



CALLED TO SERVE

by Ron Panzer

Acknowledgment.	<u>3</u>
Foreward.	<u>4</u>
Called To Serve.	<u>5</u>
When All is Said and Done.	<u>10</u>
A Fading Rose.	<u>16</u>
Walking On Water.	<u>18</u>
Muddy Waters.	<u>22</u>
Swallowing The Bitter Pill.	<u>30</u>
To Life!.	<u>40</u>
The Giving Space.	<u>47</u>
The Spirit of Christmas.	<u>57</u>
Little Son.	<u>60</u>
You Found Me.	<u>62</u>
About the Author.	<u>63</u>

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Foreward

Called to Serve is a collection of inspired writings I've put together here for the reader. I believe these convey the spirit of caring not only in nursing, but in service of many sorts. It is only with great danger to the people that health care is taught and provided by some without a spirit of humility and love for the dear Lord. Any work that is begun without honoring Him and that rests solely on man's strength is bound for failure. The tree is known by its fruits. Pro-life "fruit" can only arise from a respect for the sanctity of life the dear Lord has given.

Lord Jesus said:

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

- Matthew: 25:34-40

May God bless you and encourage you in your mission.

Called To Serve

July 18, 2004

You may understand what it means to be called, what it means to serve. Either you do, ... or, you don't. It's not complicated, and it is very real.

In every field, it's the same: you'll find a majority of people who approach their work as "only a job" and drift along, or you'll find a few people who approach their work with intense motivation and concentration. Of those, there are some who mainly seek to advance themselves and those that see their work as a mission.

You may be drifting along doing the work to be done without great zeal, you may be seeking status, power, wealth, even fame, or you're seeking none of those, serving out of dedication to your purpose. You work because it is the right thing to do, and it's something you feel you have to do. It's the only thing you know how to do. It's the only thing you want to do.

People with a mission are not motivated by status, power, wealth or fame, even though those may come to them. They listen to a "different drummer," and travel a path "less traveled." People with a mission are leaders, though they don't need followers to be who they are. They are either respected or ridiculed, either labeled crazy or inspiring. They arouse hatred or love. And though there are moments of self-doubt and searching, they always come back to serve. No matter what they do, it is done in the spirit of service and love.

What is it for you, or for those around you? If you feel that calling, you may have noticed a few around you who are of a like mind. You also will have noticed those who simply work for their own benefit without a real concern for those served. Outwardly you and they may be performing the same duties, but inwardly you are worlds apart.

Sophisticated business advisors spout theories about how to be "successful" and imply that they have discovered a "new" truth; they advise others that to be truly successful, one must discover the real needs of your clients, and work to meet the needs of your clients, your customers, your patients. They hold seminars informing

well-paying participants that you can't just think about yourself; you've got to be thinking of meeting the explicit needs of the client. They have not created a new truth; they have merely repackaged it and marketed it.

In other words, while a slick, smooth-talking salesman can get many people to buy something they don't really need, that salesman won't have a long term relationship or a truly successful career. In fact, he'll have firmly slammed doors staring him in the face year after year. The renewals and referrals will be few and far between. However, a salesman who serves and meets his clients' needs has the key to open the door to a flourishing business relationship.

What it all boils down to is that if you're only dwelling on your own paycheck, thinking about what you're going to get from the relationship, it's a poor plan for long term business success. With hard work, there may be temporary achievements, even impressive achievements for the very ambitious, but in the end, this type of opportunism is a sure road to failure and frustration.

Selling or providing a service that gives people something they really need and something they really want is a solid plan! When Henry Ford created the factories to manufacture the automobile and when Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, their vision provided a quantum leap in societal progress. The success that came their way was not achieved out of greed, but because what they had to offer fulfilled the basic needs of so many. But is this a revelation?? Hardly! Sometimes, even often, the most basic truths are matters that even children would recognize.

There is a major difference between the three basic ways of thinking, doing and being. Whether it is health care, manufacturing, service or sales, whether it is parenting, science or computer technology, there is a basic decision that each of us must confront in what we do. It's a decision that each person must make wherever they find themselves, at every point in life, in any situation. To make that decision, we must first answer a basic question. What is that question?

How are you going to choose to approach life? How are you going to choose to approach your work? How will you relate to family and society? Do you see your function as meeting the needs of your clients, customers or patients, or do you grab as much as you can for yourself while the "going is good?" Are you like the seagulls that fight bitterly over a tiny piece of bread on the beach, or are you ready to share what you have with the hungry around you?

Some never examine their lives, never set goals and never achieve them. But if you have a mission, you have passion for your work, and you care about everyone you serve and everyone you meet. You give when you feel like giving up, and sometimes you don't even remember why. The paths your life takes are sometimes unpredictable and surprising, but they are deeply fulfilling. Even when others question your choices, you intuitively know when it's right to take a turn in the road. And you instinctively recognize those who follow the same mission.

You don't need a thousand dollar seminar to learn that you're supposed to help others and meet their needs. You don't have to think about it. You don't need to be convinced. The attitude runs through your veins.

People can feel the difference. You "connect" with others, because you are fully invested in what you are doing. People remember what you do and what you did. It's not every day that they meet someone like you. You probably don't even feel that you're any different. And when the self-centered ambitious step on others to get ahead, you just don't understand how they can act that way. You don't understand their way, and they don't understand your way.

It's not like you could explain it to them. Their outlook is totally foreign to you, and yours is foreign to them. Even if you tried to explain your way of living, they would not be able to "hear" you or relate to your vision, because their basic approach to life is completely different. Your worldview is essentially different. It's almost as if you live on completely different planets. You have different windows through which you view the world.

When they grab positions of power to themselves, it's not surprising. When they propose solutions to the problems at hand, you don't wonder how one can so completely miss the point. You know that their solutions often involve schemes and scams that reward their own network of "friends."

And when, to get what they want or, to save their skin, they smile and lie through their teeth, you know what they are and what they're about the moment you meet them. They can betray anyone in a moment, if necessary to move their own career forward. And they do so regularly. They are empowered leaders. They do not seek to understand those under their power, because they believe they know better. They don't listen to others, because they really don't care. They lord it over others and become intoxicated with their own sense of power, believing that because they have power, they are great.

Your experience and your heart help you to recognize them and differentiate them from those who are among your own. You do not seek power, nor do you ever feel you are great if power comes to you.

The self-centered ambitious may meet with hundreds of their own type, year after year, pretending to be the best of friends, but they are always alone in the deepest sense of the word. They cannot share the innermost feelings within. They are not emotionally intimate with others, and they cannot admit their own fears, even to themselves. They run roughshod over others, bullying their way through life, putting others down in order to pump themselves up.

They can never share their hearts, never truly know or understand others, and they fear the loss of whatever they have grabbed to themselves. Any of their "friends" could betray them in a moment, and each knows their "friendships" are convenient, circumstantial arrangements.

Though you may or may not meet with many others, if you have a mission, you do not feel lonely. Your heart is full and freely shared with all.

Though we read and hear about the necessity to have a "meeting of the minds" or that "everyone is equal," the reality is something quite otherwise. However much you try, there can be no real meeting of the minds between the two intense types.

They race through life thinking of the happiness they'll find when they finally get this or that. And if they fail, they are quick to blame others. They become extremely angry if anyone suggests that their failures in life have anything to do with themselves. They refuse to examine their own behavior toward others or the impact they have on others. They believe they are victims in life, yet regularly victimize others.

You race through life trying to bring happiness to others, and if you fail in some way, you pick yourself up and try again and again. Never stopping long to think of yourself, you're too busy enjoying yourself as you serve to think of yourself as a victim.

While they seek the thrills of amassing wealth or drinking, drugs, sex clubs, and the fast life, ... or gambling or even crimes of one sort or another, you thrill at the most basic realities in life: spending time with your friends, family, people you meet and God.

They are so busy seeking the thrills of another victory or pleasure (grabbing things along the way) that they fail to notice the moments that make up the journey. And life passes swiftly by. At the end of it all, they stand at death's door reaching back to their wealth, longing for pleasures that now elude them, as they did throughout life. Just as the grains of sand in an hourglass are all swept away, they take nothing with them and are forgotten.

They die just as they lived, grasping and fighting. And you die as you have lived, accepting, contented and reverent. While their world calls you a fool, you know their preoccupation with amassing wealth is the real folly. Recognizing the finite nature of this life, you live life fully in the moment.

Ever fearing the thought of their own death, they feverishly strive not to think about the end. As it approaches, they are depressed and then surprised. For them, death is the ultimate betrayal. For you, death, when it comes, is a continuation of everything that came before.

You see and feel the beauty of life, nature and the world around you. You appreciate the uniqueness of each person you meet and the gift involved in each moment of life. You constantly endeavor to find ways to improve your service to others, to create, to provide. Whether at the beginning stages of your career or at the end of life, you know that there is a purpose and a meaning to life that transcends anything you might possess.

And while they crave admiration and fame, if some call you heroic, you are repulsed, knowing that you are merely one human being. The large numbers of those who drift along in life, never examining their decisions and goals, may be amazed at the energy you bring to the mission, but then again they don't feel the fire within. They don't have the thirst that drives you. They simply don't understand.

For you, life is not a reaching over and through others to get what you want. For you, life is intense, full, a constant, unending, demonstrable prayer. And for that reason, in the end, you are grateful and fulfilled. You are ready. You have few regrets.

When the end comes, you are not surprised. You are not depressed. You have known all along, through whatever trials came your way, you were called to serve. And it is enough.

When All is Said and Done

January 18, 2004

When all is said and done.

When we last "look ourselves in the mirror."

When we review our lives with our last breath.

When we are called to account for all we did in this life.

When "push came to shove" and we chose, one of the few things that will matter is the question: did we choose to act in a way that honored the life given to us by God and given to those we met along the way.

"Honoring life." A concept that is foreign to those who promote the culture of death. We are not speaking of "honor" alone, for even Hitler's most vicious SS squad had a sense of "honor." They certainly did and were proud of it! But they honored a madman responsible for the mass murder of several million people. They honored principles that exalted one group of individuals while devaluing others. They honored a system that stripped people of their property, stripped people of their freedom, stripped people of their families and friends, stripped people of their jobs, stripped people of even the clothes on their back, leaving them, in the end, literally naked as they were "processed" and forced to march into the gas chambers of Auschwitz and other death camps. Even their dead bodies were eventually taken from their relatives, as the bodies were cremated in the ovens where an evil smoke rose over an evil government at an evil time.

Those who promoted the culture of death in Nazi Germany honored loyalty to the Third Reich. They believed that some people were more worthy of life while others simply were not! They respected principles such as "respect for SOME persons," "justice," and "the greater good of society." They had their own interpretation of what "respect for persons," "justice," and the "greater good of society" meant.

No, the Nazis were not just brute murderers, as some would make it out to be; they had high-sounding philosophies. Their actions were authorized by the Chief Executive of the Nation: the Fuhrer, Adolf Hitler himself. Their actions were approved with the full authority of the courts and the legislatures. Everything was done with the appearance of legitimate government action. The leaders of society,

the judges, attorneys, physicians and other scholars approved the actions that were taken, or, they were eliminated.

If you've ever read Hitler's writings such as Mein Kampf, (see www.fatherryan.org/holocaust/meinkampf/mk1.htm) you would know that Hitler was not a totally illiterate barbarian. He had a way with words, a perverted but convincing logic, and a power of persuasion. The German and Austrian people were enthralled with him - at least SOME were. Enough to form a core group of activist societal leaders who step-by-step, incrementally changed the laws, increasing the power of government while making the individual's rights subservient to the state, the nation, the "greater good." There were no rights that were to be guaranteed to an individual who challenged the agenda and authority of the government.

With a strange mesmerizing ability, a strength of voice, rhetoric and charm, Hitler transformed the very fabric of society. Though he acted quickly, he did not accomplish all of this overnight. It took years and the active cooperation and zeal of many followers, especially that of the scholars, academicians, and other societal leaders.

When even one person speaks with authority and takes a strong stand, there are sure to be some, somewhere, who will resonate to that message. Hitler was the wrong person in the right time and place in history to sweep the nation under his control. The people were thirsting for a leader who would bring back renewed national pride and power.

One of the first things Hitler did was to empower his followers with power in the armed forces, making the national army an instrument of brutality and absolute obedience. The officers of his army and police force became the eyes and ears of this leader and part of the ever far-reaching tentacle-like network reaching into every facet of society and individual lives.

One of the next things Hitler did was to have his officers seize and eliminate any person who stepped forward to oppose his plans, principles and ways of oppressing the people. These natural leaders, people who otherwise may or may not have had actual positions of power, had something Hitler would and could not tolerate: conviction of spirit, a strong belief in human rights that compelled them to speak out and condemn the evil perpetrated by Hitler and his thugs. These natural leaders were systematically arrested and executed, often on the spot, setting an example to terrorize those remaining.

People all over knew that anyone could and would be taken, that freedom and life itself were dependent upon absolute support and loyalty to "the cause." Those who questioned were killed or destroyed, one way or another.

As the balance of power shifted in favor of Hitler, the leaders who remained enacted additional laws. These laws controlled many details of daily life, assuring that there would be violators who could then be arrested, which would further terrorize the public into submission.

Those who excelled in serving Hitler were rewarded with respect, position, power, pleasures and wealth. These were the well-respected judges, attorneys, officers and police. Cultural pride was nurtured with zeal. The contributions of other cultures and societies was ignored or suppressed. Non-Germanic people had their possessions plundered; they were targeted for degradation, humiliation, servitude and death.

You may wonder how all this was possible. How could thinking people not only accept such evil but also enthusiastically embrace it and make it their own? They had pride. They had principles. They had education and skills. They had their own sense of honor. But they did not honor the individual. They did not honor life as something created by God.

The courts administered what they called "justice," ignoring the testimony of the disenfranchised, suppressed evidence that worked against the Nazi agenda. Decisions of the court were pre-determined, the results, a "sure thing." Those who were to be condemned, were condemned. Those who were to be executed, were executed. Defense before these courts was futile, although those who advocated reason and fairness did raise their voices.

Some survived. Somehow. But oh! the people who did not! What of their individual lives, their families and friends, their jobs, their relationships? Snuffed out with no more concern by the Nazis than someone swatting a mosquito.

"Justice" you see, no longer meant "justice" for all. A "person" no longer meant all persons. "Rights" were not for all. They were only accorded to those deemed to be "persons" and who served the cause. The misuse, brutalization, torture and extermination of others were seen as "ethical." How? Through re-definition of all the basic terms of life and society, through re-defining how the people were to view the world. The media was completely involved in promoting the new worldview,

reinforcing the system of beliefs that made all of that possible.

The "good" was no longer seen as what was good for each individual. Rather the "good," or "beneficence" became anything and everything that would further the agenda of those who "knew better." Those who did not serve their agenda? Slated for death.

And now, you see, we have come full circle. The American nation - so, so righteous in its fight "to make the world safe for democracy." So righteous in its condemnation of the evils of the Nazi tyranny. But America did not enter World War II primarily to save the oppressed and to stop the killings. We entered the war because we were attacked at Pearl Harbor and because Nazi Germany had invaded several other nations in Europe.

Hitler had dared to trample boundaries among nations and disturb the international equilibrium. We fought to defend ourselves from attack and to restore sovereignty to our international friends, the French, the British and other nations. We took credit for liberating those who survived the concentration camps when the war ended, and we did liberate them. However, had Hitler kept his Nazi tyranny confined to Germany and Austria alone, I doubt we ever would have declared war.

Just as the USA tolerated Saddam Hussein's atrocities against his own people in Iraq for decades. We launched the Gulf War I when Hussein entered Kuwait, disturbing international boundaries and threatening to disturb the stable flow of oil from the Middle East. And again, in Gulf War II, which is currently ongoing, the USA did not enter Iraq primarily because of the suffering of its people or to stop the mass killings of its people. The justification given for the war was to stop international terrorism. Again, we took credit for the liberation of the Kuwaiti people and later the Iraqi people, but that was not the primary goal of entering into war.

Yes, there were some in the USA, even many, in the mid 20th century who agreed with Hitler, with his program of "eugenics," "euthanasia" and extermination of those deemed to be less worthy of life. Hitler and the Nazis glorified man and his achievements above all. They were enthralled with the greatness of man and science. They bowed to no other god but their own self-interest and pride. They used the force of law to validate and impose their views upon all. Yet they were not so different from elements within every society, even in our own time, here in the USA.

Genetics, selective breeding, forced sterilization, abortion, euthanasia and the

elimination of the unfit - these were the tools Hitler's followers used in their attempt to create a "purified" Aryan race. These are the same tools used or advocated by his modern day heirs, the culture of death proponents, the right-to-die advocates. If one carefully reads the internal writings of leading advocates for the so-called "right-to-die," you will find references to eugenics, population control, and elimination of those whose "quality of life" is unacceptable. You will find clear definitions, RE-definitions of what it means to be a "human," relegating some people to the "nonperson" category.

"Eugenics" and "bioethics" are not new terms; they were used in Hitler's time. Euthanasia began as Hitler's program to medically murder the vulnerable. A "good death," he asserted. He started with "death to the mentally ill and disabled: having them summarily executed outright, with the nodding approval of many physicians and nurses of the time. He moved on to "death to the Jews," death to the "Gypsies," "death to the Christians," and "death" to those who spoke up for human dignity and equal rights for all.

The currently vanishing generation of those who lived during those times, witnesses to the atrocities committed in the name of Hitler's "greater good," knew and knows the truth. When all is said and done, when you "look in the mirror," review your life, when the end comes, will you have chosen to honor the life given to us by God? Or will you have bowed to the gods of personal power, pride, the glorification of man and his achievements without acknowledging the source of each person's gifts?

For all we do, and all we achieve, all we "understand" is little compared to the infinite Greatness, Beauty and Love demonstrated through God's Creation. This wonder includes even one child or one adult, one person, even the disabled or mentally ill.

These questions that confront us are not the sole concern of Christians or the Jewish people or any one portion of humanity. They are universal questions basic to the human condition; these questions must be answered by each of us, in all places, throughout all of time.

And again, I ask, when all is said and done, will I, will you have chosen to act in a way that honors life? You see, your choice, just like every other person's choice, makes all the difference. Collectively, we as individuals, determine the future of our world. Ultimately, the dignity of man rests not in the glorification of man, but in glorifying God and all of his Creation, even the least of those among us. Will we, out of fear, refrain from speaking up, refrain from confronting those leaders around us, refrain

from risking all to save our fellow man?

In Hitler's time, so many were terrified of saying anything, of being judged, condemned and losing everything. In our own time, so many just don't care. In our own time, so many do not understand the consequences of the small changes in laws, here and there. But that is where it all began before. Either you will choose to care or you will not. Either you will choose to act or you will not. For evil only flourishes when the people remain silent. And evil flourishes when the people do not act. What will we see when we review our own lives, at the end? Will we have honored life?

A Fading Rose

September 14, 2004

Fading rose,
Still beautiful,
 though only some see your beauty.

Still fragrant,
 though only some can appreciate you.

A petal falls,
 and then another.

I remember how you once were.
 how truly dazzling you once were.

Still holding your head so high,
 now, only with much effort.
 still turning to face the Sun.

Once so admired,
 everyone would stop to look.

Now, they hardly notice,
 they turn away.

Soon to be discarded.
 I too soon will be tossed away.

I walk among the living
 and am not even seen.
Visible? Of course!
 yet invisible I am.

I am still alive!
I still yearn!
I still feel!

I reach out.
you reach out,
but nobody cares to reach back.

I call out.
you call out,
but though their ears hear,
they do not listen.

I speak my wisdom,
but they do not heed my words.

I see ever more clearly,
... old as I have become.

So many stories I have,
I would share,
but no one asks.

No one even imagines
I have anything to share.
little do they know.

Visible? Of course!
yet invisible am I.

Petals falling,
I am still a fragrant rose,
fading,
a fading rose.

Walking On Water

November 7, 2004

We all become discouraged at times. We become fearful and choose a safe path, one that feels comfortable, one approved by everyone around us. Even though we choose a path that appears "reasonable," somehow we know it doesn't feel right. So we feel discontent, unsure, and haunted that we may have missed out on the possibilities existing in this life.

For those who are concerned about the victimization of the vulnerable, the fear of failure causes us to hesitate. And we have all hesitated far too long. We cannot afford the luxury of indulging our fears: others' lives depend upon our actions now!

Society will never change unless we change, unless we act, unless we have even a little faith!

If I told you that people can walk on water, many times in their lives, you would laugh. Or, you would accuse me of being delusional. "Nobody can walk on water," you would say, and you would be correct, but wrong.

"Walking on water" requires taking a leap of faith, like stepping off a cliff, stepping into the unknown, absolutely "knowing" that you will fall, but having the faith that somehow, mysteriously, you will be carried along. Somehow, a steady path would materialize in front of you as you stepped along.

You might be called "crazy" to do the things your faith would lead you to do, but it would make sense deep inside you. Trusting in one's intuition and having the courage to act on one's faith makes dreams come true.

That is how one lives by faith: not knowing what is coming, yet knowing that the step you are taking just now is the right one, even if it is a very small step. You thrill at the possibilities, knowing how wonderful and rewarding such a life can be.

We are not expected to do what we cannot do; we are expected to do the little things that we can do right now. You know that sometimes you have a thought, a feeling, an

inspiration to act. Not "impulsively," but spontaneously, and there IS a difference. And what you can do in the moment changes as you change. Ability and power are given to you as you seize your faith, trust it and live by it.

If your mission is to protect others, begin where you are, with those around you, in your own circle. Share your experience. Share your insights. Be brave.

But being what we are, we are sometimes doubtful, skeptical, confused, and we often hesitate. We all do. If we finally muster the courage to act, we enter a new world where our actions harmonize with our lofty inner inspiration. And, amazingly, the next step becomes clear only after we move along with faith.

When Gandhi began his journey as an attorney fighting for justice in South Africa he had no idea what changes awaited him. As he acted, he was transformed and transformed those around him. He was not "Mahatma" Gandhi (meaning "great soul") in the beginning. As time went on, as he acted according to his inspirational vision, his soul revealed itself to himself and the world.

Martin Luther King began the same way, working for justice, exploring ideas, learning as he went. If someone had told him in the beginning to deliver a speech that would be remembered forever, he would have laughed at the very idea. Yet years later, he was able to do what would have seemed impossible beforehand. He lived by faith, committed to his ideals, and was propelled along by that commitment and dedication.

Abraham Lincoln began by speaking the truth about the rights of man, whether black or white skinned. He began, and began again, after repeated failures, finally to become President of the United States. He never imagined his inauguration would cause the collapse of the Union of the States which he held to be a sacred bond. Having received threats against his life, he refused to be intimidated. Remaining steadfast in his faith in the rightness of his position, he kept on, through the Civil War and all the hardship he encountered. And his steady leadership not only saved the Union, it transformed the world, setting an example of evolving liberty and freedom which became the foundation for later freedoms to be won.

As Lincoln, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King demonstrated, leaders cannot give in to fear. They submit themselves to be a vehicle to speak the truth, and the truth spoken through them transforms the world. Followers of the truth and goodness need only follow the example given to them.

John F Kennedy said it so well, "Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country." We need to be asking what we can do to serve and protect our society's most vulnerable: the government has not, and has chosen to, not help the vulnerable very young, elderly, chronically ill, disabled and vulnerable who are being victimized and killed in our nation.

We cannot hesitate forever. We cannot live by fear. We must choose: to be truly alive or to be technically "alive" but dead to our sacred duty. Our fear paralyzes us and the gifts that are given to us remain unused, unexpressed, never blossoming into the fruit intended. Choose life. Drink it in. Revere it and protect it. Your life will never be the same.

Your love will draw you along, like a magnetic charm, leading you to riches to be felt and experienced within. Sometimes, life unfolds before us, like a scene in a play: the curtain is withdrawn to reveal new visions, new messages, new realities. The foglike confusion that blocks our vision is burnt away by even the smallest flickering light of faith.

Walking on water, living by faith, walking on living water, is truly being alive within. Our fear may prevent us from taking many first steps, but if we overcome that fear and listen to the inner prompting leading us to serve, our faith is strengthened. What faith we have is increased while those who have little faith may lose what they have, because they turned away from that inner prompting.

You are called to walk on water, to live by faith, to serve life wherever you are. Remaining silent and refusing to act is a betrayal of the inner voice that beckons each one of us. If you feel the call to serve, do something about it.

Act. Speak up.

The way becomes clear the moment you begin to move along, daring to do what is needed to serve your mission. The more you do, heeding the call within, the more you will be strengthened.

One of my favorite quotes is from Mother Teresa of Calcutta who said, "What I do you cannot do; but what you do, I cannot do. The needs are great, and none of us, including me, ever do great things. But we can all do small things, with great love, and together we can do something wonderful."

Give of yourself. Give of your time, energy and money to support the work wherever you see these best spent.

Do the small thing that you can do now and do it with great love; you will find yourself walking on water, living by faith, thrilling at the wonderful opportunities that open up before you. Your life will be changed. And the world around you will be changed, starting in the world you directly touch. Like ripples of water, spreading out in ever-widening circles, your actions reach out to others, and the world will never again be the same.

Muddy Waters

May 6, 2005

If you hike up into the mountain country you may appreciate the pure air, brilliant blue sky, deep green forest and the crystal clear sparking streams. You can almost reach up and touch the white fluffy clouds, and the mountain streambeds glisten with beauty. The waters reflect the sky above, and in a timeless moment, you may be reminded how majestic the Creation truly is. You may actually wonder at how beautiful it all is, more beautiful than you could ever have imagined.

You may wonder at Who could have created such beauty and perfection, a perfection that science reveals as intelligently organized down to the nth level of microscopic minuteness, to the incredible organization, function and structure of the human body, the interplay of all the cycles of life on Earth and all the way to the vast reaches of outer space. That there is orderliness to the physical world is something many take for granted.

Our scientists discover the laws of nature and pat themselves on the back for learning something new. Yet, they often refuse to acknowledge that were it not for the orderliness that pre-existed their discoveries, the scientific method, experimentation, and the ongoing accumulation of knowledge could not be possible. Without the orderliness of nature, there could be no predictable results when scientifically developed technology is applied.

Although the intelligent orderliness of our universe is the basis for all scientific explanation and knowledge, science does not explain where the orderliness of the world comes from; it does not explain how it all came to be, though scientists have put forward many theories over time. Scientists can explain how water evaporates, how clouds are formed, how rain falls and how streams and rivers are formed, but they cannot explain why they (or anything) exist(s). And no matter how much is discovered and explained, there always is and will be "the next level" of discovery, whether in the microcosm or macrocosm.

As you move along and descend from the summit, moving step-by-careful-step down the mountainside into the valleys, the waters change. All sorts of plant life, fish and

animal life enter into the waters. The streams no longer hold inches of water, but feet of water, flowing deep and fast. The clear streams are replaced by often turbulent rivers, chaotic eddies and swift currents that cloud the water as they stir up mud from the depths below.

The difference between the clear mountain stream and the muddy river below is striking, yet the water in both is the same. There is continuity, a connection, and if you think about it, the huge river is simply a "development" of the stream: the stream and the river are one, just as the river and the ocean are one. And although they are "one," that does not mean they are in all respects exactly the same.

The form the water takes is at one place a stream, and further down, a river. Can we draw a line between the water of the stream and of the river? Can we draw a line between the water of the river and the water of the ocean it flows into? When exactly does the stream become "river?" And when exactly does the river become "ocean?"

Though the appearance of the mountain stream and river are different, they are part of the same reality. And so it is with much of this world, including a human individual from conception to childhood, adulthood or old age. So it is with the individual even if he is ailing, disabled or unable to communicate. The appearance of the person changes over time, but he remains the same person.

So it is with America, whether colonial or Revolutionary America, a newly formed United States, or the United States we see today. There are always different perspectives from which to view the "reality" of the river, the person, this world or this nation. Each perspective has its own validity; each is just one "snapshot" of the one reality.

We have some glorious qualities as a nation that serve as an inspiration to people all over the world. Our nation's founding documents express lofty ideals and values based in a deep respect for the sanctity of human life. And our nation provides opportunity unparalleled in any other nation. Yet, our nation has also joined in perpetrating some of the darkest deeds in the ever repeating story of man's inhumanity to man. We don't enjoy remembering our nation's dark deeds, and some label those who expose our nation's dark deeds as "unpatriotic." However, if "patriotism" means ignoring the total reality of our nation's history, then it is quite a shallow patriotism.

We need to be realistic about our nation's depths as well as its heights, whether

physical or historical. When the ships brought Africans over into slavery in Colonial America it was one of our lowest points. The slave masters conveniently justified their horrible acts by saying that the African natives were not fully "human." When native American Indians were rounded up, mistreated and even killed, soldiers and settlers alike conveniently justified their actions by saying that the native Americans also were "savages" and not fully "human."

And the economic benefit of "free" African slave labor or "free" American lands to be taken by settlers was strong enough motivation for most supposedly Christian settlers to "forget" the Judeo-Christian teaching to treat others as one would want to be treated. They chose to conveniently first consider those who were to be exploited as less than human, and then chose to systematically exploit huge populations for centuries!

On every occasion when there has been a pattern of discrimination, exploitation, or oppression against any ethnic group, it has been justified by saying that those being targeted were not "fully" human. And there often are huge economic benefits that are to be gained through the victimization of the other, targeted group of individuals. The rationale of denying the "personhood" of any individual is the first step into muddy waters, turbulent waters. Once accepted, the denial of personhood is used as justification for all sorts of abuse, neglect, and exploitation, ... even atrocities.

If you choose to deny the "personhood" of any group of individuals, you are stepping into the company of those notorious villains who committed terrible crimes against humanity: the Nazis, the slavers, the Ku Klux Klan, those who massacred noncombatant native American men, women and children, or those who have victimized the disabled, the elderly and others.

Adolf Hitler justified his war of conquest by spreading a belief in a new glorious German empire or "Reich." The German people were thrilled with the idea of renewed national pride and power. Many were also thrilled when they were able to seize the assets and businesses of the Jews and others who were forcibly relocated first to the designated ghettos, and then to slave labor in factories and the "concentration" camps. Similarly, settlers in the USA were thrilled to seize the lands of the nomadic tribes when they were forcibly relocated first to designated camps, then to reservations.

Working to achieve his empire, Hitler and his troops swept away millions of people, and seized vast swaths of Europe. 40-50 million people are estimated to have died as

a result of battle during World War II, plus about 10 million as a result of genocide.

In the mid-1800s in the U.S., a new idea of "Manifest Destiny" took hold in our nation, suggesting that American expansion from the East Coast all the way to the West was inevitable and ordained by God. Before that time, it was assumed that the western regions belonged to Mexico or the Native Americans. "Manifest Destiny" was a convenient rationale settlers used to justify their seizure of lands held by the wandering Native American tribes.

Although large percentages of Native Americans died from diseases carried by settlers, those who survived exposure to those diseases were systematically threatened by discrimination, forced relocations to reservations and violent death. In a huge clash of cultures and populations, the American nation we know was established and many Native American Indian tribes were swept away into the dustbin of history.

The treatment of the Native Americans, African slaves and their ancestors is part of our very muddy American waters. The treatment of the disabled and the treatment of the very elderly in America is also part of our very muddy American waters. We don't like to look at that part of our history; we don't like to think about it. We prefer to proudly speak of the Bill of Rights, Declaration of Independence, a victorious American Revolution and the spread of democracy across the land. We like to speak about our democratic process, the smooth transition of power between elected officials of any political party. However, the total reality in U.S. history is rather muddied, even though we have our crystal clear streams of democratic documents and history. The clash between whom we say we are as a people and who we actually are as a people is stark.

During the Civil War, the Confederate states seceded from the United States in order to retain the convenient economic benefits of slave owning in the South. The Union of northern states fought to preserve the United States and to end slavery. Over one-half million people were killed in the war to preserve the Union. The prosperity of the powerful in the South was dependent upon continued slave labor. Once the war was lost, many plantation owners lost their lands. Others kept their lands by continuing to oppress the newly "freed" slaves by instituting sharecropping policies that kept the workers perpetually indebted to the landowners. Along with oppressive practices and discrimination, the Ku Klux Klan began a campaign of terror designed to keep African Americans subservient, afraid and powerless.

We face just as great a clash today between whom we say and believe we are as a

people and who we are actually are as a people. While we have laws forbidding murder, state and federal law (and the courts' interpretation of our law) allows the widespread murder of various categories of people aside from the very rare execution of a small number of convicted murderers.

Women are allowed to kill their unborn or partially born children (individual human beings), scientists are allowed to kill cloned individuals, and our courts allow the killing of severely disabled individuals. The law enforcement agencies, the courts and the law allow the very elderly to be denied treatment with the intent that the elderly die, even when they could be helped by such treatment.

Legal "permission" to kill within a health care setting has been achieved through a combination of incremental steps towards the legalization of euthanasia and/or assisted suicide. Just as killing Native Americans, African slaves or the Jews during the Holocaust was rationalized by labeling them as "nonpersons," killing vulnerable elderly, disabled and chronically ill today is rationalized (by some) by considering them to be less than complete human beings.

One such incremental step is the redefinition of basic necessities of life such as "food and water" into "medical treatment" when that food and water is provided through a tube feeding. Another incremental step is using the well-promoted patient's "right to refuse" medical treatment, as a justification to withhold tube feedings. Another step towards legalized killing is the bestowal of unlimited powers upon individuals who serve as guardians for dependent patients. When a guardian (who is supposed to see to the welfare of the ward) acts to end the life of the patient, today's courts usually will not challenge that action, though it would have been challenged just a few decades ago.

The fiercely defended "right to privacy" becomes a cloak of secrecy to hide the killings occurring throughout our health care system. How can an accurate investigation of these killings be done when the privacy laws forbid the release of the information needed to conduct such an investigation?

And we now are told that patients are not being "killed," they are being "allowed" to die!

In practice, removing life-support such as a ventilator from a ventilator-dependent brain-injured patient is not considered killing; it is considered to be "allowing" the patient to die. However, if the patient demonstrated conscious awareness and

intelligence, as did actor Christopher Reeve, society would consider the removal of ventilator support as "murder."

Why? Because our society has largely bought into the belief that quality of life, not sanctity of life, determines when a patient's life should be protected. If we accept the sanctity of life ethic, one may never intentionally end the life of a patient, and death is allowed when it naturally occurs. With the "quality of life" ethic being the deciding factor, when a patient is mentally retarded, brain-injured, in a coma, or somehow mentally incompetent, ending the patient's life is not considered "really" killing.

It is clear that an open "hunting season" has been declared targeting the severely disabled, elderly and chronically ill.

Removing food and water from a person who is dependent for nutritional needs is no longer considered killing; it is considered to be "allowing" the patient to die. I suggest that removing a fish from the water must therefore (according to such twisted "logic") also not be considered "killing," but merely "allowing" the fish to die. I suggest that (according to such twisted "logic") placing a plastic bag over the nose and mouth of a person is not "killing," but merely "allowing" the person to die. And I suggest that (according to such twisted "logic") removing blood from the arteries and veins of a person by shooting him or her is no longer "killing" them, but merely "allowing" the victim to die.

Where do the "logical" absurdities end? Our society has certainly entered very muddy waters. And many people are confused. We have been led to believe that it is "ok" to end the lives of others under so many "certain" circumstances that would never have been accepted just a few decades ago. Practices that are commonly implemented today would have been prosecuted as crimes just a few decades ago.

Are you confused? Sometimes, it is difficult to know what is the best course of action. We are hearing conflicting advice. Doctors, lawyers and many around us advise us to end the lives of the very elderly, to "allow" them to die. We are told to put them into hospice even though they are not terminal. We are told "it's all for the best." We are told, "there's nothing else you can do." Or, "you've done what you can." "Time to let go." But everything can be misapplied. What may be good advice at the very end when someone truly is dying is inapplicable to those who are not dying.

But we can clarify the decision-making process by comparing two scenarios:

Imagine: you are again up at the mountaintop, with the crystal clear water flowing in the stream before you. Imagine that you are standing before God as you contemplate ending the life of a vulnerable person. The sun is shining bright in the sky as you consider choosing to kill the vulnerable, needy, dependent person before you. Do you have any doubt about the "rightness" of your choice? Do you think God might condemn you for killing the one who is dependent upon you for care?

Would you hesitate? Are you sure you are "right?"

Can you stick a knife in? Or shoot the one who needs you to care for them? Imagine you go ahead and do so. Blood flows everywhere. Would you be pleasing God? The waters of the stream turn blood red. Are you pleased? Do you think God is pleased?

Now, ask yourself, why is it any different if you have a "medical" way of ending their life? Just because you kill with a pill, or kill by dehydrating someone to death within a "supportive" health care setting, does that make it morally acceptable? You are deciding to end someone's life and are actually ending their life!

Now, imagine you are choosing to continue to care for the vulnerable, needy, dependent person before you. Imagine that you are again standing before God as you contemplate continuing to care for the one who needs you. The sun is shining bright in the sky as you consider loving and continuing to care for the vulnerable, needy, dependent person before you. Do you think God would condemn you for caring for the one who is dependent upon you for care?

I cannot believe God would condemn us for caring, but I do believe we would be condemned for killing.

"But!" you say. "BUT!" you say louder: "It is hard!" "It is difficult!" "I have to sacrifice so much!" "It is 'ruining' my life!"

Few willingly seek difficult challenges, and nobody is saying here that doing the right thing would be easy. Nobody said it would not entail sacrifice, ... perhaps sacrificing all through your life. But what is this life about?

Are we here to serve, or to serve ourselves?

Are we here to do what is convenient for us, or to do what is a blessing to all around? We hear talk of further "treatment" being a burden on the patient, and at the very end

of life, when death is truly unavoidable, further treatment may be ended, allowing for a natural death. But when treatment is said to be a burden and the patient is not dying, and when life itself is said to be a burden, what are we really talking about? Those who promote this line of thinking continually ask, "who would wish to live like that?" They ask, "would you wish to live like that?"

That is not the right question, for people change how they think, and though many believe they would rather die than be disabled, those who are disabled tell us that life goes on, that meaning is found in their lives, that they want to live. Beyond that, there is always a purpose in life, though we may not fully understand that purpose now.

Are we deceiving ourselves when we consider killing the vulnerable an act of "compassion?" Is a more likely explanation found by recognizing that we as a society, or as individuals, selfishly consider the lives of the vulnerable to be a burden to us?

If we kill those who are "inconvenient," do we have any hope of retaining our humanity?

If we learn to heed the call to serve and follow a path upstream where the waters are clearer and purer, our way will be made clear. We can leave the muddy waters behind. And as we work through all the difficulties and sacrifice, we will know that not only are we not condemned, we are blessed!

Swallowing The Bitter Pill

May 15, 2005

Those who work with the dying witness the waves of challenging losses that arise as death approaches. We see pain on the physical, emotional and psychological level and the anguish of those who are about to lose the one they love. Patients sometimes share their fears and spiritual struggles as they contemplate losing everything they know and face their impending death. There are all sorts of interactions between family members, friends and other visitors. But, contrary to what one might imagine, the dying process is not always experienced as the dark and depressing time many imagine.

For many, dying and death are accepted as a natural culmination of a long and complete life. Death is seen not as a defeat, not as an obliteration of one's being, but as a transition to something even greater. For those who are ready, though some may find this difficult to believe, death is actually welcomed.

Those who work with patients at the end of life know it is a special time of sharing that is filled with an intimate, intense immediacy that is unlike any other care setting. Although there are common issues that must be dealt with, each person and their family are unique in how they tackle these issues and complete the "unfinished" business of their lives. They will face dying as they have approached life.

The dying process is not separate from life,
but is a continuation of all that has come before;
it is the last part of living out our lives.

Some would choose to hide death and dying away behind the cold, hard walls of a hospital corridor where "others" can provide care. They want to hide from their own fears and the painful experiences they might encounter were they to be present during the dying process. Sometimes this fear of death (on the part of those not dying) causes isolation for the terminally ill patient who just wishes to continue as normal a life as is possible under the circumstances.

While others may wish to hide death away from sight, we have learned that the dying

themselves mostly want to die at home surrounded by those they love. Good end-of-life care helps to make that possible. Patients say, "whatever you do, don't put me in a facility." Hospice staff can help support the family and patient through this incredibly trying yet often strangely rewarding process at home.

Those who have no experience with the end of life care setting do not understand how caring for the dying might be "rewarding" or "fulfilling." They fear death and feel revulsion for the dying process. However, the period of approaching death is not only a time for loss, but also a time for sharing, communicating, serving and experiencing. It is a time of great need, ... a time when experienced and knowledgeable staff can make a tremendous difference.

It is a time when caregivers do their best to assess and relieve the various forms of suffering that may arise. The memories of that special time remain forever with those who survive, and how staff intervene to relieve suffering can make the difference between a family having very positive memories or experiencing bitterness about how the dying process and symptoms at the end of life were handled. Because of the intensity of the experience, the dying process and death are not something that can be forgotten easily, just as a birth is forever imprinted upon one's memory.

Whether at the end of life or not, I have yet to meet a person who has not encountered and suffered some deep pain. We all have losses and experience pain: physical suffering, emotional disappointments, and problems with relationships, finances or other losses. That pain can sometimes feel overwhelming. Though everyone is touched by pain in some way, representatives of popular culture seek to convince us otherwise; they suggest that we can be forever "young," "healthy," "beautiful," "carefree," "happy," or "successful," if we only would follow their advice or purchase this or that product being marketed at the time.

We want to believe them! We want to believe that we can actually be free of the pains of this life, that we can be forever "young," "healthy," "beautiful," "happy," or "successful." The problem is: ... we know better!

Unless we were teenagers filled with the naiveté of youth, we cannot fail to see the "sands of time" move inexorably through the hour glass, demanding that we take note of increasingly prominent signs of aging: gray hair, changing shapes, wrinkles, weakness, pain or disease. If we allow ourselves to be objective, we are forced to admit that many around us are stricken with accidental injuries, sickness or death each year. We ourselves will inevitably suffer and succumb to old age and death.

The Psalmist expressed it so well:

"I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak." Psalms 31:9-10

He confirms what we witness in the ever-full hospitals and nursing homes. He confirms what we learn from the obituaries and cemeteries. No expert witness could ever refute what he tells us about life! The people we see in the hospitals and nursing homes (or in the cemeteries) compel us to realize how temporary our lives actually are. We are forced to realize that no matter how much we accumulate, no matter how much power or wealth we acquire, we cannot take any of it with us when we die.

There are wonderful times, but we also witness the illnesses, disabilities, crimes, disputes, legal wrangling, plotting, conspiring, divorces and estrangements, the battles and wars, and the injustices heaped upon the weak by the strong.

We witness the powerful who end up weak (or dead), the young who become old, the arrogant who are humbled, the rich who lose all they "possessed" upon death ... and we wonder how it can possibly make any sense at all.

We may wonder if the Creator was a "madman" to have created this world. We may blame Him for the suffering and losses that plague us, or for even allowing death at all. Although we want to blame someone, blaming God or others for the suffering in this world only increases our own isolation and pain.

Although we may be tempted to bitterly label the Creator that "madman" for allowing mankind's inhumanity to man, it is mankind's own madness that gives rise to the evils of this world, not the Creator's. It is our own blindness and disregard for God's laws that give rise to manmade calamities.

If we deny God's existence and reject any spiritual foundation for life, we will view life merely as a material accident of chance; taken at face value then, life would not appear to have any lasting meaning or importance. Yet, to take just one example, scientists have learned that the complete complex genetic code for a human being would fill hundreds of books.

I cannot bring myself to make the leap of faith required to believe that all of that complex DNA code arranged itself by accident, even were a billion years allowed for

it to happen!

To believe in the completely accidental nature of life, as we know it, would require the denial of everything I see around me. All of science serves to confirm the wondrous complexity of this life and to confirm the miraculous in life. Rather than being a material accident without meaning, we can view life as a gift. We can view life as a spiritual journey with lessons to learn through every challenge. All of life including the dying process becomes meaningful.

It is a lack of appreciation for the miracle of life that leads us to find fault with death itself or the suffering that is part and parcel of this world. It is very common to feel tempted to blame God for the losses that occur in our lives. And the advice of one of (the Biblical patriarch) Job's self-appointed counselors was to do exactly that, to "curse [blame] God and die." - Job 2:9 The appeal of a chosen death is nothing new! "Choosing" death was exactly the advice of one of Job's misguided counselors!

Yet, even if we reject suicide (by whatever means) we may wonder how God, if He truly is a "just" God, could allow suffering and death, especially suffering and death that touches ourselves, or those we care about.

Dwelling on our bitterness only expands it till we are consumed with rage at the injustices (whether real or imagined) that we see dealt out in this life. We may not understand why "one man dies in full vigor, completely secure and at ease, his body well nourished, his bones rich with marrow [while] another man dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good." Job 21: 23-25

We naturally question these and other apparent injustices. We naturally question the suffering we encounter, and some of us become bitter, blaming others. However, we cannot be fulfilled if we cling to that bitterness. We must go through it, beyond it, even though we feel that much of whom we have been may be left behind if we let go of our bitterness.

When Job's family died and he lost all his possessions, Job grieved but did not become bitter; he didn't blame others or God. Some would argue that a person who would not blame others or God angrily for such terrible misfortune could not and did not really love his family. Yet Job was a man of great faith who did love his family. It was his greater love for God that enabled him to absorb the terrible losses in his life and allow him to remain filled with faith.

When Job heard that he had lost everything and everyone dear to him,

"Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head." [He was upset!]

"He [then] fell to the ground in worship and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." In all this, Job did not sin by charging [blaming] God with wrongdoing." Job 1:20-22

The Book of Job contains one of the most difficult lessons: to accept whatever comes with unshakeable faith. No matter what suffering, pain or loss is sent our way ... we are to remain faithful, loving and devoted.

Who can easily do this?

While we (and others) may accomplish much in this life, we are to accept those things we cannot change. For who are we to understand "why" the universe is the way it is. We can study endlessly "how" objects in this physical universe interact. We can study the structure and function of various living organisms. But ultimately, though this is offensive to our sense of pride in all humanity has accomplished, we can never know exactly "why" the universe is the way it is.

In one of the most famous verses from the book of Job, God asks Job, and ultimately each one of us who regularly question "why?"

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." - Job 38:2-4

And we can only answer that we certainly weren't there at the foundation of the earth or the universe, and we do not understand. No matter how "learned" we become, we do not understand at all.

Yet we still question and challenge God regularly asking, "why?" "Why do our loved ones have to die?" If we question why God allows suffering in the world, we should be willing and able to "correct" and improve upon what God has done in this world. Could we really do a better job? Could you, if you were given the chance to do so?

Job, like many of us, found that people around him were eager to offer another

message on how to deal with the troubles encountered in this life. Job's "friends" offered much advice that was not helpful at all. Like modern day assisted suicide proponents, some told Job to commit suicide! ... to "curse God and die." They said that Job's (man's) suffering was so terrible that death would be preferable to living with such grief. So, the argument of the euthanasia or assisted suicide advocates for a hastened death, at a "time of one's own choosing" is surely nothing new.

And what if Job had accepted the advice of the suicide proponents and "cursed God" and died? He never would have experienced God's blessings, because the greatness of the Book of Job is found not just in Job's tremendous demonstration of faith, but in God's grace and blessings given to Job:

The Lord blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first. - Job 42:12

If Job had listened to the suicide proponents of his time, there never would have been a "latter part" of his life to be blessed!

Some of Job's other "counselors," like many today, may say that the suffering we encounter is our fault, that we are being punished, or that our faith is inadequate. But that is not the message of the book of Job. The message is clear that we may be tested as we move through this life. The message is clear that our faith may need to be strengthened. But while we are responsible for the consequences of our actions, we are not to blame for all of the suffering in our lives. Suffering is simply an unavoidable part of this life.

People often advise the grieving that they can and should "forget" whatever has caused them pain, even to "forget" the death of their loved one. "Just let it go," they say, but there is no need to force ourselves to forget. In fact, "forgetting" someone we have loved is not really possible.

We cannot and should not forget them, but we can and must continue to move on with life and do whatever we can to make this world a better place. In time, we will relinquish our preoccupation with our grief and with the past. We will not and will never forget. We will never lose the connection with those we have loved and then lost through death.

Those with unwavering faith, like Job, may take all challenges in stride. But how many have such unwavering faith?

When we are confronted with deep pain, disease, suffering, even with our own impending death or our loved one's death, it is very difficult to accept and remain at peace. We do not have the strength of faith that would allow us to remain at peace in the face of such deep losses.

People have a way of curling inward upon themselves while creating a self-imposed wall of isolation. Though the wall is self-created, the barrier separating them from others is experienced as very real. The individual now not only suffers due to his losses and pain, but also suffers even more intensely due to his isolation. Pain becomes unbearable when we believe we are isolated, unloved and alone. The dying may be consumed with their own feelings of fear, grief, guilt or anger.

Some of the dying may even shut out their friends and family, refusing to speak or interact at all. Those doctors, nurses and others who care and serve the ill or dying know that one of the greatest achievements they can have in the care setting is to be there and "connect" with the patient, to share in the moment, to let them know they are not unloved and unrecognized, to let them know that they are positively loved and appreciated, to "reach" past the wall and touch their soul, so that a mutual recognition is felt, heart to heart.

We are all alone in a way, but it is the loss of feeling "connected" to others or God that hurts so much. The betrayals, pains and disappointments in life make it even more difficult to trust others or to trust the process of life itself. The loneliness and depression that may arise can eventually lead us to shut ourselves off even more completely. One of the paradoxes of life is that in order to free ourselves from that loneliness and self-imposed isolation, we must be again willing to trust and reach out to others and God.

We all have a need to feel loved, and so do the dying. Those who care for others have the privilege of serving and sharing their love. Although many fear being around the dying, the dying often need those they care about to visit and be there with them. They do not need casual visits from those who are not involved.

And those who are involved, the family and friends, may also feel afraid or experience grief, guilt and anger. Sometimes the family and friends cut off the relationship with the dying making them even more isolated and alone!

While those witnessing the dying process wonder what to say or do, there are no special words or phrases that are going to magically "make it all better." Dying and

death are not something that can be "fixed." It is something that must be acknowledged and accepted.

The prospect of dying brings most to their knees, shakes them to their core and forces them to contemplate the meaning of their life, to review their actions in life, to confront their ultimate aloneness. Many are afraid and overcome with loneliness in their despair, but many others are ready to "take death on" and let go of this life.

Not everyone experiences "aloneness" as "loneliness." Some can spend days, weeks or even months all alone and never feel "lonely." What makes the difference? Those who are not "lonely" are filled with a sense of purpose, a focus, a feeling of "connectedness" that bars any feeling of loneliness from entering into them.

They know they belong. They know they have a place in this world. They know they are loved. They know they have a purpose in this life and love to share. Those who face death with this attitude are at peace when the end comes. And the love they have for others may make itself known in a million ways.

Those who have understood reach out to others, encouraging, comforting, loving, helping, sharing with them, nurturing them till they are strong enough to trust and to stand on their own in their "aloneness" and set out along their own paths. They are no longer afraid. In some cases, the dying comfort those around them! In some cases, friends, family or caregivers comfort the dying.

There is no rigid rule about how the process of dying and death will impact any one patient or their family and friends. Patients who perceive and accept their ultimate "aloneness" may also know their connectedness with others, with all of life and the Creator of all life. They are ready to experience the next step and the world that awaits them beyond. They are not afraid.

They demonstrate that the bitter pill that challenges us in life can be swallowed. Our loving approach to life need not be broken by the losses or hurts we experience.

Though we may not be able to immediately forgive those who deeply disappoint us,

Though we may not be immediately able to accept the horrible injustices we witness,

Though we may not be immediately able to surface from the depths of our rage when those we love are hurt and swept away,

Though we may not be immediately able to embrace our pain and transcend it, there is a way to turn the poisonous depths of despair into hope.

We need to focus on doing the little we can do in our own world to help others. We need to open our eyes and hearts to see the need of others. Their needs cry out to our hearts: choosing to care for them has the power to heal us.

For those who are dependent upon others and in need, being willing to accept the help of others is not only humbling, but also healing. In serving as well as in being served, we are all healed in some way!

Strange it is that while we feel so powerless over the hardships of this life, we have only to give of the little we have, to find that we have so much more. And the more we give of ourselves, the more we have. The pain that has been tormenting us no longer touches us in the same way. That pain may stubbornly cling to us, but it becomes tolerable.

The awareness of suffering's universality becomes a raft that helps us to make the journey from isolation to connection, from self-centeredness to concern for others, from bitterness to gratefulness, and from doubt to faith. We can then reach out with real compassion, a compassion that connects us with the ones we serve.

If we consider the wonders of the universe and remember and focus on the kindnesses that each of us have surely sometime received, we can awaken within ourselves gratefulness for whatever good fortune we have all had in our lives.

Willingly accepting our reality, including its pain, we can move forward to truly live, not by focusing on ourselves only, but by realizing our purpose and loving that which inspires us. There are endless opportunities to serve, none of them unworthy of pursuing.

For as long as there is life, there is an opportunity to serve and help others in some way or another.

Even the dying can serve, help or bring healing to others around them. This service given to the surviving family and friends by the dying is regularly seen at the end of life. This is one of the reasons that choosing to end the life of even a dying person is wrong.

Assisted suicide and euthanasia eliminate the endless possibilities in those moments, hours and days at the end of life.

Assisted suicide and euthanasia are the equivalent of cursing God for the gift of life He gives.

We all have pain in this life. If we struggle to rid ourselves of the suffering that must in some way accompany this life, we find nothing but continued pain and isolation: a very bitter pill. There is nothing wrong with caregivers using all medical means to relieve physical pain. We must do everything possible to relieve pain. But if we accept the suffering that still comes our way and appreciate the greatness of God's love for us, we are comforted. Our pain becomes bearable.

When we accept and willingly shoulder the burden that is given to us in our lives, we find our burden lightened. We are able to swallow (what we thought was) a bitter pill: the simple reality of this life.

To Life!

July 15, 2005

If you've ever been to a wedding, a large family gathering or even a wake, you know that traditionally there is a "toast" made at gatherings of family or friends, whether in happy times or sad. It involves a few words said to congratulate someone on an accomplishment, an occasion, or even to remember a loved one who has passed on. The people hold their glasses up high and say, "a toast, a toast!"

Sometimes a quick toast is to say, "To Health!" or "To Love!"

What "To Health!" or "To Love!" means is clear from the words themselves. But "To Life!" ...? "To Life!" is on an altogether different level, as toasts go.

"To Life! ... and all the glasses clank together as they smile and nod together, and toast again.

What "To Life!" means (for those participating in the toast) cannot be as easily explained. It is understood, and understood better as one lives on to experience life. It may mean that life is wonderful, or happy, or joyful, and, for that they are grateful. Yet, it may mean that life is terrible, or sad, or even unbearably painful, and then, there is hope that better times are ahead. Life is what it is: sad and happy, wonderful and terrible, all rolled up together. The meaning is never discussed at the table; everybody just seems to understand.

Those who make a toast "To Life" embrace it all! And that sets them apart, as not everyone toasts "To Life!" anymore. It is understood (by those who toast "To Life!") that whatever life brings, it is a gift, a blessing, mysteriously meaningful and wondrous, and through it all there is friendship, the opportunity to love and be loved, and, there is a purpose. It is the life given to us by God. And because we acknowledge Him, because we revere Him, we are utterly grateful! We understand the sacredness of this life, and we do not lightly discard what He has given!

Whatever cards we are dealt, we play the game till the end, living the best we know how, till the Dealer takes the cards back, and the game is finally over. We don't fold;

we don't flee, we don't protest. We don't yank the cards out of other players' hands; we don't force them from the game. We accept what we are given and make the most of it. We know there is a purpose to it all, and that it has everything to do with His will for us, with our growth in understanding and following His way, not our way.

Those who do not make the toast "To Life!" are not interested in His way or Him. They don't even consider Him at all in their deliberations. They think nothing of yanking the cards out of other players' hands, forcing them from the game and destroying the sacred gift of life, whenever it suits their fancy.

For those who embrace life and value its lessons, there is more to life than meets the eye; there is a spiritual element to living, serving, and caring, even in health care ... especially in health care.

The ethics guiding the decision-making of those who embrace life is the antithesis of the ethics guiding those who value the dollar above the Dealer.

The economic "ethics" of those who place personal or corporate gain above the value of the lives of the vulnerable is repulsive to those who care more about the patients they serve. Those who care about each individual are inspired by others who have gone before, who fought "the good fight," who never quit, never complained, and held their heads high even while they faced many obstacles.

The good fighter never surrenders till the fight is either won or lost. He gives it everything he has, holding nothing back. Adjusting the strategy till an opening is found, moving this way and then that, he finds a way to succeed and win, or lose. The competition for the prize is fierce. This is the reality of life: "win or lose." But in life, fighting the good fight is what makes one the winner. The "fight," how we choose to go through life, the process of life, is everything.

The greatness of those who serve is not a greatness that makes for big headlines, but is a greatness that makes them loved and respected by the many they have touched through the years.

The good fighter cannot afford to lazily put off training, to be unskilled or careless if he is to win. He cannot refuse to play. He cannot afford to pretend the competition does not exist. He knows that he will face tremendous challenges. Whatever strategy he chooses, it is all part of the great and mysterious game of life, played out within this world for all to see.

Our reverence for life cannot be conveyed in a catchphrase such as our being "prolife" or our belief that we all have a "right to life." Labels are convenient. They are also misleading. We are not just "pro" life, but of life! And we understand life in an utterly different way from those who eagerly end lives. We understand the gift that life is.

We "give thanks to God for His kindness, and for His wonders to mankind."
Psalms (107:22)

Our perception of life is completely foreign to the thinking of those who care nothing about Him or those He has created. They do not hesitate to say who should be, or who should cease to be. They cannot even imagine that they might be arrogant in usurping His role in determining when and how a life finally comes to its end.

Yet, who is to say that this one or that one is not worthy of continuing to play the game? The Dealer has dealt everyone a hand. Everyone is given the chance. It is not for them, or me, ... or you, to say, "he should not be allowed to play!" ... "she should not be allowed to live!

"It is not for any of us to say that the Creator made a mistake in dealing out these cards and creating these players. Or do you think Him a cheater? a fool? a failure? or simply mistaken? Those who care nothing for Him believe that if He exists, he must be a fool as well as mistaken! They think that with all the suffering in this world, and all the problems, ... how could He be anything other?

"They know better" they believe they "know."

We do not always understand why He allows suffering. We don't understand why he allows "imperfection," but we do not make the rules. Everyone, yes everyone is "imperfect" in His eyes! It is only our own arrogance, or our greed, that would make us ascribe "perfection" to ourselves yet label others as "unworthy" of life.

How would you like it if you were selected for the "special treatment" of an imposed death, whether by gun, gas chamber or the professional and "peaceful" (but just as lethal) "gift" that a willing medical killer is ever ready to give. If not you, why another? Why not you?

This world is like a huge ocean-going cruise-liner setting out upon a voyage. At times, there's only smooth sailing, "fun and sun." Yet at any moment, dark brooding clouds

may rush in bringing storms and walls of water that could sweep everything away, bringing a swift and untimely end to it all. Expert captains and sailors are needed to maintain direction, speed, control and safety.

Leaders of nations, like captains sailing upon the sea, set forces in motion that affect everyone "on board." Our current leaders are steering society into known and very treacherous seas. Their ideas, like vessels, sail swiftly from sea to sea and nation to nation.

The eugenics belief that some people are worthy of life while others should never even have been born traveled from the USA to Germany in the 1930s, affecting the practice of German physicians who laid the foundation for what would later become the Nazi T-4 euthanasia program, and even later, the Holocaust.

The global society, like that ocean-going cruise-liner, involves everyone on board. In every land where euthanasia or assisted suicide is legalized, there are some whose lives are swept away, thrown overboard into the jaws of death. Though a very small number willingly jump to their own demise, many more are pressured to die for the economic gain of others, of states or of nations. Euthanasia practiced in one continent threatens to sweep away the vulnerable in other lands.

Those who promote a utilitarian view of life have never disappeared; they have not renounced their views. They have merely bided their time, worked diligently, incrementally, to achieve worldwide acceptance for their deadly philosophy. They have spread their ideas in the universities. They have spread their ideas in the medical and nursing schools, in the halls of government, economics, and the political backrooms. And, they have spread their ideas in the media. They do not toast "To Life!" They do not toast to the Giver of this life. They merely look to the so-called "quality of life" and then arbitrarily decide who shall live and who shall die.

Examined, or unexamined, these widely accepted societal beliefs exert a pressure on all of us. Whether we are aware or unaware of this influence, most of us make choices which are supported, even strongly encouraged, by those societal representatives around us. Who are these pivotal societal representatives? Increasingly, it is the doctors, nurses, social workers and attorneys who urge us to look at the "quality" of life and then decide what to do (facilitate the death of the vulnerable). They do not advise us to recognize that there is life, sacred life. They do not advise us to protect that life!

Many, many thousands of us have chosen to "let" an elderly parent "go" even though they were not actively dying based upon this societal trend. And while nurses and doctors nod, entice, encourage and even berate, we increasingly succumb to the pressure to hasten death by depriving the parent of water and medications. Many have been misled to believe that choosing to deprive a vulnerable elder of food, water and medications before they are actively dying is "letting nature take its course." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Decisions to neglect the vulnerable directly result in their death; it is now a common form of imposing death, euthanasia. Not only is it a common form of imposing death, it is now the common form of dying. Who dies a natural death today? Who is allowed to live without some help, some extra "something," some push over the edge into death?

Add a little unneeded morphine for "comfort" as the vulnerable wither away and die, and you have stepped from compassion to killing. Rather than caring for these, we are now collectively throwing so many of them off the cliffs of life into the abyss.

The silence of our collective but hidden guilt screams out and mingles with the voiceless pleas of the deliberately made dead.

These choices, multiplied throughout recent generations, have now completely tainted the health care environment. These choices have planted fear in the minds of the vulnerable elderly, disabled and chronically ill, who no longer can trust whether their life will be respected or ended at a time of need. Caregivers who value the lives before them fear losing their careers and worse, should they refuse to follow deadly but daily orders to harm the vulnerable.

They risk all if they now do what once was the only thing to do: honor life.

Those who revel at the thought of controlling who may live and who shall die sooner reason that certain groups of others are expendable. They justify their thoughts, decisions and actions, and never allow themselves to recognize what it is they are destroying. They point to the economic "benefits" to society and the (to them) "holy" budget, while filling their own pockets and increasing their power over others.

They say that others should not be permitted to live. They say that some should not have even been permitted to be born. A dark spirit (opposite to that which inspires the "Special Olympics" for the disabled) guides them. They do not celebrate the lives

of the disabled or elderly; they stamp them out whenever and as quickly as they can.

Yes, we have seen this before, and where did that all end? Mountains of corpses consumed in the fiery ovens of Auschwitz! Evil medical experimentation upon individuals regarded as less than human because they were of another race, or another ability! And no surprise, these same policymakers say it is "ok" to experiment upon the vulnerable, or the disabled, or the mentally ill, in order to benefit the rest of society.

Shall we go down that road again? Do we really want to devalue some, choosing to use their lives and then end their lives, simply because we declare them "better off dead?" Where will it end this time?

Do those who kill so glibly really "live?" They kill those who (according to them) have a low quality of life, yet what about their own "quality of life?" Can the killers know what is killed? Can the victimizer appreciate the loss of those they slay? Do they sit on the porch watching the leaves flutter in the wind like the strikingly brief lives of men and wonder what it all means? Do they recognize that every drop in the ocean of life sparkles with the life of the Creator? Can they truly appreciate the life they toss away so blithely? No!

Do these killers really live? Though now powerful and societally persuasive, do they have the quality of life enjoyed by those who value life and adore its Creator? Hardly! They are robotic zombies, living without any idea of the harm they do, living without any insight into the purpose of life, though they fancy themselves the wisest of all time.

It is easy for them to snuff out a life, but they cannot create a life. They brag about "creating" lives through cloning though all they are doing is manipulating the materials of life given to them by One infinitely more powerful and wise. Their goal is to create "perfection," never recognizing the fatal and evil consequences of their plan. They award themselves prizes for manipulating materials, yet deny credit to the Genius from which all of this wonderful world arises.

Not one scientist has ever created a human life, or any life, from scratch, ... from the elemental atoms and molecules that make up our universe. Life comes from life! Life! We do not create it, but we are witnesses to it and participants in it.

Who cannot but wonder when looking out upon the ocean's endless waves or the

vast reaches of space? Who cannot but wonder when gazing upon fish swimming, jumping, and fighting their way upstream to find their way home and begin the cycle of life again? Who cannot but wonder at the amazing activity seen within a cell? Or at the amazing complexity organisms all over the world display? Or at the innocent smile of a child? Only infinite Genius could create such life, such intelligent life!

The deadly folly arising out of mankind's continuing, unrestrained greed and violence misdirects our abilities. It eliminates the wonderful possibilities of all that could collectively be achieved should we only seek to serve rather than to serve ourselves.

Though we cannot with certainty change the world around us, we can change ourselves and choose to salute life. We can then hope, and pray, for the best. I pray that more will join in and lift a glass across the table of this life, as I do, and make a toast, to the family of those who respect life and its Creator, to my friends, to you, and make a toast "To Life!"

"To Life!"

The Giving Space

October 12, 2005

I am dying.

We are all dying.

Some have been given the gift of seeing their dying, and have grieved, knowing we must leave this world one day. Whether death comes tomorrow, next year or many years from now, with all its suffering and joy, we love this amazing world. But don't be alarmed or misunderstand. I have not been given any dread diagnosis; I simply see the dying aspect of this life, the dying aspect of my life.

If you have cared for the terminally ill, you have been forced to confront your own attitudes toward death, the dying of others and, your own mortality.

Depending upon your perspective, all of this life can be understood as one continuous dying process or as one continuous living process. However, most prefer to live their lives without thinking about the end, without thinking about any of this at all. They do everything to avoid confronting their mortality and are not even aware that they put up mental roadblocks to any reminder of their own mortality. It's something like people insisting on seeing the cup half full, knowing that it's only "half" of the cup, yet refusing to acknowledge that there even is a half of a cup that could possibly be empty.

Those who have been given the gift of seeing their dying see the cup of life simultaneously as both: living and dying.

Clearly, our lifespan is limited, and as the sands of time pass away, death approaches. Objectivity precludes us from being disappointed when reality strikes, but who among us are consistently "realistic" when it comes to his own death? Most prefer a delusional subjectivity where death, for all practical purposes, simply does not exist in their world. Even those who know their death is approaching, eventually, choose to forget it for as long as they possibly can.

However, as we age, we do think about it more, ... a lot more. We can't help it. At first you don't talk about it, but you think about it. Perhaps it has to do with one's stage of life. People you know die. People you don't know die. In the beginning, most often they're older, then increasingly they're the same age, or younger, and death stubbornly, forcefully, intrudes into our consciousness making us painfully aware that the end of our run will eventually come, making us painfully aware that the end of those we love will come.

Those who are young think of how much time has passed since they've been born, how "old" they are. Those who are middle-aged, or older, or who have a terminal illness, think about how much time they have left; they know how "old" they are.

Whether you think about it as "living" or "dying," is there really any difference in this life that bridges the space between birth and death? Don't all of us share with the terminally ill this common end? Have you really thought about it? The concept of "dying" simply includes the recognition that death awaits all of us in the end.

Yes, modern health care's advances have helped so many people to live healthier. Yes, modern health care's advances have helped so many people to live longer. Death is put off long enough that the young and relatively healthy can talk themselves into believing (or acting as if they believe) that death will never touch them. The "not so young" and not so healthy can only talk themselves momentarily into forgetting their constant reminder that they are vulnerable. They know!

If I insisted that you are dying, you might find it hard to accept, so strong is your aversion to really seeing this truth. You would admit that theoretically all of us die, and theoretically you will die "someday," but you might not see your approaching death as a reality. You can accept that others will die, but you??

You wouldn't feel your approaching death as a reality. You wouldn't be urgently, intensely aware of the waning time left ... for you. Yet death will approach us all, even those we love, just the same.

Many choose to lose themselves in their own apparent strength, the enjoyments of this life, the acquisitions to be made, the power they can amass in their world, and youth, for as long as that lasts. They obsessively and futilely attempt to suppress even the slightest recognition of their own aging, encroaching weakness, loss, and death. Yet we will all suffer losses, grow old and need the help of those who are more able. We will need others to give of their time, energy, and skills to meet our needs. That is

a reality from which most recoil and seek to escape.

We wouldn't want to think of ourselves as needing anyone's help, let alone needing help with the most basic activities of life. Yet, who is it that will help us? If we do not help others, who will be there for those in need? You see there are only us, all of us, in this society, in this nation, or in this world. We choose whether to help, or not to help. We choose whether there ever will be any help. And if most of us choose not to help, there won't be enough people to help those in need, who might, ... who will, include us one day.

How many of us think about giving now to those in need? Aren't we preoccupied with what we are doing, with achieving our goals, with what we can get or enjoy in this world? Don't we think that "they will take care of it," that "they will do what is needed," and quickly we suppress the thought that "they" are people just like us, because "they" are us. All of us together are all who are in this world.

When we in time become weak, suffer losses and grow old, it will come as a shock, because we spent so much energy, all of our lives, absolutely turning away from this undesired, and feared, truth.

Strength ebbs, beauty fades, power is lost, and even the enjoyment of this life slips away; death arrives. So what is this all about? How do we find satisfaction, fulfillment and peace in the face of inevitable loss and death? Aside from living in the moment and enjoying what life offers, without giving, without serving, without loving, there is no real joy in this life.

In this life, and in this dying, we all give out of, and from, our very selves. Just as a river gives water out of itself to quench someone's thirst, we can give of our time, our energy, whatever we have or are, to help relieve the suffering of others. The river does not worry about giving water to the thirsty, and neither should we.

As a father or a mother, a friend or caregiver, we give of all we have and all we are to those we love. But the river doesn't only give to those it loves; it gives to all, and so should we. We may not find it easy to give our love and service to all, but those who do know an exhilarating joy here in this world.

Those who grieve in the awareness of their dying, shed tears both for the loss of all that might be and simultaneously, in gratitude for all this life and its Creator have already given. Inevitable death becomes the teacher of those who see the finiteness of

this life, and eventually we accept the face of death. We no longer fear the loss of what is or was or might be. We are ready ... to live, or to die.

Have you allowed yourself to see your own potential death?

Perhaps we could have been a better father or mother, husband or wife, brother or sister, son, daughter or friend, but did we do the best we could at the time? If you really were aware that death approaches, would you choose to live a different life? Would you choose to give more of yourself and to know that you fought the good fight? Isn't that why we are here? ... To do our best, to serve, to give all we can from within the giving space?

Some have all sorts of questions about giving. They wrestle with questions about "who" to give to, "what" to give, "how much" to give, "when" to give, "if" they should give, and IF they give whether their gifts will be appreciated or not, whether others will know. They revel in thinking about what they may get from this world.

Although one should give wisely to those who truly are in need and who will benefit, those who live within the giving space are not preoccupied with these questions. They give unceasingly like fruit-laden trees bending low, effortlessly releasing their innumerable ripe fruits; they share their bounty with all who reach out in need.

Some say they will only give sometime in the uncertain future, when things are "better," when they get more money. Some say that their individual help is not needed, that "others have already given," that their gift "wouldn't make a difference." They always find a reason not to give.

Some determine all their actions from the perspective of the "Left" or the "Right." They do not understand that within the giving space there is no "Left" or "Right." Within the giving space, there is startlingly lucid awareness of the world's great needs, right here, right now. There is only a great desire to fill that need, to comfort the suffering, feed the hungry, warm the cold, share with the lonely, and love the unloved.

Those who know their mission in this life perceive the unending need and opportunity to meet those needs. Like a mother nursing her child, out of herself, she gives, sacrifices, serves. She doesn't need to hear her child's cry to give once more; she is ready before her child's cry! That is loving from the giving space.

Although there is such unending need and opportunity to serve, those who live within the giving space do not question the mission. They give and work, as they feel guided to do, as long as they are needed, and then move on to others who need their assistance. They cannot "fix" the world. They do not even try or think to "fix" the world, but they help just the same. They heal and share their love, one person at a time. And their touch is never forgotten!

There is a story about an old teacher kneeling on the beach with a cup, scooping water from the ocean and then emptying the cup onto the beach. A student seeking wisdom comes along and thinks, "This doesn't make any sense at all!" "How can this crazy man be a great teacher?" "Nobody can ever empty the ocean of all its water." "What a waste of time!" "Why are you doing this?" "Why don't you stop what you are doing and teach me?"

But the old man smiles silently and serenely continues, knowing that whether or not it is possible to empty the ocean is not really important. He knows that the important lesson is to commit one's life to doing what you can do, with what you have, and to begin and continue doing that even if you only have a very small cup, even if the task seems impossible.

Though the ocean of need can never be completely emptied, we need not empty the entire ocean of need alone. We can simply empty our small share of the ocean of need. Together, today, we can begin to empty the ocean of need in our small circle of this world. Life's purpose is found when we engage ourselves where we are, meeting the needs that present themselves, with whatever ability we have, even if we have believed that we can do but little.

This limited life, this ongoing dying, is all about giving, wherever we are, whomever we're with, whatever we're doing, out of all that we are, while we are. It also is about receiving, not "taking," about actively receiving, consciously, and accepting with love and gratitude. For the giving space is the same as the receiving space when we give and receive in the Spirit of Love.

Some who witness the lives of those who are actively dying understand this potential: the heart can melt. The boundaries can dissolve. We can know a great connectedness: through our eyes, through a touch, a kiss, and a smile ... through caring for those who reach out to us for the simplest of things.

Through the pulsating, throbbing fullness of this life, we know. What else can we do

when we are aware of our own dying, accepting the finiteness of this life, while living fully now within the infinitely giving space? We know that however our life here may end, life itself will go on in its ever renewing, wondrous dance.

I don't know what my end will be, but I could never write or say how much I have enjoyed this living, sharing, and this dying. How can I describe the gift of all this is, the living and the dying, this life? This is not a dark perception. It is not a preoccupation with death. It is simply not being preoccupied with life to the exclusion of seeing its limits, without seeing death and the never-ending cycle of it all.

The details may change, but we all have been given this gift: to breathe, to know, to do, to be, to give ... and receive. The details may change, but we all have been given the gift of choosing how we are as we live this life and how we are as we die ... whether to give from all we are and from all we have ... or not. Daily, moment-to-moment, we choose whether to allow ourselves to live, and be, within the giving space.

If we hold back, if we are afraid to risk losing what we have in the giving, we lose it all. In that moment, we lose the gift of this life and all it could be and is and could have been. And everyone around us loses what could have been, had we but chosen to give, to let go, to live and to make the leap into serving Him.

You may wish to give up, to turn away from life, for you may not see the purpose in continuing. "Better to end it all," you may say, like putting an injured, but not fatally injured horse "down." Too impatient to work with the injured, to heal her if you can, to let her live as long as she can? You say, "There's no purpose," "She's not good for anything!" But life itself is good even though you may not think so. Its purpose may be mysteriously revealed one day, if you only would give life a chance.

Like a disabled patient who despairs, believing she will never find acceptance, and seeks to end it all. Though so many things have changed, and it is unspeakably hard work, how many times have we who work with the disabled seen little glimmers of hope sprout and a new life begun? How many times have we who work with the dying seen the miraculous gift the dying give to the remaining in the very last moments of their life? The healing of family relationships? ... Yes, in the very last moments of a naturally lived life and a "naturally died" death?

How often have we seen that where there is "unfinished business," the patient will hang on till that last work is done? Till a certain family member visits... till a treasured

gift is given... till the unspoken words are finally spoken.

We've seen this so many times, yet those who encourage others to give up, those who "assist" in killing the "willing," affirm their despair, affirm their denial of the gift of life, and eagerly hasten their death, snuffing out even the possibility of the miracles so often found in the naturally ending moments of a life.

The death-bringers, for that is what they are, care not at all about the giving they have destroyed. And while they stamp out every glimmer of hope, for as long as there is life there is hope, they think they are caring with real "love." They understand little about dying, or life. They hold back from seeing the real meaning in life, preferring to flee from life into death. They affirm that holding back from life in those they kill ... reinforcing their denial of the purpose of a life, both killer and the killed, even the willingly killed.

Those who flee from life protest that they know better when death should occur.
Better than God?

They may simply be afraid to experience dying as it can be, and it's not always pretty. They may fear being humiliated. They may angrily wish to control every aspect of their life including dying, never allowing themselves to be humbled by the overwhelming power of Nature and its loving Creator. They may fear being while not being on their own terms. For they do not allow themselves to feel love for Him or to admit to their own fear of really letting go.

We know medical science can relieve pain very well, but we can't help to heal the hearts of those who flee life as it is and turn their backs on His healing touch. A down-turned pot can hold no water. A down-turned mind sees no Light, sees no hope, ... sees only darkness and shadows. A down-turned mind only sees the limited world below, yet asserts fiercely that it "understands."

If we hold back, we cease to truly live. Like a river that refuses to flow, we can become like a dried-up puddle stagnating in the mud. We become a mere shadow of all we could have been or were meant by our Creator to be. If we hold back, we cease to participate in the river of life. If we hold back, we cease to enjoy. We don't even begin to fulfill a mission we dared not imagine or see!

The opportunity to fulfill that mission is never ended until the last touch, the last kiss, the last word, and the last gift of giving as we take our last breath ... no matter how

long we've turned away from giving, from others, from Him.

He is the Giver. He is the Maker. And we are fulfilled in mirroring His image, the image of One who gives all of what He is and gives all of whom He is from within His Infinite giving space.

Sacrificing our pride and opening ourselves to giving, we are able to renew our hearts and regain our place within the giving space.

We can only begin to reflect His image, sharing, laboring, till nothing more is left, like a candle that gives all the light it has and is consumed by that Light.

"Where does it go?" you ask. "Where do we go?" you ask. Those who give from the giving space no longer ask; they know.

The greatness of giving freely is something that anyone can experience. It is something anyone can share. But not everyone knows this experience, and not everyone shares it. The question clearly is: "why?" Why don't we all care and why don't we all share that caring by acting and giving? Why do some always expect others to do, others to care or others to give for them?

It's not difficult to understand. Holding onto what they have, they fear. They fear risking and losing, but in their choice to desperately hold onto what they have, they lose all that could be. They lose the thrill of living within the giving space.

It is so easy to let ourselves become caught up in the petty concerns that routinely arise. Yet when the day is through, when our life is through, when we consider the terrible anguish of those who have lost it all, how important were those petty concerns? How important were the now meaningless preoccupations?

Seeing those near death, seeing ourselves near death, brings us to our senses.

We expect so much. We hope for so much. Yet it always seems to be "just out of reach." Or if we finally find what we desired, we desire more, or something different, or it doesn't last. Change touches all. Death touches all.

We desire so much, but often the blessings that we seek may be found within the simple circumstances surrounding us right now. Perhaps those circumstances are not as we envisioned or demanded, and perhaps they are not as we prayed they would be.

Nevertheless, sometimes in little things, sometimes in great things, the blessings abound.

Do we pause to wonder at the blessings of our lives? Do we appreciate our wives or husbands, our parents or children, the friends or neighbors we meet along the path of this life? Do we take the time to share our love, to express our love, to forgive the hurts that occur from time to time and to help others forgive as well? These are the lessons of death and dying. Do we remember that while we are living, we are also dying, that there is only this moment, ever, in this life: now, and now, and now.

We are all guilty of not taking that time, not expressing that love, not forgiving all the hurts that occur and not helping others to forgive as well. Though we fail, we can try once more, forgiving ourselves and others and allowing ourselves to finally arrive at the giving space, even if it is at the very, very end.

It is a soft, unrushed space where we can feel and perceive the wonders of this world and our lives. Although there is much that appears ugly in this world, and we may think death "ugly," ... from the giving space we can see a beauty that pervades this world and even death, yet transcends the petty preoccupations and concerns of our lives. From that space, we can surrender to the changes and losses that occur as we age and die, whatever our age.

Can we awaken from the preoccupation and self-absorption that rule our lives? Only if we open our hearts.

Do we experience the blessings of living within the giving space? Only if we choose to embrace the changes that must occur in this life and only if we choose to embrace the Giver of this life.

I may be alone at the end. You may be alone at the end.

Or not.

But every drop of kindness given helps to create a powerful river of goodness, washing away the troubles of this world, at least in "our world." Every drop of service creates an expanding ripple of love that cannot fail to spread and heal and bring peace in "our world." Every word of encouragement feeds the hearts of the discouraged and despairing.

In that giving space, there is not even the slightest hint of enmity. There is no fear of dying. There is only love, forever.

We may or may not receive a visit from a friend or a loved one. But being with us, sitting with us, even praying for us in our dying, the remaining give us their final gift, and we give them a gift as well. The tears will come, knowing how much we have been given and how much we have even now to share with the world.

We can only begin to reflect His image, sharing, laboring, till nothing more is left, like a candle that gives all the light it has and is consumed by that Light.

Tears of joy will fall at that time, knowing we are traveling on in the Presence of the Giver of this life.

You who remain when we are gone: I pray you choose to live from within the wondrous, glowing, giving space.

The Spirit of Christmas

December 25, 2006

The Spirit of Christmas
is revealed in the wind, in the rain,
in the night and day,
in the beauty of this world,
if only we take time to see.

The Spirit of Christmas is revealed in the heart
that laughs, and cries out with joy,
remembering the Joy He brings
throughout this life.

Yet the Spirit of Christmas
is also revealed in times of sadness and grief,
for we are forced to remember Him
and to find Him, and in remembering Him ...
we know the peace and comfort He gives.

Whether living or dying,
we think too much of fighting and taking,
and of hurts that then hurt all over again.
Rather dwell on loving and being!
... being with Him now,
this beautiful day and life,
and being with each other,
with fullness of heart.

When the time comes,
now, and now and now ...
each moment, each day,
may you remember He that made you,
He that made this you see,
and He that made this day.

There can be no greater gift,
we give ourselves and all ...
it is only to remember Him
and to live within His grace.

Finally seeing His face
shining with love upon us,
we realize it is we ... all of us,
who simply have forgotten the Lord.

It is we who have ignored Him
... for so long,
so missed Him so long.

We suffer so heavily
only because of that forgetting
and the not knowing
He was with us all along.

No need to struggle,
no need to fight,
No need to suffer and fear,
His love is with us.

When we dare to love,
His love is with all.
Dare to love, dare to serve,
let go your pain and be free!

Then you will be one
who loves as He loved
and gives as He gave,
and knows joy beyond words,
the joy that is joy.

See the Spirit of Christmas
revealed in the wind, in the rain,
revealed in the night and the day,
revealed in the hearts of each other,

if only we take time to see.

Little Son

January 17, 2008

It's too late!
Time is up!
I wanted so much to tell you,
But there's no chance.

Suddenly, I'm gone ...
No longer will I hold you in my arms.
No longer will I hear your voice.
No longer will I live in this wondrous world.

But here I am.
Alive, but not in the world.
Here, but not where I was.
Loving you still.

I, but a shimmering form.
Here, wherever this is.
Others nod, knowing already
"All is well."

Smiling without having to smile.
Loving without needing to speak.
Warm, present,
Bright.

For an instant I fear you will not see,
but somehow you do.
For an instant I fear you will not hear,
but somehow you do, ... you know.

My love reaches out
across no distance

Bridging a seeming "divide"
only imagined by those yet in the world

Embracing you,
Telling you, "it is ok!"
"Be who you are meant to be!"
"Do what your heart calls you to do!"

You too are in the world
but for a little while,
And we will again be together
In the light, aware, loving, here.

My time is done
in this wondrous world,
But you are now a man,
my little son.

You Found Me

October 27, 2010

Do we remember our purpose?
Do we deny
or flee at the first surprise?

Though we are weak,
Can we feel the strength
and return to the path?

Will we put our backs to the task?
To finish the fight
and die in service to the Lord.

When will we remember?
When will we awaken from our slumber?
How many need to die?

How many need to cry?
What will it take to turn
stone hearts to living water?

What will it take to
allow blind eyes to see?
Only His Grace, Only His Love
Only the Lord, Only the Lord.

Forgive me, forgive me dear Lord!
For forgetting & valuing the cheap,
like a child I was lost, so lost!

And You found me
and brought me home.
Oh God, you found me and brought me home!

About the Author

Ron Panzer is a pro-life patient advocate working to promote excellence in end-of-life care, to protect terminally-ill patients, their families and staff working with those at the end-of-life. Trained in hospice and rehab nursing, Ron became a whistleblower in 1997 after seeing Medicare fraud being intentionally committed in a large hospice in Michigan. This Medicare fraud caused much harm to the patients and their families.

Ron founded the Hospice Patients Alliance in 1998 and serves as its current president. He is the author of *The Hospice Patients Alliance Family Guide to Hospice Care: What NO Hospice Will Tell You* and *The Heart of End-of-Life Care* as well as numerous articles on the end-of-life. He has appeared on many radio shows as well as on TV and his insights are referenced in many newspaper and online articles on hospice and the end-of-life.

Ron has personally counseled callers by phone and responded to letters and emails from the public. Many contacts are from family members whose loved ones were patients who were hastened to death at the end-of-life through unwanted overdoses of morphine or they have been terminally sedated against their will till they died of dehydration. This is the Invisible Holocaust being suppressed in the major media. These patients often had their pain controlled and needed no increased morphine, or were not agitated at all, yet were sedated into a medically-induced coma. Ron estimates that death is imposed upon a minimum of 100,000 patients each year in the USA alone.

HPA is a nonprofit charitable patient advocacy organization that has helped millions of people around the United States (and in other nations). Millions of people have gotten information about hospice from our website which was created to reach the public when major media and the hospice industry itself have withheld this vital information. HPA's website contains the most complete information on hospice, standards of care and the end-of-life setting on the internet.

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