

Old Man

by Paul Harris

The old man woke up feeling joyful, as was his custom. He was grateful to be alive, to experience the beauty and mystery of life. He was grateful that nothing hurt. As he lay peacefully on his back in bed, he directed his attention to his breath and began his morning meditation.

Breathe in Hold Breathe out.

Breathe in Hold Breathe out.

Breathe in Hold Breathe out.

His mind was still for a while, and then there were words. I am Aristotle I am the Buddha I am Confucius I am Jesus I am Krishna I am Lao Tzu I am Mandela I am Moses I am Muhammad I am Rumi I am Shakespeare I am Socrates I am peace I am joy I am love I am healing I am a human incarnation of the one eternal source of the whole space-time continuum. I am one cell in the nervous system of the Earth. My attitude is compassionate curiosity toward myself, life, and the world.

When he finished his meditation, he got out of bed slowly and put on some clothes. He walked downstairs to the living room and sat in his favorite chair. He

was spiritual, but not religious. Here is my hypothesis, he thought. This one human lifetime is only a tiny reflection of who I am. I am eternal life. And so are you.

"Papa," said his daughter, as she burst into the living room through the front door. "I have groceries."

He was an old man who lived alone, and during the Coronavirus he had gone forty days without taking a walk. His daughter had come to stay with him, buying groceries and household supplies. But now she had arranged for a service to deliver what he needed, and she was going back to live with her husband.

It made her sad to see the old man sitting all day in his living room chair or on the small balcony next to the dining room, except when he ate meals, took a shower, or did his light exercises. He had grown a full white beard and wore old blue jeans with ragged shirts. His hair was disheveled and there were brown spots on his face that may have come from sitting in the sun too much on the balcony. The veins on his hands stood out and his skin looked like thin tissue paper. His body was old, but his eyes still sparkled with life when he remembered happy times from his past, especially when he was a child.

"Papa," said his daughter, when she called to let him know she had arrived home with her husband. "If you wish, I can come back and stay with you again."

“No,” the old man said. “Your husband needs you. Stay with him.”

“Remember how you and I used to go on walks together, Papa, when I was a little girl? You would tell me the names of the flowers and trees.”

“I remember,” the old man said. “Even when you are far away from me, I still feel your love.”

“My husband missed me, Papa. But now I miss you.”

“I know,” said the old man. “I know.”

“He doesn't have your spirit, Papa.”

“No,” the old man said. “But you do. Perhaps our spirit is contagious, like the Coronavirus.”

His daughter thought about some of their relatives, who would make fun of the old man for not leaving his home. He would listen attentively when they called on the phone, without getting annoyed or impatient. They would encourage him to engage with other people using video calls. He would smile and respond warmly that telephone calls were good enough for him.

After his phone conversation with his daughter ended, the old man walked into the kitchen and fixed himself something to eat. He took it out to his balcony, put it on the small table, and sat down in one of the two chairs. Here I am, he thought, home alone. By myself, I can do nothing. Slowly, he took a sip from his

glass of water and smiled with a deep contentment as he looked at the beautiful garden next to his home. Words are weak and fragile instruments, he thought. Yet they, and the actions they inspire, form the foundation of all civilization.

I no longer need to convince anyone of anything, he thought, not even myself. When I was 15 years old, I wanted to travel and learn about the world. At 30, I had a good sense of direction and purpose. At 40, I stopped worrying about the challenges of life. At 50, I could hear the gentle soft voice of heaven. At 60, I listened to that voice without becoming defensive. Now, with a clear conscience, I follow my own heart.

When we humans are graceful, we can flow like water. We can speak agreeably, even when we disagree with others. We can move joyfully, even when we go where no one wants to follow. No matter where we are or what we do, we can always serve others. We can raise them up, simply by being humble ourselves. We can look to our own faults, what we have done and left undone, and overlook the faults of others. Rather than seeking to follow in the footsteps of ancient sages, we can seek what they sought. Calmly seeking the truth, with humility and grace, we can allow our hearts to open and embrace the deepest reality. Our minds may be frail and unreliable, but we can still be diligent in our efforts to become well.

We need not make any claims of wisdom or human perfection, yet we can be steadfast in our purpose and tireless when we teach others. We may be tempted to

take credit for an accomplishment, but no accomplishment is possible without help from forces beyond our control. When we talk with others, we can ask them to consider what we say carefully, and then to agree or provide an alternative perspective. Instead of getting defensive, we can open our minds and hearts to new discoveries. We can cooperate with others in this wonderful adventure of life.

The old man did yoga stretches and light exercises every day. On odd numbered days, he would walk up and down the stairs in his home. On even numbered days, he would use the rowing machine in his bedroom. Pull, hands, he thought. Hold up, legs. Stay clear, head. I need all of you. I am mortal, and when I look back on my life, it seems that it took place in a moment. Like a young child, who pauses to look at pretty shells on the beach, I raise my eyes and see the entire ocean before me unexplored. I am profoundly grateful that my life journey has brought me serenity and deep satisfaction. I try not to be extravagant nor miserly, but to follow the golden mean. I no longer seek to do my own will, but only the will of heaven. Were I to speak on my own behalf, my words would not be true.

Day and night, I adore the mysterious creator, who has given me this precious gift of awareness. Though I love, respect, and honor my human parents, my deepest love and loyalty is to the one who created my spirit. I offer myself always, freely and humbly, to serve the one eternal creator.

I am a messenger. I love and trust the past. I love teaching anyone who is willing to learn. I love little children. They see with eyes not yet impaired by the judgments and prejudices of their culture. I listen to children carefully, for their wisdom and insights often transcend those of adults. They are closer to the truth than we are. A young child once asked me a question, and my mind went totally blank. When the child saw that I was clearly startled, she began to laugh. If only I could teach others what that child taught me. The most valuable secrets are hidden from adults and revealed to little children.

When we accept that we don't know, we become open with refreshing awareness to the boundless mystery of life. If someone suggests we are wise, we might wonder, how could that be true? We know almost nothing. Yet we may have wisdom born in the humility of acknowledged ignorance. By being alive to difficulty, we are less likely to encounter it.

The old man loved reading the 2016 book by Paul Raskin, *Journey to Earthland*. It gave him hope to imagine a new paradigm for the world. Why not have a global culture that is peaceful, prosperous, just, and sustainable? The earth is bountiful. With proper tending, it can meet the needs of everyone.

The world is rapidly becoming a single social and economic culture through global issues, finance, markets, the Internet, and travel. Large international

corporations now have supply chains, productive capacity, customers, and shareholders all over the world. People are connected with others outside their national borders by instantaneous communication and information flow using email and video calls. National governments, many of which did not exist a few hundred years ago, are incapable of governing effectively due to forces outside of their borders. The world needs a truly global political network to effectively address global issues.

All 192 states of the UN have signed on in agreement with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including, "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." Governments are responsible for protecting these rights. The mayors of large metropolitan areas throughout the world are already responsible for protecting these rights within their jurisdictions. They need support at the global level to adopt best practices and to resolve conflicts that cross national borders.

Many of the most important issues today are global and require cooperation across national borders. These issues include racial justice and equity; wellness; environmental protection; peace; financial regulation; and economic security. Black Lives Matter protests across the U.S. and the world following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis have increased awareness that racial injustice anywhere affects people everywhere. The Coronavirus has shown that new

diseases ignore national borders and must be identified quickly and stopped at their source. Environmental protection requires addressing climate change; ocean, lake, and river pollution; topsoil erosion; and deforestation. Peace requires resolving conflicts effectively and wisely while reducing the threat of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction, conventional military weapons, small arms, and domestic violence. Global financial regulation is required because money travels instantly and all major financial centers are connected. Economic security requires a social safety net in all parts of the world to ensure that everyone has clean water and sanitation; nutritious food; adequate housing; and other basic services.

The world needs a World Of Metropolitan Areas Network (WOMAN) to nurture a flourishing global culture that is peaceful, prosperous, just, and sustainable. This network can also help ensure that human rights are protected everywhere. By connecting the major metropolitan areas of the world, identifying best practices, and supporting the adoption of these practices, this network can help resolve conflicts and ensure that people everywhere thrive while leading lives that are productive, meaningful, and fulfilling. The network can be financed by a global tax on international financial transactions or on wealth. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said in 1927, "Taxes are what we pay for civilized society." For a global civilization, we need global taxes.

I would like my town to dedicate itself to the proposition that all people can flourish together in harmony and happiness, serving each other while caring for our only home, the Earth. Perhaps Rotary International can adopt this "Declaration of Interdependence" and encourage cities and towns throughout the world to adopt it. Humanity has the potential to unite in a single global political, economic, and cultural system that provides all people everywhere with physical well-being, security, love, connection, honesty, respect, play, peace, autonomy, purpose, meaning, and self-actualization.

The old man reflected on the lyrics of a 2019 song by John Lennon and Paul Harris called "Reimagine."

Imagine we're in heaven

It's easy if we try

Within this present moment

That doesn't ever die.

Imagine all the people living for today.

Imagine all the countries

With nothing more to do

Than care for all their people

And other people too.

Imagine all the people living life in peace.

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will be as one.

Imagine we're one family

I wonder if we can

No need for greed or hunger

A healing of the human.

Imagine all the people sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one

I hope someday you'll join us

And the world will live as one.

There is good news for the humble, he thought, for those whose hearts are filled with awe at the mention of heaven. It is they who endure adversity with fortitude, attend to their prayers, and generously give to the poor from what they have been given. Not everyone who prays will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who follow the biddings of heaven. If we offend heaven, there is no one

to whom we can pray. There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 people who have no need of repentance.

Truth is paradoxical. Nothing in the world is more weak and submissive than water, yet for attacking that which is strong and hard, there is nothing better. The weak overcome the strong, the gentle overcome the hard, and the one who appears last may soon be first. The humble will inherit the Earth. It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. Today, the whole world is sick. I hope the doctor is near. All the tribal, ethical, religious, and national traditions of humanity are like rivers and streams flowing relentlessly toward a united world. In this union, the peacemakers may finally prevail. Large states that are peaceful can take small states under their wing, and small states that are peaceful can revitalize large states. For the first time in history, all states can unite and there can be peace everywhere.

The gentle abide by three principles I am still learning: their humanity is confident and secure, they act boldly and decisively, and their courage knows no fear. Rather than taking pride in our virtues, we can be humbled by our failings. To lead, we must follow. If we humble ourselves when talking with others, they are unlikely to feel threatened or envious. When we do not contend with others, they are unlikely to contend with us. When we do not place burdens on others, they are likely to follow us joyfully and help us work to benefit everyone.

We cannot end violence with violence. To bring peace to the world, we must first bring peace to ourselves and our own families. Let us not appear formidable, be roused in anger, or contend with others. If we humble ourselves and cooperate with others, they are more likely to follow our example and become peaceful naturally.

How can we attain the supreme consummation of wisdom? Unerring in our discrimination, sovereign of our senses and passions, free from the clamor of likes and dislikes, we can lead simple, self-reliant lives based on meditation. We can guide our thoughts, words, and actions. Free from self-will, aggressiveness, arrogance, anger, and the lust to possess people or things, we can be at peace with ourselves and others. This is how we can follow the biddings of heaven. Let us go beyond this way or that way, to the farther shore where the world dissolves and everything becomes clear. Beyond this shore and the farther shore, beyond the beyond, where there is no beginning, no end. Without fear, let us go. Let us meditate, live purely, be quiet, and do our work, with mastery.

One day the old man woke up with a fever. This may be it, he thought. I may have the Coronavirus. I don't know how it is possible, unless my daughter gave it to me before she left. A wave of fear washed over him. Then he remembered his favorite saying, perfect love drives out fear, and the fear dissolved.

He went out on his balcony and began eating his breakfast of oatmeal and berries. He saw some robins in the garden maintaining appropriate social distance. This lifetime is short, he thought, and I do not know whether I have accomplished my purpose. Perhaps I have served simply by being.

Every day, the old man talked on the phone with his daughter. He wondered whether he should tell her about his fever. She has not mentioned having any symptoms herself, he thought, but many people have Coronavirus without symptoms. I don't know yet whether I have it. So far, all I have is a fever and some fatigue. If my daughter gave it to me, I do not want her to feel guilty. I do not want her to worry, I do not want her to fuss. I do not want to go to the hospital. If I tell her about the fever, she will probably come back here. She will worry about me and, if the symptoms get worse, she will urge me to call my doctor. Then my doctor will tell me to go to the hospital. If I recover without telling my daughter about the symptoms, there will be no need for any of that. If I die, it will be over. Then she can grieve. I am going to die sometime anyway. I will see if I can talk with her without mentioning my symptoms. I think that will be best.

The old man reflected on a familiar question: Who am I, really? He considered the question calmly, allowing it to run playfully through his mind. This question is like an iceberg, he thought. Most of it is below my awareness. Let me follow you, little question, ever more deeply until I come to your source. I think

you are connected to something real and incredibly deep. You may be as large as the space-time continuum and the whole universe. Something about the question nourished his spirit. It seemed to say, "Let me nurture you. Are you ready to be inspired?"

The old man enjoyed doing one minute mindful meditations. Each one took only a minute, yet that was often enough to quiet his mind. Then he could rest peacefully without any awareness of time passing. What a refreshing practice, he thought, and it only takes one minute.

Gradually, he began feeling more symptoms of the Coronavirus: body aches, a dry cough, and shortness of breath. Don't you know, Coronavirus, that if you kill me, you will also die? Perhaps we can negotiate a truce. I will share my body with you, if you keep the symptoms light. Does that seem reasonable?

The old man thought about his wife, who had died years earlier from cancer. That was the saddest time in my life. My daughter and I were overcome with mourning, and grieved together for a long time. I wish my daughter were here. Perhaps I should tell her about my symptoms.

The Coronavirus moved more deeply into his body, and especially into his lungs. Soon I may be having trouble breathing, he thought. Coronavirus, you and I are together now. Let us make the best of it and see what we can learn. I do not want to die in a hospital. I would rather die here in my home with just the two of

us. I hope it will not be too painful. I have felt pain often enough in my life, and I do not like it. I wish the fever would break, and I would begin to feel better. That would be wonderful. Most people do recover from the Coronavirus, so why not me? But as he sat in his chair, the old man knew his body was weakening. Coronavirus, I respect you, but I want to recover. I want to feel the joy of waking up refreshed and feeling well. I want to live.

I need a plan to recover. What shall I do? Coronavirus, you and I are both part of nature, but I can feel you taking control of my body. If there is too much fluid in my lungs, I will drown. He looked across the room and felt deeply alone. He was out of everyone's sight and infected with the worst disease he had ever had. He knew it could be fatal, especially to old people. There was not much relief now. He did his best to accept the suffering without fighting, for that would just make it worse.

I wish my daughter were here. All I need to do is tell her about my symptoms. She would give me food, water, and kind words. No one should be alone in their old age. But even when we have others with us, we can still feel alone. I must remember to eat and especially to drink water. I know how to find contentment by myself, Coronavirus, but not with you. You are always with me, and never give me a break. This feels like hard work, and I am not a workaholic.

I believe spirit is always everywhere, so it is now here. Every day I pray, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as in heaven. If I recover from this virus, I promise I will do my best to follow the biddings of heaven. I will recover. With spirit, all things are possible. Then he thought, if I get ARDS, I will surely die. I have had fights before, but they were with people or natural threats I could see. This invisible enemy is more dangerous than anything I have ever faced. I knew I might get sick, but I didn't expect it to be this hard. Life is not easy, and this challenge is too much. Coronavirus, I hope I will be able to outlast you.

He sat on his balcony in the evening and could see a few stars visible between the clouds. I feel connected to these stars. They seem to be giving me love from above. They are my friends, and I feel their compassion. Why is there so much killing in nature? If I recover, I will be a vegetarian for the rest of my life. I will treat all people and animals with respect. Why is there so much suffering in this world? Even before the Coronavirus, humanity faced intractable and deeply rooted crises such as racism and relentless climate change. Now we also have a major health crisis and high unemployment. I do not see how this can end well.

Do I deserve this suffering? Was I arrogant or insensitive to the needs of others? Did I make a great mistake, or many small mistakes that accumulated? There are things I regret, of course, and I am willing to make amends. I know that I have not yet mastered life. Perhaps when this is over, I will have another life. It has

been a long time since I slept well and woke up feeling refreshed. Without enough sleep, I become confused. I may forget to drink water. Sometimes the symptoms lessened briefly and he hoped the worst was over. But they always returned. This is too difficult, he thought. Perhaps I should end it. But I've lost so much strength and resolve that I couldn't end it even if my life depended on it. He laughed softly at the joke he had made unintentionally.

From his balcony he could see clouds moving quickly across the sky. There must be a lot of wind up there, he thought. Perhaps I will be up there with the clouds before long. Who knows what really happens when we die? My mother was an agnostic most of her life, but when she was on her deathbed, she said to me,

"I have been moving back and forth between life and death, and it has completely changed my attitude toward religion and our family."

I think she had a mystical experience, and she would have told me more if she knew how to put it into words.

I have faced many challenges in my life before this, and I have always come out alive. I have learned how to suffer so that I feel more connected with spirit and not less. Why did Odysseus suffer so much? Was it his pride, his lack of faith, or his stubbornness? Or was it his destiny and not due to any fault?

I am so tired I just want to sleep, but no matter where I go, the Coronavirus is always with me. We are bound together until one of us dies. It may be both of

us. The old man relaxed a little and drifted into an uneasy sleep. Then he dreamed he was a small boy with his friends in the winter and they were all sledding together. It was great fun riding down the hill and then pulling the sled back up to the top. He felt happy and free and well. Suddenly a new boy appeared who wanted to join them. Yes, you are welcome to join us. What's your name? The new boy replied, Sisyphus. Then the biggest boy in the group turned to him and said, Are you a sissy? No, said Sisyphus. If you want to fight, we can see which of us is stronger. The old man woke up and moved his pillow, but didn't go back to sleep.

The next day he sat in his living room chair and thought, I need a new perspective. Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise. If so, it certainly is well disguised. Why is there so much unnecessary suffering in the world? It has always been this way. If I am given another life on earth, I will devote it to healing. I want to help create a truly healthy global culture. My deepest commitment is to follow the biddings of heaven. That commitment is deeper even than my desire to survive.

Perhaps it is my destiny to die from the Coronavirus, and my task is simply to die gracefully. My own death could be a small symbolic act of service to humanity and the earth's biosphere. He paused and received an inner confirmation. Yes, the die is cast. I have a profound feeling and a deep knowledge that passes all understanding. I can see that all the necessary forces have come into alignment to make possible for the first time a truly global golden age. The distant dream of

countless prophets in cultures all over the world can finally be realized. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

The fluid is increasing in my lungs now, and it is ever more difficult for me to breathe. My years of meditation help bring precious oxygen into my body, but they cannot stop the Coronavirus. I have shortness of breath, and feel deep fatigue. I do not know why, but I have always had a fear that I would die by drowning. Now it is only a matter of time. I have always been sustained by the thought that perfect love drives out fear. I feel connected to perfect love, and I will follow this path as gracefully and gratefully as I can. I am prepared for the deep sleep that is the natural conclusion of every human being. I wonder if I will have a spiritual awakening. There are people in every generation and culture who, in their last days, discover deep peace, joy, and love.

I feel the gentle healing of profound love, even as the Coronavirus settles deeply in my lungs. This is hard work, but it is bearable. The Coronavirus will fill my lungs with fluid, and I will fight for my life gently, with kindness and forgiveness. I have lost my sense of taste, but I can still savor this slender thread of life. I do not know how long this will last. It feels like the last few miles of a marathon. I see the finish line ahead and a beautiful shore on the other side of the

river. May heaven help me endure. My will is to do your will, nothing less and nothing more. You never ask me to do anything I cannot do.

Suddenly, his telephone rang. That must be my daughter, he thought. I must compose myself and be strong when I talk with her. He answered the phone, but it was not his daughter. It was the mayor.

"We're in big trouble," said the mayor. "I just reviewed the revised budget for the coming fiscal year. The Coronavirus has reduced revenue considerably and costs are up. We're going to start laying off teachers and other staff."

"Perhaps not," said the old man, speaking as confidently as he could while having difficulty breathing. "We have talked about asking our wealthiest residents to pay a voluntary municipal wealth tax on their total net worth."

"That may be a good idea for the long-term," said the mayor. "But we need more revenue now. I don't think anyone will pay more tax voluntarily."

"I have talked with a married couple I know," said the old man. "They have agreed to pay the tax and they know others who will pay. I expect it will be enough to close the budget gap." He gave the names to the mayor and ended the call gracefully.

The old man's body was much lighter than it used to be. He ate only small amounts now, and soon he would stop eating altogether. I don't taste the food and it

is difficult for me to eat. I need to keep drinking water. I must write a note to my daughter if I can.

There is so much to grieve. All the sorrow in my life, my family, my community, my country, the world. So much sorrow. It is too heavy for me to bear. I need help. Help me, whoever is up there. I am a small boat in the ocean and I feel a great storm coming. Please protect me. I love you with all my heart, soul, and mind. My useless mind. It is a wonderful tool, but a terrible master. Oh, my aching heart. It is breaking and all I can do is watch. I wish this were a dream, and I could wake up healthy as ever. I am sorry to leave the earth this way. It was not my intention. I am sorry for all of my mistakes. I am overwhelmed with grief.

The old man felt his death approaching. He wondered what he would experience, if anything, after his body died. There was nothing else for him to consider, as the sun began to set on his life. His imagination could not come up with anything he considered likely to be true. He felt his life falling away. Death was at hand. Where could he rest on the way? What could he take with him? When we ask, it is given to us. When we search, we find. When we knock, the door is opened. It is because we have enough to eat, that we turn our attention to spiritual matters. Let us not work for food that goes bad, but for the spiritual nourishment that is eternal. Words from heaven are truly nourishing. They give life to the world. Whoever listens to these words and follows them will never see death. They lead to

truth, and truth will set us free. Let us build our lives on these words and make them our home.

Why grieve death? Is it not possible we will join wise and good companions who are better than people in this world where we live now? Death may free our spirit to be with the supremely good divine spirit. Let us not worry about dying. Let us look forward to it, and be curious about what we will find there. It may be better than the trials and sorrows of this world. What is death? Is it simply the release of the soul from the body? Is it nothing more or less than the separate condition of the body when released from the soul, and the soul when released from the body? The impermanent has no reality. Reality is eternal. To see the boundary between these two is to attain the end of all knowledge. Let us identify with that spirit which pervades the universe and is indestructible. No power can affect this unchanging, imperishable reality. The body is mortal, but the spirit within the body is immortal and immeasurable.

When a person dies, it is natural that the physical body in the visible world, the corpse, decays and decomposes. But the invisible part, the soul, goes to a place that is, like itself, glorious, pure, and invisible. Like a drop of rain falling into an ocean, the soul becomes one with the magnificent and wise great spirit. If its nature is immortal, how could it be destroyed when it is released from the body at death, as many people believe? If the soul is pure and carries with it no attachment to the

body, release from the body will be a welcome relief. If the soul has followed the spiritual path in the right way and practiced facing death wisely, it will go to the place that is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal, eternal. It will go to heaven, where there is happiness, release from uncertainty and ignorance, from fears and uncontrolled desires, and from all other human evils. It will become one with the eternal spirit that is the source of everything.

Unless an acorn gives up its identity as an acorn, it cannot become an oak tree. Unless we give up our identity as individual human beings, we cannot realize the potential of humanity. Those who identify with spirit, even when their bodies die, continue to live. Those who devote themselves to spirit will never die. The atoms in a human body continue to exist after a person dies. A decomposing human corpse is part of a complex living ecosystem. As cells are deprived of oxygen, chemical reactions take place inside them. Enzymes digest cell membranes and then leak out as the cells break down. The chemical reactions change the molecules of the corpse into new molecules, but the atoms in these molecules continue to exist, just as they did before the person died.

To follow the way, we must renounce ourselves. If we try to save our lives, we will lose them. If we lose our lives for the sake of the way, we will find them. What would we gain by winning the whole world and losing our soul? We will speak, not our own words, but words given to us by the spirit of the universe.

These words lead to eternal life. Therefore, what spirit tells us is what we speak. In truth, unless we become like little children, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Let us resolve deep within ourselves to follow this path and attain singleness of purpose by seeking spirit alone. Without this resolution, the decisions of life are many branched and endless.

Day and night we are awake, shining in the radiance of spirit. We are slow to anger. We keep our promises. We do not offend others, yet we speak the truth. Our words are clear, but not harsh. We want nothing from this world or from the next. We are free. Desiring nothing, doubting nothing, beyond judgment and sorrow and the pleasures of the senses, we have moved beyond space-time to the eternal.

It was dark outside now, and the old man did not turn on any lights inside. I have no more need for light, he thought, and no more need for eyes. I will wait here in the darkness in my favorite chair until I leave this heavy weight and fly away. Perhaps I am already dead. He made his two hands into fists and felt his muscles tense. I am not dead. I can bring the pain of life by simply opening and closing my hands. He leaned back against the chair. I still have prayers to say, he thought.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me to water in places of repose;

He renews my life;

He guides me in right paths as befits His name.

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for

You are with me; Your rod and Your staff — they comfort me.

You spread a table for me in full view of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My drink is abundant.

Only goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life,

And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be your name,

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

All praise is to God, Lord of all the worlds

Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Master of the Day of Judgment

You Alone do we worship and You Alone do we ask for help

Guide us to the straight path

The Path of those on whom You bestowed

Your bounties, not the path of those who

incurred Your wrath or those who went astray.

Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. I have found the place for me to die, and now all I need to do is love. Yes, I am coming soon. I shall be released. He lay back in the chair and soon fell asleep. He dreamed he was in a prison with shackles. All my trials, Lord, soon be over. A warmth surrounded him and he no longer felt the difficulty breathing. Yes, that's better. The worst is over now. He waited for the warm light of dawn to bring color to the sky. He watched the sunrise. I have done what I have done, he thought. There is no need for me to judge

it or to have regrets. That is not my responsibility. I have lived with warm feelings for all people and I did what I could to bring light into the world. I made mistakes and sometimes hurt people. I am sorry for that. I didn't know what I was doing. If I am given another life, I will do better.

He tried to settle more comfortably in his chair. He was not dead, but he was stiff and sore and his whole body hurt as he strained to get enough oxygen. I would like not to fight anymore, but it seems the Coronavirus is not going to let me die gracefully. It continues to ravage my tired body. A little more time, Coronavirus, if it is not too much to ask. It is a heavy weight, but I am not carrying it alone. My body is filled with aches now. There is not enough oxygen to keep my organs working. Little by little I will have to let them go. I feel them shutting off now, one by one. I hope I will be alert until the end. I feel more tired than I have ever been. I did not know it was possible to be this tired. After I die, I want to stay alert and direct my attention toward the bright light. A dim light will also beckon, but I know it is a trap that leads back to the cycle of birth and death.

The old man had little strength now and no motivation. He couldn't even stand up from his living room chair. I have lost the will to fight. I forgive the Coronavirus, for he knows not what he does. I must be calm and strong. The old man felt compassion for all beings that have ever suffered. I hope I have accomplished my purpose. If not, perhaps it will be accomplished in my death.

Now his difficulty breathing was getting worse and he gasped for air. His chest felt too tight to inhale or exhale fully. He felt like he was breathing through a straw. Then he felt the tickle in the back of his throat that triggered the coarse sound of his dry and unsatisfying cough. The Coronavirus had filled the old man's lungs with fluid so that he was barely able to breathe. Certainly my breathing has not been this difficult before. Such a tiny invisible enemy, and yet so powerful. Coronavirus, you have won. I accept your victory, short lived that it will be for you. I will stay with you until I die.

The old man was barely conscious now. It is so hard to breathe, he thought. I will not live another day. He wanted to go to bed, but he could no longer get out of his chair. I will stay here in the living room. The Coronavirus is in charge now. My body is not getting the oxygen it needs. I am surprised I am still alive. Or perhaps I have died and have not realized it yet. I am getting confused, yet I still have my spirit. I am grateful for spirit. I can still meditate. I can still pray. Whoever you are up above, I give you my life. You may take me whenever you want. I am done.

Finally, he could not breathe at all, and he knew it was over. And what murdered me? Nothing. I caught the Coronavirus. No, the Coronavirus caught me. I have been murdered by a submicroscopic infectious agent, a molecule. You have won, Coronavirus. You may have this worn out body that used to be a man. Now I know what it means to drown.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

He slumped into his chair and lost all consciousness.

Somehow he became aware again. Where am I? he wondered. Am I dead yet? I am aware, and that is some comfort. Awareness is my friend, I hope. Death is my friend, too. My friend and my destiny. It is not so hard to die. I did not know it would be like this, but I do not feel surprised.

His awareness began rising above his body as he looked down upon it. He tried to move his right hand, but it would not move. He noticed that he was no longer breathing. This is strange, he thought. I am outside of my body. I am not breathing, yet I am aware. I have no eyes, yet I see. I have no ears, yet I hear. I have no body, yet I feel. I feel relieved. You were a good body, but you are useless to me now. I am better off without you. I no longer feel tired. I feel free. I could fly away like a bird. His spirit floated higher above the corpse. He had the sense that he was a character in a movie, and he was also watching the movie. This is a magnificent movie, he thought. Or is it a dream? Am I dead or am I dreaming? I really don't know.

His daughter burst frantically into his home. "Papa, are you all right? I've been trying to reach you and you didn't pick up the phone." She saw the body slumped in his favorite chair in the living room. "No, Papa." She felt for his pulse, but there was nothing. "Papa!"

He could see her below him, but he could not speak. He wanted to reassure her, to let her know that he was fine. I have never felt better, he thought.

He watched her compassionately and hoped she would read the note he had left for her. The Coronavirus beat me. Now I am dead, unless I am dreaming. I don't know. His daughter held his hand and cried.

He was floating above his daughter now, like a cloud, and he felt deep empathy for her. For himself, he felt only wonder and amazement. Here I am, watching my daughter cry. I feel so much love for her, and I wish I could comfort her. I must accept that I am spirit now, with no body to speak with her. Perhaps I will be able to speak with her in a dream. Or perhaps this is a dream. What is happening to me?

Death had arrived. He was leaving this world, but he was not alone. This happens to everyone. He could feel himself letting go of his physical body, of the physical world. He did not cling to life. His attitude remained constant as he accepted this new experience. Death is a doorway, he thought. I still seek the truth,

appreciate beauty, and love the eternal source of all. He remembered learning about the passage from death to rebirth, and realized the time was coming for him to choose a path. I will soon have the opportunity, he thought, to recognize the deepest reality and become enlightened, or to be reborn in another body.

As the old man looked down on his still body, no longer breathing, a bright light arose. All phenomena became empty, like space. His awareness became utterly clear, connecting him to the radiant light, empty without horizon or center. He recognized this awareness as his own intrinsic nature, and he felt deeply rested, content, and well. This is death, he thought. I recognize the radiance. He felt great generosity and devotion toward others, and wished everyone happiness and wellness. He meditated on loving kindness, compassion, and charity. He sought enlightenment for all sentient beings. He practiced meditations he had cultivated while he was alive. As the inner radiance of reality arose all around him, he felt immersed in it.

The wise do not grieve for the living or the dead, he thought. There has never been a time when we did not exist, nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist. Just as the soul inhabits the same body through childhood, youth, and old age, so at the time of death, the soul attains another body. The wise are not deluded by these changes.

Suddenly he began to feel a cold eerie fear, that brought him face to face with terror. Facing the terror directly, he remembered that perfect love drives out fear. He renounced the fear and observed his awareness rising, manifesting naturally of itself. The fear dissipated. He moved forward, into the reality, reciting passages he had learned when preparing for death. He recalled that no matter how terrifying the images were, they were natural manifestations of the ultimate reality.

Death is a freeing and separation of the soul from the body, he thought. For many years, I have cultivated the desire to free my soul when I die. This has been the desire of spiritual masters and true philosophers throughout history. They learn practices during their lives that help them at the time of death gently to free their soul and separate it from their body.

As the old man felt his soul letting go of all attachment to his body, another bright light arose, and all space seemed before him with the purity of fresh clear water. He recognized this light as the ultimate reality and felt immersed in a wave of overwhelming joy. This is the natural radiance of my own awareness, he thought, and he felt all of the light rays dissolve into him as he experienced rapture. This is the light of compassion. I must move into it and take refuge. This bright light will lead me on the dangerous path from death to enlightenment. From within this light, he could hear the natural sound of reality, clear and thunderous, reverberating like a thousand simultaneous peals of thunder.

He felt afraid, though he knew he now had a spiritual body, the result of his past habits and inclinations, and no longer a physical body of flesh and bones. Whatever sounds or lights arise, they cannot harm me. I have no eyes to blind, or ears to deafen. I am beyond death. All I need to do is recognize the bright light and sound as manifestations of ultimate reality. If I feel any pain, I must lean into it.

Together with the bright light, there was a dull smoky light representing the human realm. He felt pride well up inside of him and a strong urge to run from the bright light to the dull light. Then he paused and realized the delight promised by the dull smoky light was based on his own deep delusion and was inviting him to follow a path back down into the human realm. If I surrender to it, he thought, I will return to the human realm and experience again the sufferings of birth, sickness, old age, and death.

I am in the intermediate state between death and rebirth, he thought. He remembered the six kinds of intermediate states: (1) the intermediate state of living or natural existence, (2) the intermediate state of dreams, (3) the intermediate state of meditative stability or concentration, (4) the intermediate state of the time of death, (5) the intermediate state of reality, and (6) the intermediate state of consequent rebirth. He realized he was in the intermediate state of the time of death. I must look directly into the intense bright light of ultimate reality, or I will continue to roam within the cycle of birth and death. With great effort, he directed

his attention to the blinding bright light. He prayed to the light, recognizing it as the transcendent source of the universe. He avoided looking at the dull smoky light that would lead him astray. He knew it was a path of temptation, created by his own habitual tendencies. It was an obstruction blocking his path to liberation. He did not look at it. He stayed focused on the bright light, but it became too much for him and he turned away from both lights.

Life in the physical world is but a sport and a pastime. True life is eternal. Mortals do not know what will happen tomorrow, nor where they will breathe their last. Spirit alone is wise and all-knowing. No one knows the origin of spirit, for it is the source of everything in the universe. In living beings, it is consciousness. In that which can be measured, it is space-time. The whole physical universe is supported by a fragment of spirit. Spirit is eternal. It is neither being nor nonbeing. It dwells in all, in every atom in the universe. Without senses itself, it shines through the functioning of the senses. Completely independent, it supports all things. It is both near and far, both within and without every creature. It moves and is unmoving. In its subtlety it is beyond comprehension. It is indivisible, though it appears divided in separate creatures. It is the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer. It is the light of lights, the object and goal of knowledge, and knowledge itself.

Now the old man directed his attention to stillness and emptied his mind. He meditated on spirit. It appeared, without inherent existence, like a reflection of the moon in water. He watched the rise and fall of the myriad creatures. He saw how they all returned to their roots. Returning to our roots is stillness. It is our destiny. It is the one eternal constant. Knowledge of the constant is discernment. Action not rooted in the constant is useless. Action rooted in the constant leads to impartiality, impartiality to kingliness, kingliness to heaven, heaven to the way, and the way to eternal life.

By renouncing all selfish desires and breaking away from the ego-cage of "I," "me," and "mine," we can be united with spirit. This is the supreme state. When we attain this, we pass from death to immortality. Some realize spirit within them through the practice of meditation, some through the path of wisdom, and others through selfless service. Even without knowing these paths, immortality may be attained by hearing and following the instructions of an illumined teacher.

Now a clear bright light was within the old man. When that light shines purely, he remembered, there is no more birth or death. As a silversmith sifts dust from silver, we can remove our own impurities little by little. We must let go of greed, anger, and delusion. It is so easy to see the faults of others and so difficult to

face our own. The way is not in the sky. It is in our hearts. All things arise and pass away, but the awakened are awake forever.

Along with the bright light, another dull smoky light dawned before him and touched his heart. It represented the realm of anguished spirits. He felt attracted to the dull light and tempted to seek relief in it. It invited him to follow a path made by his own habitual tendencies of deep desire: avarice, gluttony, lust, anger, pride, envy, laziness, and fear. If he followed this path, he would sink into a swamp of unbearable sufferings of hunger and thirst, the realms of hell. This dull light is an obstacle blocking my path to liberation. With diligent and patient effort, I must untangle myself from this attraction to the dull light and let it go. Little by little, the old man let go of his habitual inclinations. When our conscience is clear, there is nothing left to desire, grieve, or fear.

Feeling the intensity of the radiant pure bright light, he started to turn away, then turned toward it with all the courage and strength he could summon. With an unwavering focus and deep devotion, he directed his full attention into the center of the light. May I be rescued from all suffering and from the fearsome passageway of the intermediate state. May this brilliant light lead me forward to happiness and spiritual perfection. I love you with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my mind. As he surrendered fully into the transcendent light, he experienced a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment. He realized it as the natural radiance of his own

awareness and compassion. He became liberated, saved, enlightened. It was the perfect love that drives out fear. As he embraced it, he dissolved into it and entered heaven, becoming one with the eternal source of the whole universe.

Vainly we seek the builder of our house through countless lives. Still, we are not successful. How hard it is to tread life after life. But now we see the source of the cycle of birth and death. Never again will we be deluded. We have beaten out desire, and now our mind is free. May heaven bless us. May heaven deal kindly and graciously with us. May heaven bestow its favor upon us and grant us peace.

We want nothing. Where there is desire, we say nothing. Happiness or sorrow — whatever befalls us, we walk on untouched and unattached. Few cross over the river. Most are stranded on the side of mortality. On the riverbank they run up and down. But we, following the wise way, have crossed over, beyond the reach of death. We have left the dark way for the way of light.

To be truly awake is to live forever. It is to watch, to be clear, to be happy. For wakefulness is life. How happy are we when we follow the path of the awakened. Let us wake up now, reflect, and watch. Let us work with care and attention. When we live in the way, the light grows naturally within us.

Ever joyful, beyond desire and sorrow, we have equal regard for every living creature and are supremely devoted to spirit. By loving spirit, we come to know

ourselves truly. We know the glory of spirit and enter into its boundless being. All we do is serve spirit. We make every act an offering to spirit. Spirit is our only protector. Relying on interior wisdom, we meditate on spirit always. Through the grace of spirit, we overcome all difficulties and realize eternal life.

This is the indivisible presence of reality, the essence of our own awareness. It is empty, without inherent existence. It is radiant and vibrantly alive. This ultimate eternal awareness, manifest as both emptiness and radiance, is beyond birth and death. When we recognize this brilliant essence as our own awareness, we become enlightened.

It is spirit that gives life. The flesh has nothing to offer. These words are clear and they are life. When we follow the biddings of heaven, we receive spiritual nourishment and bring heaven to earth. Let all who are thirsty reflect on these words. From them flow streams of living water. No one who drinks from this water will ever be thirsty again. This water will become a spring within us, leading us to eternal life.

We watch as the laws of nature take their course. Within nature, we seek the divine. We worship the one eternal spirit. Where there is one, that one is spirit. Where there are many, all are spirit. Spirit is always everywhere. It is now here. It is the father and mother of the universe. It is the sum of all knowledge. It is the goal of life. It is the only refuge, the one true friend. It is what is and what is not.

We give all our love to spirit. We fill our mind with it, love it, serve it, worship it always. Seeking spirit in our heart, we at last become one with it.

The pure inner radiance of reality arises within us as a brilliant emptiness. It is awareness. It is beyond substance, beyond characteristics, beyond color, and completely empty of inherent existence in all respects. Yet it is the source of the whole physical universe. It is our essence, without any blockages.

Our mind is still. We are pure. We are serene. We understand words and the stitching together of words. With dispassionate vision, we see everywhere the arising and the falling. Free from passion and desire, we have stripped the thorns from the stem. Calmly, we let go of home, pleasure, desire, and life. We want nothing. We have come to the end of the way, over the river of our many lives, our many deaths. In us, the seed of renewing life has been consumed. We have let go of our last body. With great gladness, we know that we are finished. All that we had to do, we have done. We have awakened from our sleep.

We are free. We are strong. We are wise. There is no sweetness more sweet than truth, no beauty more inspiring, no gift more precious. We have found our way. Our teacher is beyond all teachers. Our love is beyond all love. Our peace is beyond all peace. Our joy is beyond all joy. We are interconnected. We are spirit. We are eternal life. We are one. *E pluribus unum.*