it at this time ... it is about 7.30am.

The air is warm ... sea is too.

My feet enter the water. There is a sense of anticipation. I know this moment of transitioning from many years of daily swims in ocean. I walk out savouring the feel of sand on my feet, caressing, massaging, my soles ... at waist deep, I dive in ...

A major transition. I am immersed. It is the sensation of 'diving deep' into meditation, of being myself and also a unique particle of the ocean uni-verse. No fear. Just action. No stories. I sense the loss of 'my' skin, as I breathe ... bubbles of expiration, and turn my head to inhale, to feel the inspiration.

Spiritus is 'breath' in Greek ...

A gentle repetition.

In breath ... Pause.

Out breath ... Pause.

In breath ... Pause.

Out breath ... Pause.

I am here. Now. Being breathing. Being ocean. Being breath.

I become conscious of what is below in the watery realms. Fish ... black one hovering near the sandy bottom. Another nibbling seaweed.

Garfish ... as I swim into the deeper water ... all under the surface in a school. Are they 'social distancing'? Waves are slightly choppy today. I have to be a-ware that my mouth is turned away, not to ingest the seawater unexpectedly. I have to be a-ware of other swimmers. I keep my 'crocodile eyes' peeled every so often to make sure I don't collide with another serious swimmer coming in the opposite direction, or ahead of me. Not that many today -- as the sun is not shining. I am making towards the rocks where breakers are on their outer reaches.

Under me are white rocks now ...

A bevy of white fish linger underwater, in a nook beside two large rocks...others skim on their side along the rock as though to scratch an itch. The water has now turned colour...another transition. It is no longer seaweed green-yellow. It is more a green-turquoise colour. I relish the colour. It seems to satiate a yearning for beauty.

Here.

Now. I drink in the colour.

It is time to turn and swim across the cove before hitting the breaking waves, though they are not large today. I feel the current now propelling me forward toward the beach as I enter the realm of waves and wavelets. Rollicking rippling movements, rhythmic ... like unsounded music. Like rivulets of paint on canvas. I am on my way back.

Wait. There is the blue proper swimming swiftly underneath me. Its blue lustrous lips. Its sense of sureness. Its absolute at-home-ness in its ocean place. I feel a



footprints, after the front end roller has scraped it regularly. It has its own waves ...

A smile to the Council Officer at the entrance to the beach. She watches to see we don't offend the rules, by dallying too long here, by ignoring social distancing requirement ...

I go to the tap to wash sand off my feet before dressing discreetly with long dress ... and pulling out some hot water to sip quickly to aid the warming.

An old friend is walking by on the other side of the grassy area. She sees me, waves and comes over with her daughter and granddaughter keeping a good 2 metres distance, to chat briefly. 'How are you going?' 'How kind people are becoming'... most anyway. 'Some good things are coming from this'.

I tell her granddaughter, aged 8, about the tale I have written, and am now illustrating ... about 3 characters going on a journey to save Mother Earth. Perhaps she will read it some time to tell me what she thinks. She is holding the family dog on a leash and explains his name, 'Wa Wa' Chinese for 'little dog'?

We part with smiles.

Off to breakfast in the painting pavilion at home, a wondrous beginning to the day. So many minuscule, as well as more observable, 'transitions' in an hour of the morning.

thrill of recognition. Another transition. A special moment. Like a rare sense of illumination.

I see many fish. Silvery, sleek, familiar shapes in the water. I feel regret - I don't know their names, but do they care?

Wait. Veer. Another swimmer. My grandson calls me 'a fish with arms and legs'. I love this caption for my life. At one with my fish friends. Further on, a small green groper ... who may turn blue if a leader is required for the tribe in the absence of the current

blue one. I watch the side of the pool go by as I turn my head to breath in ... as I make towards the shore. Now orange cordoning off along one section. The empty concrete enclosed swim pool. The concrete walkway path. And now I am almost there. Back to the weedier, shallows ... my feet touch sandy sea bottom. I turn my goggles up on my head. Time to emerge from this wonderland -- to another kind of ground of being.

The sand has been turned by many

'Underwater Whale Dreaming'

Acrylic on Canvas,
2m x 1.5metres.
Artist: Caroline Josephs

...

It is the first time since World War II that many countries have experienced significant death and calamity. As a result, we have had to make some difficult choices. To whom shall we give respirators? Should we let people visit their dying relatives, comforting them in their last stages of life? As a society, we have shifted to a utility maximising mode to handle these questions as pragmatically as possible.

Yet strangely, during the spread of the Coronavirus, I lost touch with the first Grave Precept, the vow to affirm life. Indeed, I practised the precept through self-isolation and abstaining from seeing my friends and family. I followed the rules. I cut myself off. However, the trouble with isolation was it robbed me of the social interaction that inspires me to affirm life in a heartened sense. Thus, for me at least, the business of affirming life, had become so damn cold and instrumental. Something wasn't right.

I had been infected with a spiritual illness. A dark stranger had snuck in through the back door and made himself at home in my heart. Reading about the 'thousands dead' every day in the news further depressed me. I became seemingly complacent. An aloof and 'scientific' view began to take root. I began to focus on how obviously impartial the universe is to our existence. The Coronavirus not only revealed the precariousness of life, but also began to destroy my 'belief in life'. No longer something 'special', I saw life as simply a brief biological growth. And indeed my focus settled on its end, and the fact that everyone and everything would eventually be burnt away by the flames of time. What point is there in affirming something that is doomed? Are we all just toiling in vain? I searched for ways to warm up my practice amidst COVID-19. For a while, nothing I read spoke to the brutality of our collective and certain terminus.

But then one day I read the following haiku by Jerry Kilbride:

Ebb tide

Sandpipers skitter

Across her Ashes

This poem spoke directly to the coldness I felt, but it did so with reverence and beauty. Life's ebbing tide is a beautiful bird, not some scientific idea. The last stave, and the mysterious pronoun, 'her', ties off the haiku. It also tied a knot in my throat. I began to cry, and a crack opened in my heart revealing a deep sadness for everything: the recent bush fires, COVID, climate change

and my children's future. At that moment, there was no thinking about the point to life or some theory as to why I should affirm it. But instead, there was just deep grief. I had not become complacent. Rather, I was still being affected, overwhelmingly so, by sadness. The sadness went somewhere deeper, feeding a cold, dread-filled mental state.

Not only had I never stopped caring, but I could not stop caring. Later, I found out the 'her' was the author's wife. The 'she' was now lodged in my heart as it had been in the sandpiper's feathers. The mysterious 'her', the sandpiper and the whole scene hit me. It was my nature to be affected this way, my Buddha Nature if you will. I had never stopped affirming life, wanting it to thrive and be happy. Strangely too, the depression I felt was simply a symptom of my deepest desire to preserve life. The dark figure had turned friend and maybe even Buddha.

Indeed COVID is like the sandpiper scattering our ashes, one little strand of RNA laying waste to our bodies and our entire social fabric. For me, the practice was then to try to stare unflinchingly at the whole scene and to stay present to its immensity. I tried to recognise all the mysterious hers - the daughters, mothers, wives, as well as the husbands, sons and fathers. Many lights have been extinguished, each beautiful.

As chine-Jo wrote:

How easily it glows

How easily it dims

The firefly.

And so I bow to each firefly whose light has grown dim. We cannot help but bow to life, as we are life. In the Bendōwa, Dogan said practising zazen and enlightenment are "one and the same". Is it true then that living affirms life? Why then observe the precept? Possibly, to get out the way! And to let all life thrive, including our own, in all places, including our hearts. Each moment is teeming with life. Like zazen, observing the precepts is just another opportunity to de-robe and immerse ourselves in this profound truth - sadhu! As I finish writing this piece my meditation candle has burnt down to a tiny perfect blue sphere of fire at the end of the wick. It is like the earth, a tiny dot of warmth in a vast universe. One day our own sphere and everything on it will be gone... but not today and not now. Right now, there is only a man watching a blue flame.

...

I have tried for some weeks to begin this short piece. The times are so pregnant with possibility, The possibility of trying to speak to a predicament. Indeed an unprecedented predicament, something we told over and over. What is particular about a pregnant time I wonder; expectant I suppose, full of possibility, heavy with expectation, back aching? But I can only guess at the feeling and emotion of pregnancy. Men can share something of a pregnancy, they may participate with its advent, a delight indeed, they can stand around and offer support at some later stage, they can wonder at their partners strength and forbearance; and yet a pregnant moment isn't really a biologically neutral metaphor. I have heard some commentators speak of this pregnant time as unprecedented. What?

How is it to be so, staring each day into the coronapocalyps? I am a fully-fledged age appropriate fraction of the boomer remover cohort.

Plagues are mythical; they can harbour and harness the great artfulness of deep story, calling forth various convictions about hope and belief. Trusting in the scientists, trusting our leaders, trusting the economy will bounce back, singing together, scapegoating, hand washing and certainly trusting our social media silos. But when we put on moral spectacles pretending to be able to see more accurately what this great episode in our collective journey might be all about, it will I'm sure be just another collection of dogmatic opinions.

The great pestilence of 2020 has compelled our collective imagination to juggle different ways of coexisting with the environment. Some years ago at university various ecologies were extending their purview into futurist theory. Many scenarios presented the possibility of sustainable change and management. What was necessary however, was for there to be a confluence of change episodes rendering cultural orders unstable. How apt is this time, it's so biblical, so archaic so from the days (just like today) of myth.

Unrelenting drought scorched by a time of firestorms and then floods folded up now in the lock-down blanket of a good old-fashioned pestilence plague.

How best to celebrate other than with an end to the cruise industry?

Fire, flood, famine and plague.

We are not called upon to find meaning through this; mythical times are not meaning making times. On the contrary, as the myth unfolds our psychological response is best served with imaginative play, with an embrace of not being certain and maybe we can do this differently now. Times of great mythical energy throw up villains and heroes; front line combatants, school teachers and nurses and then too stupid people, covidiot brandishing snake oil remedies.

Living through a time, this time, a time of contagion and firestorms or even a season of great bounty reminds me to pay attention, to notice the ebb and flow. And what I notice most is how habitual are the tricks of day to dayness. While all the actors in these great dramas are lined up I find myself still with my ordinary likes and dislikes. I haven't transitioned elegantly to being zoomed about. My yoga on-line mostly ends up tangled with a nearby chair and I invariably don't notice how close I am to a fellow exercise walker.

I am most comfortable when my thoughts turn to close by home issues; friends and family and gratitude for a practice that seamlessly holds this entire disturbance with gentle fingers.

We sing a songline at sesshin, it has been offered to remind us that we sit on ancient grounds. But there is more to that ground and we do a disservice by not calling out the toil and joy of its bounty.

Ploughed earth ploughed earth
We are in debt to you.

Ploughed earth ploughed earth
You have looked after us.

Much has been said over the last month or so that speaks to bipartisanship and coming together and trusting in our better selves. Our Gorricks Run lands present to us all a small contribution as to how we as a community have transitioned.

...

BEARING WITNESS

TO BOTH LOVE AND SUFFERING
IN AUSCHWITZ AND BEYOND

Alex Budlevskis

Here are some poems expressing my experiences going on a great journey to participate in a Bearing Witness Plunge in Auschwitz, and then visiting my families land of heritage, Latvia, where I had family I had never met. This trip happened in November 2019. Poems were a way I felt I could document the experience it presented. Here are some of them in chronological order from vowing to Bear Witness and registering, to attending the event, through to reflections after returning.

*The Vow to Bear Witness*Bearing witness...

What am I ignoring?
What web of connections
Do I tell myself
I cannot accept?
What words and ideas
Do I allow to rest
Under the veil of fog
Of The mind?
To bear witness
I empty and empty
And empty...
And then it's all there already,
Whether I want it,
Or not.
It's this mind that thinks,
Decides,
Acts.
That needs to really see it,
Really get it.
Otherwise, who would know?

Day 1 - Poland - Approaching Auschwitz *One in the Bus*

Witnessing these great big hearts
All around.
Big enough to aspire

And reach through time and space
To the unimaginable horror
That is Auschwitz.
Silence
As we sit in our bus
Together,
Thoughts, our company.
The cold dark void
Awaits,
Awaits.
It rests heavy in this place,
I can feel it in my body.
The Polish forest rolls past,
Clouds grey in the sky,
A yellow leaf falls.
We are all listening.

Auschwitz One - Well and Truly Plunged

The barbed wire fences
The organised brick rectangular buildings
The tiny cells for prisoners
The execution wall
The gas chamber
The tons and tons of harvested hair
The tens of thousands of stolen shoes
The crematorium for countless bodies
Too many bodies to bury.
The mind shocks into blankness

And the heart becomes all of it.
Impossible to comprehend,
Until I see it with my own eyes.
Touch the cell door,
Stroke the gas chamber wall.
It's part of me now,
I feel it in my heart,
This horror of a place,
And I can't turn back now.
There's no ground to turn on
Anymore.
I am raw
And wide open.

Day 2 - Auschwitz-Birkenau

Our fearless driver
Distantly stares ahead,
Taking us onwards,
Onwards to Birkenau
And the terrors that await.
In silence he opens the bus door.
Wary steps spill out of the bus.
A crow pecks at the grass
In front of once electrified barbed wire.
Empty timber guard towers.
The ground is heavy, the air still.
We walk and walk
To the place of great death
Of un-nameable numbers.
The screams and suffocation are felt
Up through the feet and into the body.
The earth still holds this,
And it flows into me
Overwhelming, to tears.
A flock of birds flies overhead.
How many birds flew over the ashes and
smoke of our brothers and sisters?
Still now, they fly overhead
In a skewed V.
The grass nearby grows luscious green
Fertilised by human ashes.
We walk through the sterilisation site

Where the attempt to erase all marks of
uniqueness of thousands took place.
Tattooed a new identity - 4341!
We chanted our own unique name and
face
And sang Jewish lullaby prayers of sacred
love.

Both a homage and a protest.
Great joy and love for each of our own
sacred offerings to this great big world.
I walked the same steps that many before
marched to their death in the chambers
Across stones in muddy dirt.
We all walk our path.
May it be upright, heart open
Always,
And hopeful in every step.
When will my time be?
I am in the dark
As much as these brothers and sisters were,
Sold a lie of moving to a better place
In place of imagination
Only in the future.
Hope keeps the idea alive that maybe,
Just maybe,
The next step ahead will lead
To something more.
And it's in this step
And that step,
That our hope and heart rests.

How Does This Even Happen?!

Constructing my own Auschwitz
With labels and ideas.
Feeding the hungry,
Or
Making people their labels.
All hurt and harm,
All rests in this mind.
Just turns of the mind,
Decisions of yes or no,
Has or has not.
We all hold this power
Right here

And now.
 Do we really know it?
 Are we really clear
 To ourselves -
 Who
 Or what
 is driving this ship?
 Do we clearly see this power in action?
 Do we really know,
 Have we truly touched,
 Our best nature?
 It all rests on this.

Latvia and Beyond...

Arriving in Latvia
 Meeting family for the first time.
 "Will I feel different?"
 "Will I be very 'Australian'?"
 Swept up into homes and hearts
 Cousins who feel like brothers.
 "Genes have a lot to answer for",
 My great aunt says.
 The home far, far away
 I somehow never left.
 Seeing the place my family suffered
 At the hands of another regime:
 Stalin,
 And the KGB.
 Just another mini-Auschwitz,
 But just the same.
 Making people their label,
 Before their humanity."
 But, one thing I learned about
 Was the gift of Latvian stubbornness.
 Who else could resist an occupation
 Every 100-odd years

And still take a next step,
 And let it all go?

A Reflection on the Human Heart

We can only embody as me, what we have
 reference for.
 We can only stand in another's shoes
 In reference to our own.
 We can have no story, and just witness,
 But to have intelligent empathy
 We need to excavate our own human heart.
 We need to let ourselves feel everything,
 Every little bit,
 Especially the suffering, pain and distress.
 To hold these tenderly doesn't break the
 human heart,
 It breaks open
 Into a wider, softer and more flexible organ.
 An organ of feeling, sensing and
 connection
 Held with space rather than just another
 story to add.
 Oh the irony,
 It even allows greater love,
 Joy and Gratitude.
 If you don't believe me, just try it.
 Just a little...
 When a contraction comes,
 it is just the desire to protect
 From what you think might be
 Just too much,
 Too much to allow to be me.
 But, what if there never is too much?
 What if "too much" is just a story?
 And without the story it just becomes
 An extension of me?
 What then?
 What will you be moved to do?

...

ONE WORD

Sean Loughman

The Case

“Waaaah!”

The Verse

With her first breath, she lays down a challenge,
 Though few realise it is a koan.
 Which is why every parent meets it squarely from the first.

For little Luna and family.

This is the first koan from "The Sayings and Doings of Little Heart", a
 koan collection given to me by my daughter. Poetry by "Old Man".

...

Here is an article for those interested. It was written by Bernie Glassman in response to the question: "why do
 you keep going back to Auschwitz again and again?":

<https://zenpeacemakers.org/2019/12/why-bernie-kept-going-back-to-auschwitz-birkenau/>

If it is true, it should shout louder, yes?

If it is false, to move towards it is to push against a wall?

Guidelines for life when making decisions?

Well, I guess I am playing that out at the moment. Currently I feel that I am in the middle of a great change, like the movement of tectonic plates ... a lot of pressure, a lot of heat, a change in state of certain matter, evolution and repurposing. They say that crystals are formed with great heat or pressure. But I don't want to elevate this to a shiny process, the reality is what was there before was functional and what is to come is functional.

Yes, it is exciting to create or destroy ground, but the crystal is not the point. The beauty is in the mundane, the green grass that now grows on fertile soil, the mountains that divide the sunrise, the fresh wind that sweeps across the land as the ecosystem catches up with what has happened. Everything we need is here. I liken this to us as beings, we spend our whole lives looking for the crystals and miss harvesting the ground that is already there, turning over the sods to get the soil ready for the new seasons planting.

What do we do while this enormous shift is in play? Can we encourage it in a certain direction? Mmmmm, you try stopping plates from moving!! Often the processes we undergo as humans can be reflected in nature. Can you outsmart the shift; can you run ahead to see what the end result is so you can be prepared? I'm afraid not, it is a slow, purposeful, sometimes painful, sometimes overwhelming, sometimes exciting, unfolding of events. So what can you do?

You can be open; you can learn to stand on shaky ground in the knowledge that this will not last forever. Do not wish it to speed up for the rate of change is the rate of change and trying to change that will cause suffering. Bring a gentleness to your experience for you are the person that will remain at the end of the process and it would be nice to be on good terms with her. Sleep, pay attention in your every day and try to bring a soft, kindly curiosity to the waves that are making you feel unsteady. Talk to others, you will find that you are not alone. Others may not have the vocabulary to bring to life what is true for them, you may help them by being open about your experience.

It isn't easy, its scary as hell, but we are part of nature, of course there is going to be rumblings and change, and God, what a beautiful thing that is.

...

Jack was hitching south into dry hills and fierce skies, his tattered duffel bag slung across his shoulder. He had stood for hours on the edge of Michigan, summoning the will to lift his hand. And when he did haul himself into the cabin of that first chrome monster and look across at the driver, who didn't ask where he wanted to go, but just nodded and said, "Yep", Jack let go into the engine's vibrations, shutting his eyes. He couldn't have said where he wanted to go anyway. His determination had been used up just getting away, flattened by a foreseeable future without his sons. When the truckie pulled up in an echoing depot, he jerked awake, croaking a hoarse thanks as he dragged himself out of the chrome cocoon, the first word he'd said for days. He zigzagged through the trucks for his next ride, a shrunken man reflected in a forest of fenders and hub caps.

As he was moved south, the rhythms of day and night provided comfort. His incessant thoughts - I am valueless, useless, worthless - that's why I keep losing what I love - slotted into a framework of light and dark and became smaller. They still snagged him, and dragged him down, but the indifferent hawks, loquacious truckies and flat-faced gas station attendants let him alone and the unrolling hills and plains and even the little settlements sometime evoked possibilities. He was breathing more freely, gradually surrendering to the immensity of heat and space. He still had no appetite, but the nausea was fading.

On the edge of last night's town, noticing a yellow dog lying in the dappled shadow of a pepper tree, he remembered that once, somewhere, somebody had told him about a place - near Albuquerque? - a place where you could stay and work and share what there was. Maybe he'd heard about it

outside Cairns, when he and Lorraine were first together, living on love. Or maybe it was just a leftover fragment from a dream, a mirage of hope, out here in the heat. He didn't trust his memory these days. Lorraine and the lawyers had seen to that. But if such a place did exist outside his mind, he could go there. Stop there. If they'd have him. For a moment he felt light, even hopeful. Then You'd never recognise such a place. Better forget it.

He was let out at dawn on the outskirts of a small town. The air was cool. He crossed an old stone bridge, pausing to look down at the river, flowing calmly. A sign at the end of the bridge announced Jacoma, population 180.

He kept to a dusty track beside the road heading south for the next ride, past decrepit houses, past a verandah propped up with car bodies, which made him smile, and past the smells of toast cooking and coffee brewing. which squeezed his belly. It had been a long time since he felt hunger. There'll be no food in this place, no cafe, no supermarket - forget it, keep moving.

Just then, he saw a field of sunflowers and above the fence, a painted sign, True Home Desert Inn, all welcome. Jack leaned on the fence, the early morning air fresh on his face. Far away, a woman under a coolie hat was stoking a mulcher with sticks and branches. He wanted to call out, Good morning! , just to see her face and hear her voice, but she wouldn't have heard him. It says Inn, why not go in and ask if I can get a feed? The mulcher roared into life as Jack pushed open the gate, frightening two blue jays who flew past his face, phhhh, phhhh, their beating wings echoing his heartbeat. He walked down the flagged path and stepped onto a tiled porch. The door was open and once inside the long stucco building, the smell of incense, cool and clear in the

nostrils, mingled with the aroma of baking bread and he was reminded of the pagoda outside Saigon.

Years ago, he'd stepped inside the temple, just another curious young American sailor, a sightseer in well-laundered civvies looking for timeout from a nightmare. It had been lunchtime, and the monks had welcomed him without questions. Come! Come! Eat!

Now, reflected in the glass door was a very different man, thin, bearded, with an emaciated unhappy face, scruffy clothes, and a long ponytail. He pressed the bell. Would he be welcome there now? Would there be coffee and bread rolls? And kindness? Would they include him in their lives, without question, like the monks had? He wanted that more than anything.

A small child appeared behind the reception desk.

"Have you come to see Naomi?" she asked, "Or did you want to stay in the motel? Because it's closed right now."

"I just want something to eat."

"OK". An appraising glance. "I'll get Naomi." She slipped behind a curtain.

Jack turned and gazed out onto the field, watching the woman bending and straightening, feeding the mulcher with branches, a cone-shaped mound building up under the chute. She was small in the mass of sunflowers, some of which, beyond their prime, had begun to lean earthwards, weighed down by their own magnificence. One huge yellow head had completely yielded to gravity, its face pressed against the soil, offering up its seeds.

Perhaps he could ask these people about the desert community he'd heard about; again, he tried to remember what he'd been told, and who'd told him, but his mind was

blank. These last six months had been so mean and unrelenting. He was following his nose now, doing whatever came next. He had no plan for his life, no vision. And no hope of one. It was just one step after another and the next thing had to be food.

"You wanted to see me?" The voice was dry and somehow challenging. "I'm Naomi Miller." She smiled briefly, and lifted her eyebrows, the same keen-eyed gaze as the girl. Must be her daughter, Jack thought. Then, My children are lost to me. I am alone.

"I'm Jack Altman." They shook hands. Her grip was strong, her skin dry.

"Jacinta tells me you want some breakfast. Follow me."

They went down a corridor which opened into a room with a wide verandah facing hills and the river. Naomi brought a tray with fruit and coffee, and sat opposite Jack. She had a way of smiling that was more than a commercial ploy, perhaps almost genuinely welcoming. The dining room was empty and he wondered where the guests were.

"There aren't any other guests, The Inn's closed until June. There's just five of us here at the moment. And you've already met my daughter."

Below him, the slope was terraced down to the river and a scarecrow kept watch over cabbages and tomatoes. A trellis, hung with grapevines, led to a low timber building. As he ate, Jack again tried to catch hold of that story he'd heard about an Inn in New Mexico. Where had he been? Maybe in Sydney. Or perhaps the Pilbara?

"Did you mean to come here?" Again the challenge in her voice.

"No. Not really."

"Ah - an accidental visit."

"I've been on the road a while. I got dropped off here, and I got really hungry." What could he tell this woman? How much of his story? "This place reminds me of some monks I knew in Saigon, a long time ago." Who taught me about kindness. The coffee was strong. "Would you know anything about a place - near Albuquerque - a sort of community.....?"

Naomi waited for Jack to say more.

"Where you can stay, work, pay your way...?"

She shook her head. "You need a job?"

I need to lick my wounds and rest a while. So I can go on. But he didn't want her to take pity on him. "Yeah - I'm pretty broke." Jack met Naomi's eyes.

"I'm not on the run. Well, not from the police." But, I am at your mercy.

"From something else?"

Jack nodded. From humiliation.

Naomi seemed to be considering his hands. Jack looked down at them. Lumpy fingers, jagged fingernails, a dark scar across his wrist. Would he offer shelter to the owner of these hands? Would he trust them, if he were her? He touched his grandmother's turquoise and silver ring.

Finally, he heard her say, "Well, there's work here."

His shrivelling came to a stop. She'd take him in. She hadn't been repulsed. Maybe he was OK after all.

"If you can stay a month. Minimum."

Jack caught his breath. There was a catch. What if he didn't like it? But what option did he have? He knew he couldn't walk away

from here and climb into another chrome cabin and be hauled along another highway. He'd run out of energy for trawling over landscapes.

"And if you can agree to keep our schedule, and live our way. Which basically means no alcohol or drugs."

Keep their schedule? He recalled various cards on the front desk. A red one had said, Desert Dojo, Naomi Miller. Beginners welcome and a green card promised, True Home Desert Inn - a refreshing experience. Alcohol? He could take it or leave it. But dope was different. It suited him. He'd started smoking heavily in Vietnam. The monks hadn't liked it either. "Clouding the mind", they'd said to him. They could smell it on his clothes. "Much better to follow your breath," they said. "Monkey mind already, without marijuana."

When he first came to Australia, he'd done without it until he met Lorraine. She eked out a living selling it at markets, displaying her eccentric collection of trash on top of the table, her other merchandise stashed below. She moved from town to town, and wherever she settled down, they'd set up a small plantation. Every morning, even after the boys were born, they ceremoniously rolled a joint, letting the fresh vegetative smoke drift through their bodies and minds, playing with time, sound, colour.

But it had been years since he smoked the stuff regularly. Lorraine had become impatient with the haziness and torpor first, and Jack was left to smoke his joints alone. It wasn't the same. She'd turn off the music and yell at him to do something, anything. She'd sweep round his feet, and tip up his chair. And one day, when his stash had vanished, he knew she'd thrown it out. "And don't you ever grow the stuff again either," she said, "because I'll just rip out the plants."

"You work with us, we feed you and you get

a bit of pocket money." Naomi laughed. "I'd better warn you, no one gets rich here."

A bed, three meals a day, and quiet people were all the riches he wanted right now. "Sounds OK. "

"I'll get our contract."

Contract? This was unexpectedly businesslike. Jack was flooded with apprehension, familiar and debilitating. His "OK" sounded hoarse but Naomi didn't seem to notice anything amiss, and glided away on her errand. He would fail here too, he would not measure up.

"Perhaps you should take this away and think on it." Naomi dealt a black folder into his hands.

Jack panicked. "Couldn't I just read it here?"

"Sure." She smiled, and left him alone on the verandah. "I'll be in the office when you're ready. Here's a pen."

Jack skimmed through the fineprint. During the non-tourist season, up at five each day, meditation till breakfast, work until lunch, a long break, work until supper, meditation and bed by ten, all in the spirit of silence. On some weekends, intensive meditation, no work. Some time off, not much. In the tourist season, work in the motel, less time off and certain areas out of bounds, like the pool. He skipped details of insurances and payments and liabilities. The silence was what he wanted. No questions. No demands. He went back down the corridor. This is my new home.

Naomi witnessed his signature. In the space for "address" he wrote, c/- Post Office, Whitemark, Flinders Island, Australia. She stamped the page with a seal then handed him another copy to sign.

"Well, you're a long way from home, that's

for sure. Let's take your stuff to the other building and find you a bed. Then you can help Juan in the kitchen." Again that smile. We're in this together, it implied. But in what? He was in a place where he doubted Naomi had ever been. Reduced, stripped, and without hope.

They went along a path beside the vegetable gardens, terraced to the river below. At the pagoda, the monks had grown roses for market, taking turns to pedal into town, their panniers overflowing with rich dark blooms.

"That's our pool," Naomi said, pointing. "And that small building's the massage room. Merri's my main offsider, then there's Tom, Paul and Juan."

Naomi showed Jack into a long narrow cottage, with a verandah running down one side, the space divided by hessian curtains. "This can be your room, the bathroom's down the hall and we eat together in the other building. That's where you'll be helping Juan, chopping vegetables, things like that. We take turns in the kitchen - we rotate all the work. Come up when you've put your stuff away and I'll introduce you."

Jack flopped on the bed when she had gone. Sometimes life speeded up so fast he hadn't time to think about what was happening, or what he was doing. A force field of energy was moving, with him inside it....that's how it felt. He had just committed himself to spending a month of his life here. Well, better get on with it, he thought. He stowed his duffle bag under the bed and hung his coat on a peg.

Jack stretched out on the thin hard mattress. The thing was, he had no option but to do this. There was nothing else for him. Flinders Island seemed a long way away, difficult to imagine. It had been a place for his family and now he had no family.

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ON DEATH

Brigid Lowry

When Amber was dying, she was surrounded by goodness because all her life she had gathered goodness. Her dying was peaceful and inspiring but now she is gone. Gone forever, gone somewhere else and we don't know where. I keep wanting to email her, post her New Yorker cartoons like I always did. My beloved niece will never be here again. Her five years with brain cancer has come to an end. Her husband is stumbling. Her son is fifteen years old. Those of us who loved her struggle to find meaning, onwards we go, on unsteady feet, through our ordinary days

Summer. I am here but one day I will not be. Amber is gone. The rest of us to follow.

"Sparkly is a Christmas colour," says my granddaughter. She is my happy place but I am in the dark land of grief now, deeply sad. Other people's problems annoy me; they seem so trivial. I'm irritable, tired, weepy, borderline depressed. I try to write helpful things to my grieving family, faking wisdom I don't quite have.

There is a difference between wanting to live and being scared of dying. Amber wasn't scared of dying, but she wanted to live. Her death has left a rent in the fabric of our family. She was the queen of baking, wrote excellent haiku, loved playing Scrabble. Her hands were delicate. Her intelligence was fierce. I do not want her to be gone.

Death is the one truth we don't want to know about. We think it won't happen to us, but it will. We don't want it to happen to those we love, but it does.

At the palliative care workshop they tell us we to have "the conversation" with our nearest kin, about what we would like regarding our dying. Sensible stuff like wills and end of life instructions and funerals.

My son is not in the least bit keen to have this conversation with me. I am not sure if it is because he is too busy or because he doesn't want to think about his mother dying. Probably both.

I tell him which songs I'd like at my funeral.

"I've written them down," I say. "There's a list in a folder, along with bank details and other important stuff, like how to arrange an eco-funeral."

"You'll be dead, Mum. I get to pick the songs."

We laugh and get on with our living, but one day he will have to pick the songs, or I will have to help pick his, and this will seem a dreadful thing whichever way the cards fall.

Death is the greatest mystery of all. We do not know who will be next, or how they will go. What happens after we die? No-one knows that either, although there are plenty of theories. For some, religion has answered the question with certainty, for others there is no certainty at all.

Meanwhile, we have a life to live. All of this for a short time only, as my Zen teacher says. Amber is gone. Meanwhile, there is the day, the moment. There is the beach, the teapot, the fading dusk, the bird singing, the child colouring in.

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GOING BACKWARDS INTO THE FUTURE

Sally Hopkins

What is it that travels from here to there? Obviously our bodies do. This stooping old frame is nothing like the baby of nearly 87 years ago, or the active young woman. Senses, which gave me the only news of the world beyond this body, start to falter. Memory is less sure, the past floating in and out in tiny moments. It is confusing. "How is it really?" Who knows?

Past certainties go out the window. This can actually be helpful. A traditional verse goes:

*'Nothing to do but work
Alack! Alack!
Nowhere to go but out.
Nowhere to come but back.'*

In these times of turmoil and uncertainty, crisis for all life everywhere, what do we make of this? Asleep perhaps?

Don't we sit in silence, listen and breathe, to learn to wake up? Learn to be here, wherever we are, to be open to the news that all is connected? That change is the very nature of things? Nothing to cling to. Life cloudlike, ungraspable, always mysterious, beyond our knowing.

Always fresh. Whatever the state of the body.

Gordon Waters (whose painting, made shortly before his death, hangs in the Annandale dojo) introduced me to the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska (1923-2012). Her generation went through horrors. She wrote:

*Nothing can ever happen twice.
In consequence, the sorry fact is
that we arrive improvised
and leave without the chance to practice.*

Everything here for the first and last time. Past answers not much use. It is Now. Not Then. We don't know.

Dogen says something similar when he says, "Wood does not become ash. Spring does not become Summer. Life does not become death". Right now! This is it.

Right now crickets are singing in the darkening garden. The radio brings bad news from the world. This body is not what it was.

*Right now!
Tomorrow? Who knows?*

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Transition

Ink Painting by Glenys Jackson

