



DISPATCHES FROM  
THE FRONT

A BUDDHIST TEACHER'S  
LETTERS FROM HOSPICE

ERIC  
KOLVIG





DISPATCHES FROM  
THE FRONT

A BUDDHIST TEACHER'S  
LETTERS FROM HOSPICE

by Eric Kolvig

Letters Written from Hospice  
Posted on CaringBridge  
June 26 2023 to June 28, 2024

e-Book by Lissa Reidel

Cover Photo by David Pascale

ISBN 979-8-89546-456-4

**Copyright © 2024 Eric William Kolvig Living Trust**  
All Rights Reserved.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

**Terms of Use:**

“Commercial” shall mean any sale, whether for commercial or non-profit purposes or entities.

**For Free Distribution:**

You may copy, reformat, reprint, republish, and redistribute this work in any medium whatsoever, provided that you only make such copies available free of charge. Any such republication and redistribution must be made available to the public on a free and unrestricted basis. Translations and other derivative works must be clearly marked as such.

**First Edition**

August, 2024



FOREWORD BY BRIAN LESAGE

DISPATCHES FROM THE FRONT  
BY ERIC KOLVIG

ABOUT ERIC

AFTERWORD: LISSA REIDEL

GRATITUDE



# FOREWORD

*by Brian Lesage*

Dear Readers,

When I think of Eric Kolvig, my heart fills with gratitude, love, and reverence. Eric was my dear Dharma mentor, colleague, and cherished friend. He left behind a profound legacy of wisdom, compassion, and unwavering dedication to the path of freedom from suffering.

A few months before Eric died in July 2024, Lissa Reidel proposed to Eric that she could compile the writings he posted on his CaringBridge site into a book. Eric was delighted by this idea and gave Lissa the go-ahead on this project, resulting in this collection. Eric wrote these entries while he was in hospice, offering profound insights and reflections during his final days.

Eric's journey was marked by an extraordinary commitment to understanding and teaching the principles of Dharma. His insights were not merely theoretical; they were lived experiences, deeply felt and eloquently expressed. Eric had the rare ability to translate the profound teachings of Buddhism into practical guidance for everyday life, making them accessible and relevant to all who sought his counsel.

In these pages, you will find a tapestry of Eric's reflections, teachings, and personal anecdotes, each imbued with his characteristic warmth and humor. From his early days navigating the challenges of academia to his later years as a respected Dharma teacher, Eric's writings offer a window into a life dedicated to the pursuit of truth and the alleviation of suffering.

Eric's final letters, written in the weeks leading up to his death, are particularly poignant. They reflect a deep acceptance of impermanence and a serene readiness to embrace the unknown. Even as his physical form weakened, his spirit remained vibrant and his teachings unwavering. These letters serve as a testament to Eric's enduring legacy and his profound understanding of the Dharma.

As you read Eric's words, I invite you to take them into your heart. Let them inspire you to explore your own path with curiosity and compassion. May they offer solace in times of difficulty and encouragement in moments of doubt. Most importantly, may they remind you of the boundless potential for freedom and peace that lies within each of us.

May Eric's presence and absence continue to guide and inspire us, a beacon of light on the path to liberation.

With deep gratitude and love,

Brian Lesage  
Flagstaff, Arizona  
August 5, 2024

**JUNE 26, 2023**

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

Dear friends,

Thank you for joining me here.

In the past couple of weeks my physical condition has deteriorated to the point where I can no longer maintain personal correspondence. Bless Caring Bridge for allowing me to share my news with you here.

Here's my situation in brief. Last August I was diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, a progressive disease for which there are no treatments and which leads to death. In August my pulmonologist guessed that I had one to four years to live.

My family lived in Flagstaff, AZ, at elevation 7,100 feet, too high for my lungs to function very well. Last October I moved to my hometown, Laconia, NH, elevation 520. My regal cat Ruby and I live alone here in New Hampshire's Lakes Region, near very large, very beautiful Lake Winnepesaukee and within sight of the White Mountains.

Recently my physical condition has deteriorated to the point where I can no longer manage the physical part of life — shopping, cooking, cleaning, laundry — so I am busy seeking help from both volunteers and professionals.

Within this dying process I'm glad to report that I am emotionally healthy most of the time and spiritually healthy all of the time. Pretty good, don't you think?

Love,  
Eric

JANUARY 14, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

Dear friends,

Greetings from Concord Hospital in Laconia, NH. For the past two weeks I have been in and out of here with an infected leg.

Three days ago I was told that my body was weak enough that I would die gradually and painlessly if they discontinued giving me oxygen. I asked for a couple of days for me to say goodbye to loved ones before we pull the plug, and I hustled to get family and a couple of friends to visit in person.

Then two days ago a little delegation led by the palliative care doctor came to say, "Sorry, your body has rallied and is now too strong to die if we stop giving you oxygen." This body's immune system has always been robust!

So....back to the drawing board.

I now qualify for home hospice. After three to five days at an in-patient hospice in Concord, a nearby town, I will return to my home and to Ruby the Siberian cat, my only companion there. I will

have the good fortune to die in my own home with support from a home hospice agency. At least that's the plan.

And the heart? As in the old psalm, my cup runneth over with gratitude for the goodness and mercy I find day after day all around me. To die fulfilled and at peace seems like the last, best gift.

I feel your presence, and I send you love.

Love,

Eric



JANUARY 24, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Exultation and Horror*

Dear friends,

If you are not a spiritual practitioner, consider skipping to the second section below, because you may well find this first section at best boring or at worst just weird. I'll indicate where the second section starts.

Sangha friends, during a single recent 24-hour period, one of the most sublime experiences in my life happened, and one of the most terrible experiences also happened.

Let's start with the positive. It has a long background. For decades I have held Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 like a Zen koan, hoping that its deep truth would somehow burst on me.

The truth is love, but radically unlike love as we normally conceive it. We might say that Shakespeare shows us Big Love. This sonnet, I personally feel, qualifies Shakespeare as one of the world's great spiritual writers. I will include Sonnet 116 at the end of this sharing. You'd need footnotes to understand much of it. ("Mark," for example, indicates depth in water, the same "mark" that Samuel

Clemens appropriated when he called himself Mark Twain.) But the important stuff about Big Love in this poem needs no footnotes. Big Love escapes time itself. It looks on tempests and is never shaken; it bears it out even to the edge of doom (Yes, that's Shakespeare!).

The other positive thread also has had a long background. Many years ago, soon after I started the Tibetan meditation practice Dzogchen, I encountered this sentence of instruction for this practice: "Rest in Natural Great Peace." From the start these five words have seemed to me magical. You can't aim attention toward Natural Great Peace; you can only rest in it. Words from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic mystic Meister Eckhart have helped me with this practice: "The eyes through which I see God are the eyes through which God sees me."

If you are still with me, we can bring these two positive threads together. The truth of Sonnet 116's koan has burst open for me. I "get" Big Love. It's everywhere; it permeates and pervades all things. We are Big Love and cannot be otherwise.

And Natural Great Peace? Two evenings ago I watched the movie "Maestro." It drew me in profoundly. I felt as though I was experiencing it on a few levels simultaneously. For a while after it ended I sat quietly thinking about the movie. Then I began to notice the mind that was thinking: great purity, like an original purity; profound peace; a clarity both lucid and pellucid (Sorry, look it up!); it's everywhere, permeating all things. Great Love and Great Peace are identical. We are Natural Great Peace, and we are also Great Love, and we cannot be otherwise.

Isn't that a good place to get to?

Dear non-practitioners, the second part of this sharing starts here.

I watched “Maestro” and experienced Love as Natural Great Peace in a state of crystalline clarity, calm, and purity. Then I went to bed. At 4:15 I woke in the most terrible state I have ever known, and I’ve known some doozies. It was different from anything before. I checked to see if I was getting enough oxygen from the oxygen concentrator (I’m dying from pulmonary fibrosis, a lung disease.) and air from my CPAP. Both fine. What was causing this uniquely terrible experience?

I grabbed the phone to call 911, then thought, “Can’t get caught in that system again!” At least I was experiencing this unique horror in my own bed at home. For weeks there had been way too much urgent care, ambulances, ER, gurneys (Try sleeping a night in the ER on a frigging gurney because there’s no bed available anywhere in the entire hospital; then try to lie on the gurney for most of the next day.), and then the coup de grace, a palliative care doctor from hell.

Well then, back at the horror factory ca. 4:20 a.m., gotta conclude that this is probably IT, so just relax and go. But a big piece of the horror by about 4:25 was the fact that something would not relax and die. It was fighting all-out, like the Russians piling up German corpses at Stalingrad. But what the hell was it?

Eventually I ditched the horror that morning by going back to sleep. And as I did so I was clutching one jewel of insight: My spiritual psyche was ready for death with through-and-through equanimity. But the body has its own unique terror, based on its deepest root purpose: survival at any cost. I had just witnessed and lived the body’s Stalingrad.

Then later that day I explained as well as I could to my hospice nurse what had happened. She supports me in home hospice. I told

her how unique the experience was, an anomaly in my life. She reassured me by saying that I had just given a classic description of one aspect of “nearing death awareness,” a clinical term in hospice. After I told her my theory of “body terror,” and the body’s ferocious resistance, she borrowed the term from me for when she helps others dancing with nearing death awareness.

Friends, I thank you for walking with me at my elbow through my current reality. Everybody has their own journey into death. May yours be simple and easeful. I sure wish mine weren’t so dramatic. But then we work with what we’re given.

Love,  
Eric

William Shakespeare  
Sonnet 116

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments; love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no, it is an ever-fixèd mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand’ring bark  
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love’s not time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:  
If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

FEBRUARY 20, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Generous and Thankful*

Dear friends,

Not long ago I listened to Edward R. Morrow report in 1940 from the top of a building in London while the Germans bombed that city. I also heard Morrow's harrowing dispatch after he rode in a British bomber on a mission of reprisal to bomb Berlin.

If enough strength lasts for long enough, I would like to send you dispatches from the front. It's not that I consider myself in war, not at all. But this is a precarious perch out here at the edge of earthly existence, and the stakes are, after all, mortal. During the past 15 months or so I have learned directly through my experience some things that I have considered valuable. You may find them valuable too. Time is short for someone in hospice. Let's see what I can manage to share.

For now, some words about gratitude and generosity. You cannot know how deeply your words here at CaringBridge affect me. When I read them all together, it's like a flash flood of love and gratitude! So many of your words express your gratitude to me. Here I extend my gratitude to you. Ruby the cat (see her in the gallery) and I live

alone in our small home in New Hampshire. My brain remembers that I have helped a lot of people. But all the challenges of dailiness and of illness tend to drive those memories away. You remind me of what I often forget, and your reminder is altogether important.

This morning my partner Marc, visiting from Flagstaff, and I went out to breakfast. This is a way big deal for a hospice patient who is confined every day to my home. The restaurant was full. A couple with room at their table invited us to join them. Right away the four of us clicked. Breakfast was lively and fun. When J.D. of the other couple stood to go pay his bill, he snatched our bill too and dashed away with it. My body and mind were suffused with gratitude, a delicious flavor of happiness.

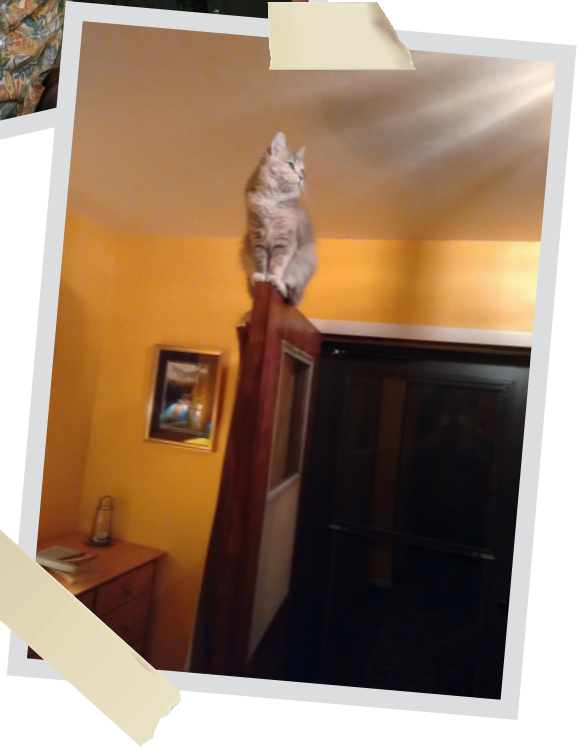
Recently I have had multiple chances to be generous, to give away things that have been important to me. They include a promise to a friend that he may take Ruby after my death. Generosity suffuses body and mind with a different delicious flavor of happiness. Sometimes my heart feels like a delighted echo chamber of gratitude and generosity ricocheting through clear space.

Forgive me if I do not respond personally to what you write. My energy is limited and becomes more limited by the day. However, please let me make two exceptions.

Sharon, I think you are right to speculate that I have met God. I think so too. What Jews, Christians, and Muslims call “God” is what Buddhists call “Nirvana.” There’s only one difference, a big one: to Buddhists God is not a personality; rather, it is the infinite love, the infinite awareness, or the infinite presence that permeates all things. Dante’s final revelation in his Comedy is of a “Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.”

Jan, my heart leaps up to hear from you again after many years. In fact you DID climb into my heart 30 years ago, and you have never left.

Love,  
Eric





FEBRUARY 24, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Expand*

Dear friends,

When sometime in my fifties I began sniffing around the edges of old age, I resolved to do something that might spare me a load of suffering: I would try to expand into old age and death. I have never forgotten that resolve. It has done a lot of good.

Mostly we contract. We have all seen them on the street or in the aisles of the supermarket: older folks with vacant eyes, a kind of death-in-life. Cognitive loss leaves us afraid of the mind fog and doubting what the mind can do now that it is impaired. Physically our enfeebling bodies can go less far and can do fewer things. For the rest of my life my physical world will mostly extend no farther than the 1,417 square feet of my home. Eventually our mental and physical reality narrows down to a single point, that last breath.

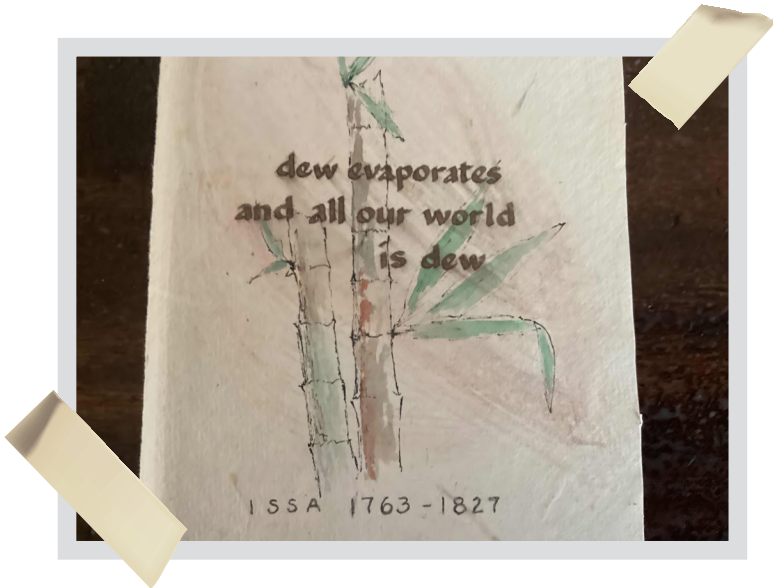
If as we age and die our physical and mental circumstances nudge us toward contraction, we need awareness and strong intention in order to expand instead. Why does it matter? Remember the glazed eyes. Because I decided a couple of decades ago to expand, these

eyes are still alive, present; this mind is curious; and this heart remembers how to love.

They say in New Mexico that the place will spit you out within five years or so if you feel uncomfortable with all that space and light. I don't know for sure what will happen when we die. But I have a good hunch that consciousness will melt into the vast, clear space of Natural Great Peace, like a raindrop dissolving into the Pacific. I plan to be ready.

To shift the metaphor (because I can), Friedrich Nietzsche famously wrote, "If you look too long into the void, the void looks also into you." Just so. The void steps forward extending a friendly hand. "Hi, I'm Emptiness. We're going to have a really good time together."

Love,  
Eric



MARCH 1, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Tuckerman Ravine*

Dear friends,

Fifty-nine years ago when I was 19, a friend and I hiked from the road at Pinkham Notch about two and a half miles up to the base of storied Tuckerman Ravine on Mount Washington, New Hampshire's highest mountain. Tuckerman is a glacial cirque or head wall that collects a prodigious amount of snow every winter. It's very steep.

My friend stayed at the base while I climbed the head wall carrying my skis. Three or four other people climbed with me. I, the last of our little group to ski down, noticed that someone at the bottom had a video camera trained on me. This was 1965, when such cameras were bulky and rare.

It was a glorious run. I was moving fast when I reached the bottom. Then the tip of my right ski caught in a hole in the snow made by someone's boot, and I fell flat on my front. As I skidded, still fast, on my front across the snow, I saw that I was headed for a big chunk of ice. I lifted my head just in time and hit the ice with my chest. Just before I passed out, unable to breathe, I looked around at that

spectacular place on a gorgeous day and thought, “This is a good place to die.”

Tuckerman Ravine kills on average ten people each year, mostly with avalanches, but I was not one of the ten in 1965. The lungs, it turned out, hadn’t collapsed. The sternum had shattered and would heal in time. Otherwise I was well enough to hike back down to the road.

As I sit here 59 years later, I feel grateful that I accepted death so spontaneously at 19. I must have feared death at times in this long life. Now, on the verge of my actual death, I can discern no fear of it. Why? Has spiritual practice dispelled this fear? Because the fear of dying brings with it so much suffering, I will try to parse out in the next couple of dispatches precisely what in spiritual practice unbinds us from our fear of dying.

For now, I want to acknowledge that death earns our fear by being very scary. We lose everything we have, everything we know, and everyone we know. The body rots. Most of us do not know what happens next. Void? A chance to head for the light? Hell fire? Every Halloween we stage a cultural orgy of death. Are we displacing our fear into play? Does that work? Or are we just reinforcing the fear? I don’t know. I do know that some religious traditions greatly exacerbate our fear. Take a look, for example, at Jonathan Edwards’ famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Oy!

Love, Eric



MARCH 6, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Dispelling Fear of Death*

Dear friends,

Changing our attitude toward death won't be easy. How we see it is entrenched for most of us, both personally and in the culture.

I wonder what people think when they see the bumper sticker on the car I hardly drive anymore: I ♥ Aging and Dying. That's an exaggeration. I prefer Ben&Jerry's strawberry cheesecake ice cream, but we work with what we're given.

Here's a shift in attitude, a poem I read decades ago. The name of its author is long lost to me. Do you think that you can alter your own view enough to align with this poet's view?

For a Child Who Died at the Age of Five Minutes

What a miracle  
that so much  
stayed in so little  
for so long

Instead of lamenting a life cut off after five minutes, the poet stands awestruck by the miracle of an embodied life. Huzzahs to you, dear Anonymous!

Besides knowing thoroughly that all things are not self (more of that later), understanding deeply that all things are impermanent helps dispel the fear of death. We all know in our minds that everything comes and goes away. For it really to work, we have to drive that knowledge all the way down into the cells. I once practiced the mantra, “Death is certain, and I will be gone soon.” Yucky? Actually, this practice brings happiness because it expresses the truth, and when we align with the truth, happiness follows.

If you do manage to get the truth of universal impermanence all the way down to the cells, you will be considerably immunized from your fear of death. And that’s not only — a really big “not only” — your own death but also your fears about the deaths of those you love. When I learned that I had a terminal illness that would take me out soon, my response was basically, “Well, of course.” In the last couple of years two of the people I have loved most, from the innermost circle of my life, have died. Well, of course. I have felt sadness for these two losses, which have left me humanly diminished, but no grief. It doesn’t make sense to resist what cannot be avoided.

Are you up for the hard work of getting the truth of impermanence deep enough to immunize yourself from fear and grief? Probably not. Probably you are content just to read casually something novel: words about death from someone about to die. That’s fine. But please remember this: The moment when you began reading this sentence is as nullified and extinct as the dinosaurs. Before you get

to the end of an in breath, the beginning of that in breath has joined in oblivion our defunct, unfortunate cousins the Neanderthals. Just. Gone.

Nanosecond by nanosecond experience snuffs out, and we're left with only memory. Continuity is ultimately an illusion. Dew evaporates, and all our world is dew. Pursue this tack a little further and you'll see that the only real time is eternity, just as the only real space is infinity.

As an ex-Quaker I have never been much attracted to ritual and other devotional practices. The one exception has been a Pali chant that tells a teaching of the Buddha on impermanence. If I can post a recording here, I will record it for you. Chanting it in Pali has helped mightily when I have needed to steep myself in the truth that all things pass.

Anicca vata sankhara  
Upada va-ya dhammino  
Uppajjitva nirujjhanti  
Tesam vupasamo sukho

All things are impermanent.  
They arise and they pass away.  
To be in harmony with this truth  
Brings great happiness.

Love,  
Eric



## MARCH 9

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

### *Chant of Impermanence*

Dear friends,

Here is a recording of the chant of impermanence. I cannot carry a tune, so this recording is a close approximation of how it should sound. If you can carry a tune, you'll correct for my defects. There are on-tune versions online.

If you learn this chant, you may find it useful to chant it whenever you're hurting from impermanence — grief, fear, remorse — because “To understand this truth brings true happiness.”

Love, Eric

MARCH 16, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Graceful Death: Curious; Trust the  
Karma or Fix It; Dump Regret*

Dear friends,

CaringBridge has provided this medium for us to be together in a good, pure way. What a blessing for me. I live alone and prefer it now at this sunset time. But I also love having you all crowded in here with me in my kitchen/dining room/hospital space as I write this love letter to you. Thank you for being here. Grab a coffee.

There have been signs this morning that cognition has oozed a little farther down the slippery slope. Pulmonary fibrosis brings with it brain fog, including greater trouble thinking clearly. Time is short.

I have planned four more of these love letters. Two, starting with this one, are about dying gracefully. Since I discovered about a year and a half ago that I was dying, by paying attention to my direct experience, I have learned what I could about dying well. I have wanted some way to share what I have learned, and now that way has manifested — love letters on CaringBridge. The other two letters I have planned come not from examining direct experience but rather from reviewing this life as it ends. I feel good about this life, and I'd like to honor it by telling its story and sharing its meaning

as I conceive that meaning. Four love letters planned, but with the body and mind both slipping away, we'll see whose schedule wins: mine or its.

If you're feeling scared about dying, try feeling curious about it instead. We have plenty of ideas about dying, but few of us know what it actually is. What an adventure, maybe the biggest adventure yet. If we die suddenly we have no choice but to jump. If we die gradually — my own process stretches on and on and on — we get to use some of the fruits of spiritual practice, like impermanence and curiosity, to make the experience easier.

Being curious isn't trivial. Investigation is (Queue the capitals, please, to signify importance.) the Second Factor of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. You can't reach home without it. If the brain fog isn't impenetrable by then, when death is imminent I plan to be watching keenly for The Next Thing. No room for fear in an ardently curious mind.

As far as I know gaining an intuitive understanding of karma isn't on any of the many lists that make up my own spiritual tradition. I can "feel" karma working. Luckily I have had a character type (Number One in the Enneagram if you know it) that can be obsessed with ethics. To avoid harming others is the cutting edge of the obsession. On top of that I was severely abused as a child, and I vowed to myself that I would never abuse.

Of course I have harmed others and myself, but really nothing major. And I have tried to clean up my messes as I have gone along, making amends and seeking to reconcile. Recently a good friend who reads these love letters and I have been somewhat estranged. Disagreement over something that turned out to be irrelevant

escalated into what for me has been the most painful experience in our 30 years of friendship. I do not want to die somewhat estranged, so, dear friend, expect an approach from me once I figure out the right language for it.

This lifetime's karma has been overwhelmingly positive, and I feel it like a wholesome fresh wind in my sails that blows me unerringly in the right direction. In this lifetime as a meditator I have passed the place of no return — no more regression to births in realms of strong suffering. I have also spent 30 years as a teacher of meditation, helping hundreds, make that thousands, of people to free themselves from their suffering. Both of these things — passing the place of no return and supporting freedom for others — bring with them very potent good karma.

I don't know for utter certain that we die and take rebirth. But I have confirmed by my own experience how thoroughly right the Buddha was with those of his teachings that I can confirm. He spoke constantly about rebirth. He is the most reliable, trustworthy person I have encountered, so on his solid authority I am 95 percent with him about the likelihood of rebirth. Because of severe mental illness, I have experienced episodic anguish all the way through this life. With serene confidence I know that the next time will be easier.

With rebirth seeming very likely, I have been arranging meet-ups with fellow bodhisattvas. (If you're unfamiliar with this term, a sentence I repeat every night at bedtime and every morning on waking sums it up pretty well: For as long as space and time endure I will abide to relieve the suffering of living beings.) A few days ago Tara Brach wrote to me a heart-enlarging love note: I love you, Eric, and cherish the wakeful loving that is our essence. "Wakeful loving,"

oh my! Tara — hi, Tara! — and I co-taught many retreats, just the two of us early on, later with a larger team. They were so much fun! While 100 or 150 retreatants ate lunch in solemn silence nearby, we in the teachers’ room howled with laughter over lunch, until the retreat managers had to come in to shush us. Because Tara and I teamed so seamlessly, I think we might continue:

I doubt, dear Tara, that we have seen the last of each other. How it will be next time we can only guess. But we bodhisattvas who have teamed well will most likely team again. So a deep bow to you and a casual “Later!”

Lila Kate Wheeler — hi, Lila! — is another teacher and bodhisattva who has teamed so well with me to teach many retreats together. We have made a pinky-promise to look for each other so that we can yoke together again to relieve the suffering of living beings.

If you have mostly helped in this lifetime, have done little harm, and have cleaned up your messes as you have gone along, then choose your metaphorical vehicle and ride in comfort through death to your next gig. My own metaphorical vehicle is a bright red 1939 Supercharged Flathead Ford Ragtop Convertible.

If you have helped some but have also done a lot of harm, then you have an emergency on your hands. Consider making amends and trying to reconcile with as many people you have harmed as possible. Include those who have died; it’s a one-way conversation, but still it can be effective. If people you have harmed want nothing to do with you, consider sending gifts with simple cards saying something like, “I have been thinking about you and hope that you are well.” That strategy often works. We can’t erase our negative karma, but we can mitigate it by feeling contrition and doing our

best to apologize and reconcile. A couple of times I have not been able to reconcile fully with someone, but they have been willing to exchange apology and forgiveness with me. I have felt the karma shift. The law of karma is as absolute as the law of gravity. Nobody knows how it works, but it always does. Karma is the only possession we take into death and beyond. In fact what we call a self is an incredibly complex system of karmic causes and karmic results.

Fear tangles us up and makes our dying something to suffer. Regret also tangles us up and brings suffering. Talk about a team! Fear is always prospective, agitation about something in the future. We scare ourselves with so many possible things, most of which never happen. The Dalai Lama asked us to think about something big we fear. If the thing never happens, our fear has been wasted, a lot of unnecessary suffering. And if the thing does in fact happen, our fear has been wasted because it would have happened without the fear. My best friend Bob, the most generous and ego-free person I've known, lived trapped in a great Gordian Knot of fears. He went to doctor after doctor, took handfuls of medications and supplements, read articles about diseases. Then one night he just suddenly died. All that prospective anguish for nothing. Oy, what a waste.

Regret is always retrospective, pain about something in the past. The Buddha said that we suffer intensely if we come to the end of our life and find that we have not lived it well. Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Illyich* shows us such remorseful suffering as only Tolstoy's genius could depict it. Illyich lies on his deathbed and realizes that his whole life has been a lie. He dies in rage and ragged remorse. Even if we see toward the end that we have botched life, regret is unnecessary. It's the second arrow. We can't get rid of the first arrow, the botched life, but we don't have to add the

second. Human lives so often start with hope and end with regret. It's something to watch for.

That second arrow metaphor comes from the Buddha. For dealing with fear and regret, I personally favor an acronym from the sex advice columnist Dan Savage: DTMFA! Dump The M\_\_\_\_r F\_\_\_\_rs Already!

Love,  
Eric



MARCH 20

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Love and Grief*

Dear friends,

What follows is not one of my planned four love letters to you that I mentioned in the last letter. So much for plans. If you have come to my teachings, you may have already heard some version of this rap.

Thanks to help from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116 and Paul in 1 Corinthians 13, I figured out a mistake most of us make. We confuse love and grief, when they are radically unlike each other.

The toughest push-back I ever got from teaching happened during a talk at Mountain Cloud in Santa Fe. I said that grief is resistance to change. The place erupted in protest. So I'll be careful here. The protest came, I think, because our culture had finally embraced feeling our grief instead of stuffing it. Probably folks that evening at Mountain Cloud thought that I was being dismissive of grief.

Oh, no. Recently grief seems to have dropped out of my emotional repertoire. Before that I had had so much acute loss throughout my life that grief had had me by the throat for decades. I have deep respect for this scourge of the human heart. Because the cure for



the pain is in the pain, it seems to me important to open to this pain and to feel it fully. Then, all important, we train ourselves not to believe grief's story.

And, sorry, grief is resistance to change. Everything is impermanent. When someone we love manifests impermanence by dying, we cling instead of letting go, and that clinging is our grief. We cling to what we want; we resist what we don't want. Suffering in all its gross entirety comes from just these two things. When we stop clinging and resisting, grief, that excess baggage, can gradually fall away.

Love knows nothing about change. It does not alter when it alteration finds, including the alteration of death. My brother and best friend died half or three quarters of a mile from where I now live, and where I write these words. My ashes will be scattered there. He died 52 years ago today, March 19 as I write this, when he was 28 and I 26. That was the greatest loss in this lifetime. The grief was wrenching.

A couple of years later I dreamed that he and I were out driving in his pickup, something we had done together a lot. I looked over at him, thought about how much I loved him, and felt how terrible it would be if he died. Then I realized that he had died! I lunged for him across the cab of the truck and woke smashed up against the wall next to the bed.

The grief has evaporated. But my love for Chris Kolvig has persisted undiminished for half a century, the confounding miracle of a love that (thank you, Shakespeare) bears it out even to the edge of doom.

Grief is a form of suffering that leads to more suffering, unless we open courageously to its pain and refuse to believe its alluring

lies. Love is a form of happiness, a great one, that leads to more happiness. It's important to distinguish love from attachment, two opposite qualities that we can also confuse with each other; one of them clings, the other does not. Because we don't have to like people in order to love them, our love can be indiscriminate, profligate, on all the time. The road of excess loving leads (thank you, Blake) to the palace of wisdom.

How do we apply this understanding to our actual experience? It's best if you can to start with a minor loss. Can you distinguish the actual experience of grief from the actual experience of love? Usually with loss it's not hard to find grief. It will be running its con to convince you that it's the only game in your heart. Shift your attention to love for the one you have lost. Once you can tell grief and love apart, move back and forth. Grief can seem overwhelming. Love gives you a respite. Eventually grief will weaken. Real love never does.

If you feel love for me — many of you have expressed it here at CaringBridge — you can practice with losing me. In my own mind I may well have driven my metaphorical bright red 1939 Supercharged Flathead Ford ragtop convertible over the border to have a visit with my good friend Void/Emptiness, though of course I can't know now how it will actually go then. If you should feel grief as well as love after my death, you can practice becoming intimate with them both. Thus you will become more emotionally intelligent, and thus you will have taken a good step in freeing yourself from suffering. I thank you in advance for your effort, and I link hands (or pinkies) with you on our way to freedom.

Love,  
Eric



MARCH 24, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Singing Eric Out*

Dear friends,

When I woke this morning, March 22 as I write, it was 16 degrees F with recent snow on the ground. The high will be 36 today, above freezing at least, and they're predicting 20 inches of snow starting tonight. Big fire in my fireplace. Happy spring.

For three weeks or so I have been in a blessed hiatus between challenges. Back past three weeks ago spasms in one leg had taken me to the edge of the unbearable. Sometime in the future will come increasing debility and then the transition. In the meantime I am using the blessed hiatus to focus on turning out these love letters and to enjoying life a little.

Yesterday I went out alone to a movie and a quick dinner next door. I hobbled, awkward and slow and dragging my oxygen behind me, but I went! These things were only about four miles away, but they generated some of the excitement and fun a trip back to Italy, where I used to live, brought before the disability and decline. That's hyperbole of course, but its core is true.

Well, this love letter wasn't planned either. After the movie and dinner I got inspired to write what follows.

For years I have known what music I would prefer if anyone should choose to organize a memorial service. I'd like to share it with you. There are three vocal pieces, two performed by women and one by a man.

Marion Williams, *It Is Well with My Soul*

This hymn, in this particular performance, is the music that has most moved me and has most helped me in my life. I have listened to it dozens of times. More than once when major depression has become so unendurable that I have been close to ending it, I have played this blessed music again and again and again. I wish that Horatio Spafford, the lyricist, Philip Bliss, the composer, and Marion Williams, the singer, could know what a momentous gift they have given to me. And John Plant, lifelong beloved friend and well-known composer, you, John, first exposed me to it. I remember vividly hearing this performance for the first time one evening, in your basement outside Montreal so many years ago. Thank you.

Spafford was a lawyer who was ruined by Chicago's Great Fire in 1871, and further ruined by the Panic of 1873. Then in 1873 his wife and four daughters were crossing the Atlantic in a ship that went down. His wife Anna alone survived. As Spafford crossed the ocean to fetch his wife and passed near the place where his four daughters had died, he wrote "It Is Well with My Soul."

Critic and music historian Dave McGee wrote about Marion Williams in *The Rolling Stone Album Guide*, "One will come

away from her recordings believing that she was nothing less than the greatest singer ever.” The octave range of this “growling soprano” was astounding. Little Richard got his signature wail from Williams, as you will hear at the end of this performance.

Marion Williams lived a hard life, starting in deep poverty. She had a son out of wedlock, something condemned in her time, and especially condemned in the religious culture where she spent her entire life. She never hid her child. Then there was the racism. This performance would have been impossible without Williams’ suffering, and she seemed to know the transcendence too. Late in life she was a MacArthur Fellow. Just before she died she enjoyed a Kennedy Center Honor, with the president and first lady present. Turn up the volume when you listen, especially at the end!

This performance in Utrecht in 1962 was part of the first ever concert of gospel music in Holland. This piece actually isn’t gospel but rather a hymn, of which Williams sings only part. I played this performance to a beloved friend, the son of a Presbyterian preacher, as he was dying. “We sang this hymn, but we didn’t sing it like THAT!”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukGCYNrBlP4>

When peace like a river attendeth my way  
When sorrows like sea billows roll  
Whatever my lot Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

It is well with my soul.  
I know it is well, it is well  
With my soul.

It is well with my soul.  
I don't know about you tonight,  
But I know it is well, thank God,  
It is well with my soul.

Eva Cassidy, Imagine

The Beatles got pretty complex and rarified in their late phase. John Lennon brought it all back to this elegant simplicity. “It Is Well with My Soul” gives us terrible trial — those four daughters — for an individual, and emotionally authentic winning-through to purity and peace. “Imagine” shows us the high sunlit uplands of our potential collective sanity and well-being. All the world will live as one? Amen to that, brother! May it be so.

Eva Cassidy had a devoted local following in the Washington DC area, but she was otherwise unknown before her death from melanoma in 1996 at the age of 34. Fortunately there were recordings stashed here and there. The right people heard them, and before long she was topping the charts in Britain and was valued all over the world. The haunting purity of that soprano voice compels notice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGnfqRR509M>

Imagine there's no heaven.  
It's easy if you try.  
No hell below us,  
Above us only sky.

Imagine all the people  
Livin' for today.  
Ah

Imagine there's no countries.  
It isn't hard to do.  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion, too

Imagine all the people  
Livin' life in peace  
You

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 no possessions.  
I wonder if you can.  
No need for greed or hunger,  
A brotherhood of man.

Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world  
You

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.

Bruce Springsteen, Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

Two women and a man. That man in his prime was a walking, talking, singing wet dream! Though this isn't one of his many sexy songs, that gravelly voice, even when it's hushed, still turns me on.



To judge his sex appeal for yourself, visit “Gallery” at this site. I have given the photo the title “The Boss Sweats.” CaringBridge currently has a glitch that keeps me from posting the photo with this letter.

Springsteen was once out walking with his family when fans stopped them to ask for autographs. Afterward his young son asked, “Daddy, why did those people want you to write your name?” “You know how much you like Barney the Purple Dinosaur?” “Yah!” “Well, I’m some people’s Barney.”

Springsteen and his wife Patti Scialfa used their farmhouse to record the album *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*. The brass players had to play from the hallway. So much brass gives “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize” and other songs in the album the flavor of a New Orleans funeral

band. This song, prominent in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, is based on a traditional folk song, “The Gospel Plow.” No one knows who wrote the words.

The link will take you to the whole album. On the right you will see a list of the tracks. You want the ninth, though you might enjoy the whole album. “Shenandoah” is especially beautiful.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7lnBLLn7wA&list=PLiN-7mukU\\_RHGx-zktjaT4lO0oApwT60\\_&index=9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7lnBLLn7wA&list=PLiN-7mukU_RHGx-zktjaT4lO0oApwT60_&index=9)

Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Had no money for to go their bail.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Paul and Silas thought they was lost.  
Dungeon shook and the chains come off.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Freedom's name is mighty sweet,  
And soon we're gonna meet.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

I got my hand on the gospel plow,  
Won't take nothing for my journey now.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Hold on, hold on,  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Soozie!

Only chain that a man can stand  
Is that chain o' hand on hand.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

I'm gonna board that big greyhound,  
Carry the love from town to town.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Freedom's name is mighty sweet. Bruce, thank you. You're my  
Barney.

Love,  
Eric

P.S. Here's a bonus. While I was doing some research for this love  
letter, I stumbled upon two of the masters, Aretha Franklin and

Mavis Staples, singing “Oh Happy Day” together. I have been using this duet as a meditation, closing my eyes and letting the voices penetrate and move around inside. Bob Dylan proposed to Staples when they were young in Greenwich Village. She turned him down. A few years ago, when they were in their 70s, Staples told Dylan, “I’m ready now!” “Sorry,” he replied, “I’m married.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0AF0IIZf2Q>



APRIL 15, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT  
*Graceful Death: Wisdom Frees*

Dear friends,

This letter is longer than the others because I have wanted to write it while I can still write it. The trajectory of pulmonary fibrosis varies so much from one person to another that no one can tell me how long I have. On April 10, I passed the half-way, three-month mark in hospice. I was assigned to hospice when they felt that I would die within six months. There is one sign that “transition” may be near: sleepiness. No matter how long I sleep at night, I’m constantly slipping away into little cat naps. As I wrote this love letter to you, many times as I sat at the computer I would wake to find my chin on my chest. Once I drifted off with a finger on the back key, erasing a big chunk of text! Maybe the sleepiness comes as the system, especially the brain, gets less oxygen and more carbon dioxide.

Well, whatever comes tomorrow, today this love letter to you is written. It contains the last of the things I have really wanted to share with you. Anything I share after today will be dessert.

When I was living and working in New Mexico, a woman I did not know called from Santa Fe. Her husband was dying from prostate cancer and wanted to speak with me. Would I come?

He was older, late sixties or seventies. He shared with me how much he suffered from an intense fear of death. I asked if he had a spiritual practice of any kind. No, except for some reading. Was he willing to engage the fear, to work with it? No. I danced around the subject, hoping to find an opening. Frozen with fear, he was adamant. He was scared of death and scared of fear, and he wouldn't look either of them in the eyes. I couldn't help him. While we talked I pumped out love to him, and probably I gave him pared-down instructions for loving-kindness meditation -- I don't remember after so many years -- explaining that love is an antidote for fear. I doubt that he used it, but why not try?

A couple of weeks later his wife called again. Would I please come back? Why? I couldn't help him. Her husband needed urgently to speak with me. Well, okay. The second meeting went like the first. Fear had him by the throat. I transmitted megawatt loving-kindness to him and figured that maybe he had wanted me back in order to enjoy more of that spirit-nourishing love. Glad to oblige.

After I gave a talk in Albuquerque, a respected member of the community approached me. His 21-year-old son was dying from testicular cancer. Would I officiate at the memorial service? Did his son have a spiritual practice? No. I told the father that I preferred whenever possible to plan a memorial service with the one who was dying. Would his son meet with me?

We met just days before he died. The family -- his parents and two siblings -- were there. Because he was weak the meeting might have

to be ended abruptly. I jumped right in. Did he feel resentment or regret because he was dying with so little experience of life? Not at all. He accepted his fate. His tone was calm -- even serene -- clear, assured, authentic.

I pushed a little more. At 63 I was just three times his age. If I could do it I would switch places with him so that he could experience more of life. (If you're wondering, I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it.) He would not choose to switch places with me. When he was still a small child in the car with his mother, he told her that he would die young. It would be better if she got ready for it. He had never planned to grow up. I thought to myself: 21? No spiritual practice? Where have you come from? I told him that he was doing just fine and said that he might choose to use his remaining time to help his family, who were not doing as well, to cope with his death. We planned the memorial.

The high school gym was jammed with hundreds of people. His close friends spoke with great affection about the fun-loving slacker who never grew up. Once, they told us, he pooped in the ninth hole at the golf course.

Two men dying: one long in years and short in wisdom, caught in an anguish of fear; the other short in years and long in wisdom, serenely free from fear.

I have been writing about fear of death, but if you engage any fear you are engaging all of them. The fear is always the same. It shamelessly attaches itself to any object that might snag you. You fear spiders and death? When you work with one you're automatically working with the other.

What do I mean by “work with”? Next time you’re scared of something, see if you can distinguish three things: emotion -- fear obviously, but probably more; sensation -- what does fear feel like in your body?; thoughts -- there’s always some story. Try not to believe the story. It takes practice, but while you watch these three things, stay especially aware of, and grounded in, the physical sensations. And then notice that all of it is shifting and changing, and eventually it all goes away. Once you’re adept at watching these three things, and watching them dissolve into nothing, you’ll become more and more like President Reagan; your mind/body will become seamlessly coated with Teflon. Fear will have more and more trouble finding a place to snag.

Wisdom in my spiritual tradition means something very specific: to understand more and more deeply the three universal characteristics shared by all things: everything is impermanent; everything is unsatisfactory/unreliable; everything is not self.

BUT WAIT! To read any further here could place you in jeopardy. There’s no shame in putting this document down and going out for beer, wings, and a round of pool with friends.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said, “The pursuit of truth is the most dangerous undertaking because it destroys the world you know.” And Gloria Steinem: “The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.” If you are foolhardy and want to go on, take my hand and we’ll face this reality together.

In my love letter to you dated March 5, we dealt with the impermanence of things. The letter ended with words from the Buddha:

All things are impermanent.  
They arise and they pass away.  
To be in harmony with this truth  
Brings great happiness.

Your 21-year-old son is dying from testicular cancer. His impermanence is obvious as his body becomes translucent. He was your baby. Even if you could find “great happiness” in these circumstances, would you even want to? Would such happiness feel like an insult to your dying boy and to yourself? To embrace great happiness here, in this scenario, the world you know would have to be destroyed.

That was the impermanence mishegoss. How about the unsatisfactory/unreliable mishegoss, the second characteristic of all things? The reason we suffer comes down to something very simple: we grasp for and try to hold onto what we want, and we avoid and try to get rid of what we don't want. Because our lives are a constant alternation of what we want and what we don't want, we're like ping pong balls in constant, nonstop play, knocked back and forth every minute, every year, every decade from baby chest pack to the furnace in the crematorium.

Buddhists call this reality we live in Samsara. When you get the sense that everything, everything, here in Samsara is ultimately unsatisfactory, unreliable, and an occasion for suffering, Samsara loses its allure. I remember the blessing when I saw that Samsara is broken and can't be fixed. Ultimately there is nothing here worth clinging to, and that is oh so freeing. Dying gets so much easier when nothing here is worth clinging to.



If the problem of suffering is simple -- grasping and pushing away -- so also the solution of suffering is simple -- stop grasping and pushing away. If we allow what we don't want to come when it comes and to go when it goes, without interference, and if we allow what we want to come when it comes and to go when it goes, without interference, then we achieve a state that is fully Reaganized, fully Teflon-coated. Suffering can find no purchase on which to stick.

So your beloved boy came into your life 21 years ago, and now he leaves. This is the way of it. Let be.

So for decades you have put aside money to buy your heart's beloved, a bright red 1939 Supercharged Flathead Ford rag top convertible. You have tracked every surviving red Supercharged etc. on the planet. (There is none at the local Ford dealer.) Finally a minor member of the Saudi ruling family needs to sell one in mint condition. You outbid everybody. You ship it home. It is even more wonderful than you had dreamed. On your third drive a drunk teenager hits it broadside at speed, totaling it. This is the way of it. Let be.

Let's be honest. In order to let be as your beloved son dies, or to let be when your bright red 1939 Supercharged Flathead Ford rag top convertible is totaled on your third drive, the world you know would have to be destroyed.

What? Are you still there? Missed out on the wings, the beer, and the pool? It's boring, I know, and more than a little absurd-seeming, and it's about to get way more absurd-seeming with the third universal characteristic of all things: Nothing is self. It's my least favorite discussion subject, because I see all those skeptical faces staring back at me. At least with this venue you can't answer right back.

Let me just use an analogy from the Buddha updated for our time, and we'll leave it at that.

Get a really big tarp, then take a car completely apart. Spread out all of the parts on the tarp. Pick up a lug nut and ask: Is this lug nut a car? No, obviously not. And this steering wheel, is it a car? No. It's the same answer for any part: not car. Then we take all these not-car parts and assemble them in a particular pattern and call the assemblage "car." It doesn't convince me. "Car" is just a concept that we lay on top of all that not-car.

In the same way we could disassemble all the parts of what we call "self." Is the body self? No. It's just meat and bone. What about emotions? Nope. The compassion you feel when you see someone suffering is exactly the same compassion I feel; it's not "my" compassion or "yours." It's just compassion, which is not a self. What about thoughts? Nope. If those thoughts were yours, you'd be able to control them, and we know how that goes. Whatever else you parse out of the mix will not be self either. We take all these not-self pieces and assemble them in a certain configuration and call the assemblage "self." Not convincing. "Self" is just a concept that we lay on top of all that not-self. Just a concept!

It matters. The British humorist Wei Wu Wei wrote, "Ninety-nine percent of everything you think and everything you do is for yourself, and there isn't one." The mythological deity Kuan Yin is reputed to have said (Wow, I get to quote a mythological deity!), "The winds of circumstance blow across emptiness. Whom can they harm?" Try it on. If there's no self, who dies? Check. If there's no self, who loses her child to cancer? Check. Who loses their bright red 1939 etc.? Check. As they say, no self, no problem. No problem!

I remember when Wavy Gravy ran Nobody for president. Nobody can govern this country! Nobody can end our national debt! I chucked the self, and I never looked back, and that was the last vestige of the destroyed world I had once known.

Even when wisdom -- that is, understanding that all things are transitory, unsatisfactory, and not self -- becomes more developed, I have found that there is one place where wisdom hits the wall of its powers: air hunger, or dyspnea. (Save that one for Scrabble.) When the body can't get enough air, it goes into high-alert emergency mode. No amount of wisdom seems to soften the body's urgency to breathe. As you read these words your body knows exactly what I'm writing about. I'm having more frequent experiences of air-hunger urgency. Eventually I will drown, when the lungs can't absorb oxygen and carbon dioxide fills the system. Luckily morphine helps by relaxing the body and softening the urgency. I have begun using morphine for air hunger, with deep, deep gratitude.

Over the years a lot of stuff has come and gone from my refrigerator door. One of my favorite magnets: A tough-looking, ample, middle-aged scowling woman in a 1940s dress sits in a 1940s chair with her arms crossed. She holds a cigarette between her fingers. "Aunt Bunny says, 'Adjust your attitude or I'll fix your ass!'" There's only one thing left now on the fridge door, words from one of those great Dzogchen masters from centuries past. It's probably Longchen Rabjam, but I can't know for sure. I love these words. They point to a mind that is free. I'm not there yet, but I trust the direction. I have edited very lightly to enhance verbal felicity.

Now here, now gone, thoughts leave no trace,  
And opened wide to seamless awareness,

Hopes and fears no longer stick,  
The stake that tethers the mind  
In its field pulls out,  
And Samsara, the city of delusion,  
Lies empty to the sky.

Love, Eric

APRIL 27, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Birth*

Dear friends,

Two things about the timing of my birth pointed at least symbolically toward what my work in this life would be.

I was born on the morning of April 27, 1945, Eastern War Time. That day was two weeks after Franklin Delano Roosevelt had had his fatal stroke. It was the day before partisans shot Benito Mussolini. And it was three days before Adolf Hitler in his bunker shot himself.

My birth occurred at the precise historical moment when humans suffered more than they had ever suffered before then, and more than they have suffered since then. Let me say that again. I am connected by the timing of my birth to the most cataclysmic event in all of our species' long history. About 75 million people died in World War II, about three percent of the world's population in 1940. Between 40 and 60 million people lost their homes and became refugees. These statistics may seem like just numbers, but imagine! Perhaps we can't imagine.

I have consciously carried this vision of horror at the time of my birth as a special responsibility to live without violence and to help make a world without such destruction.

The other thing connected to the timing of my birth is so august, so daunting, that I feel embarrassed to share it with you. But it's there, so.... The full moon of Taurus occurred on April 27, 1945. Though the ancient terms and the more modern ones like "Taurus" don't exactly match, and though scholars debate it, millions of Buddhists celebrate the birth of the Buddha at the full moon of Taurus.

When I learned that "Eric" in Old Norse means "kingly," I figured that I had a lot to live up to, and sometimes I have consciously tried: "What would 'kingly' do?" But to share birth at the full moon of Taurus with him? I'm reminded of the old gospel song: "Take my hand, precious Lord, and lead me on home." I will do the work, Venerable Buddha. Take my hand, dear one, and walk together with me home.

Love,  
Eric

MAY 9, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*The Force Is with Us — But What Is It?*

Dear friends,

Okay, full disclosure. This love letter to you is going to take us out into woo-woo territory. If you decide to read on, it means that you have given informed consent.

In my letter to you on April 15, I wrote about a young man dying from cancer at whose memorial service I officiated. After I posted the letter, I felt surprised and delighted to get an email from the young man's father. It had been many years since we had been in contact. His words were rich with love for his son, dead now for almost sixteen years, and rich with gratitude to me for the role I had played for his son, for his family, and for their community. His fine letter was so well expressed that I got his permission to share it with you. In the end I decided not to post it because doing so would have been immodest of me.

As I remembered that remarkable young man, clear-eyed and serene, and that memorable memorial service, I was struck by how pure it all was. Among the hundreds of people at the service I detected not even a hint of negativity. Memory ranged wider: the Insight Meditation communities in Albuquerque and Santa Fe

where I had served as resident teacher; the dozens of retreats and thousands of students I had taught; my relationships with the many meditation teachers who had taught me. Of course there were some tensions and conflicts, especially in local sanghas/communities and in the community of teachers. But in my formal roles — as student, as teacher, and with teacher colleagues who teamed with me to lead retreats — purity overwhelmingly prevailed. This impermanent community here at CaringBridge, us, we relate with each other with purity. You could consider this online gathering as your last chance to settle a score with me, but you haven't done it. .

How is that? Why is that? The Force protected us in a force field of goodness. I have seen such thorough purity nowhere else.

In the summer of 1981 the Dalai Lama gave a week of teachings at Harvard. At that time I had been in silent retreat for about nine months. I came out of retreat to attend the Dalai Lama's teachings. He was well-known then but was not yet the superstar he became after receiving the Nobel Prize. I can never forget my response when he first entered the lecture hall at Harvard. Something shifted in that space. Suddenly I felt us all held together in a single, unified field of energy. Every time that week when the Dalai Lama entered the hall, there it was, that embracing energy that held us all. What was it? Clearly it was caused by His Holiness, or maybe he was its vehicle. It was fairly early in my practice, so I didn't understand much of what he taught. The thirteen kinds of emptiness? I wasn't familiar with one. He did throw out a kind of koan or cosmic puzzle that I chewed over for several years before I figured it out: "All that appears to a Buddha appears as the sport of bliss."

Sometime after I began teaching a few years later, I started experimenting with that unifying field. Finally I managed to manifest



it. During my teachings we started to be all together in that single field. Did “I” generate it, or was I simply its instrument? After a while it required no effort; it was just there. I don’t know if others have ever felt it; I have never asked. It was as if I were relating intimately with each person in the audience.

All my life since adolescence I have been periodically disabled with severe depression. There were times when it was a struggle to tie my shoes. And yet I could go in that condition to give a dharma talk somewhere, and as soon as I took the sacred seat, all depression would be completely gone, and the spirit would be bright and clear with that strong, mysterious purity. How is that possible, to go from clinical, severe depression to perfectly well? It never failed, and I came to trust that it would not fail.

Years after I retired I visited Arinna Weisman at Dhamma Dena, her center in the desert. Arinna and I had team taught many retreats together, most of them for the LGBTQ community. Out of the blue Arinna told me, “You were channeling.” I had never had that thought before. I replied, “It felt like it. But who or what was I channeling?” We didn’t know. For sure at times I would wonder, “Did I just say that? How did I know to say that?”

I think that all of these elements connect: pervasive purity, that powerful unified field, the miracle of depression disappearing every time whenever I taught, channeling. There is no easy explanation for them. They have existed, but we can’t say how. I’m going to let them be The Force in its several manifestations. It is with us, and that is enough.

Love, Eric

MAY 13, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Honoring a Life: Physical*

Dear friends,

You and this site now occupy a big place in my psyche. Physically I live alone with Ruby the cat, which is just right for me. Then I come here, where I can love you, and where your love for me sustains me. Thank you. I have always loved the art of language. Here I get to indulge it.

A few years ago I read something that lit up understanding. Apparently people who have had severe trauma compensate in one of two ways. They can become cautious and self-protecting, or they can become incautious risk-takers. I now understand why I have taken big risks in every aspect of my life. I have paid quite a price for my adventures, especially in old age, but the benefits have been so big that I have no regrets.

Granite Hospice encourages us to write about our lives. Even though such focus on oneself can be problematic, by way of honoring this life that is ending, I'd like to share with you risks, struggles, and successes in the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual parts of my life.

I have shared with you the adventure I had at Mount Washington's Tuckerman Ravine when I was nineteen. There have been many physical adventures, but I want to start with the last big one, and the most important one of my life, when I was on the verge of 75.

I first hiked down to the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon in 1968, two days after we elected Richard Nixon president. Over the decades there had been many hikes there in the most sacred place I have known. In 2015, when my former partner and dear friend Tim turned 50 and I turned 70, he, his husband Robert, Sue from my Flagstaff family, and I hiked rim-to-rim from north to south.

Then in 2019 I conceived a Grand Finale for my physical adventures. Maintaining strict secrecy, I bought a lot of ultralight equipment and started training. When Marc and Sue of my Flagstaff family asked what was up, I replied vaguely that I was planning a hike. The hike I was planning was at my age risky enough to be foolhardy. I thought that they would disapprove. It turns out that they were fully supportive.

## *Honoring Life: Physical 1*

I intended to hike solo rim-to-rim-to-rim (R2R2R) of the Grand Canyon, from south to north and back again. The following numbers can't convey the immensity of the undertaking: 47.8 miles of walking, nearly every step going up or down; 22,000 vertical feet of elevation up and down. I intended to use the hike as a meditation retreat.

I started at the South Rim in early March 2020, just before we were all locked down. I would turn 75 the following month. Pulmonary

fibrosis was first diagnosed in 2018. Probably fifteen years before that, an X-ray technician thought he saw COPD in the lungs. So, yes, it was a little foolhardy. A ranger stopped to talk as I descended the South Kaibab Trail. Where was I going? Rim-to-rim-to-rim. Today? No, of course not. I'd camp in the campground across the river. Once I was settled at a campsite, another ranger grilled me with question after question. She couldn't stop me, but she sure could try to discourage me. Multiple times I had walked every step of the trails involved. Yes, I could end up as a crumpled corpse somewhere, in which case I apologized for the inconvenience. After the ranger gave up on what was starting to feel like harassment, she asked another hiker to look out for me.

Here is an excerpt from an account I wrote for friends soon after the hike.

I knew that the third day would bring the great challenge, but I couldn't foretell how great. On the second day I hiked north half-way up from the river to camp at Cottonwood Campground. The third day required hiking to the North Rim and back, fourteen miles. I left early with a light pack. The last five miles up involved climbing nearly 4,000 vertical feet. I wasn't prepared at my age (I'm 75) for such a brutal ascent; it challenged me to the limit and beyond.

About two miles from the North Rim, I had to make a difficult choice: turn back while there was enough light, or climb on knowing that I'd have to descend in the dark on a treacherous trail. I made it to the rim, which had four feet of snow, and started down as dark came gradually. Because I knew how perilous it would be, I scribbled a note and put it in my pack, to say that this death wasn't

voluntary, just the elements overwhelming me; expressing my love; and describing my experience at that moment of joy, wholeness and peace of heart. Miraculously, there was cell coverage, barely. I left a phone message for Sue and Marc.

As the light faded, I'd never felt so alone: the one human in a vast, vast, darkening place who must make his way, alone, along what would come to feel like a knife edge of the void.

It was inexpressibly perilous going. A flashlight makes things two-dimensional when one urgently needs three. There were snow and ice. The trail was narrow, sometimes very narrow, with a sheer drop hundreds of feet. In the dark that drop was impenetrable blackness. One stumble -- just one -- would do it. Mindfulness and concentration had to be complete, no wandering. I crept along, exhausted from the climb up with only brief rests. Twice I became so unsteady with fatigue that I lay down on the trail to nap, pushed up as close to the inner side as I could get, until the cold forced me to resume.

It was quite an existential situation, which was its great value.

Luckily I felt no fear in the ordinary sense. Such fear would have contracted body and mind when they needed to be relaxed and resilient. I did feel something I'd never known before, a powerful, deep sensation in the body. I think it was dread. Luckily it caused no probably-fatal contraction, but I'll never forget it. Memory of that descent brings the feeling back.

I'd left Cottonwood Campground at 6:00 a.m., and I got back at 2:30 a.m., more than 20 hours with only a few brief stops.

The bonus that made the whole thing fruitful: The last two miles had dangerous drops, but less so. The trail was wider. That relative safety, along with fatigue and extreme physical and psychic effort for so long, probably triggered an insight as I walked that part of the trail. All the elements had been eddying around consciousness for years. Now they flowed together into something whole.

Dante's most famous line has haunted me for years: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*. Abandon all hope, you who enter here. And King Solomon, in *The New International Version of Ecclesiastes*, has also haunted me: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." I've known that these words of Dante and Solomon have both obvious meanings and also deeper ones.

Hope and meaning are both wholesome motivators; they help -- they are necessary -- to make our living well possible. My favorite line from *Proverbs*: Without vision the people perish. All good.

But ultimately our hopes, even if we realize them, come to nothing. You hope that your loved ones will stay healthy and alive, a good hope. But soon they will die, as will you, and your hopes will perish with you. Some of the meanings we cherish are good and powerful: We value democracy, fairness, justice, equality. But our civilization will disappear, dust in the wind, and our meanings will blow away with it.

Seeing both levels, without special loyalty to either, allows a more complete letting-go, which is the path to freedom. We let go completely when we see that holding on to anything at all, even hope, can never work. Hope, meaning, and all the rest are straws on the

flood. The heart that lets go of it all, of even the best, rests unburdened, unentangled, simple, and free.

That descent from the North Rim was scary enough, but the fifth day brought the real ordeal. If I had planned a day of rest before I hiked out of the canyon, I would have been fine. I began that fifth and last day physically depleted with about ten miles and 4,314 vertical feet to climb. By the last two miles the body had given out, and only the will kept the body moving. When I finally reached the South Rim, I turned around to look at the canyon and spoke this spontaneous ritual. “We have had a long, wonderful relationship. But now we’re getting divorced. I will never go below the rim again.” During the two subsequent visits to the canyon, I felt uncomfortable. That last day left some post-traumatic residual.

This last physical adventure was my life’s greatest physical adventure. I brag shamelessly about it, like the Ancient Mariner confronting strangers and grabbing at their lapels. “I hiked rim-to-rim-to-rim of the Grand Canyon at the age of 75!”

Love, Eric







MAY 21, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Honoring a Life: Physical 2*

Dear friends,

Decades ago I was hiking with my closest friend down out of the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in New Mexico. We were racing the darkness and had no flashlight, something I loved to do. My friend stopped and said, “Wait. Do you know how you feel when you’re late for a plane?” “Yes.” “That’s what I’m feeling right now!” “I will never do this to you again.” And I didn’t.

Recently my current closest friend (my then-closest friend died) told me that I don’t take into account my impact on others when I do risky things. Because I love and respect her, I have reflected on what she said. It has been a fruitful inquiry. I’ve realized that risk-taking is so central to my character, and so necessary to my survival, that others simply must accommodate it. Without it, major depression would have taken me out long ago. With it I have been able to accomplish good things.

There have been lots of what we came to call “Eric Adventures.” I’ll limit myself to describing four big ones. The most important

of them, hiking rim-to-rim-to-rim of the Grand Canyon at 75, I described in my last letter to you.

A Bike Ride. When I finished college in 1968, like every other man graduating from college then, I was immediately drafted. I had been working passionately against the Vietnam War. Knowing that with PTSD and major depression I probably would not survive prison, I had applied only to the University of Toronto for graduate school and had planned to emigrate to Canada.

Then my government rejected me because I was gay. I was deeply closeted and didn't plan to play the gay card. But the paperwork before the draft physical asked, "Have you ever had sex with a man?" Why not be truthful for once about my sexuality? That got me an interview with a psychiatrist, and that got me a 1Y deferment. They never called me back. Homophobia did me a very big good turn. I have forgiven my government for this rejection.

So there I was, suddenly free! I applied to Yale, which at that time had the best English department in the world, with Berkeley as back-up. For this all-of-a-sudden-manifesting gap year, I spent some months in San Francisco with Kevin (a woman -- hi, Kev!) and then went to Europe. My friend Lass (hi, Lass!), doing her junior year abroad in Munich, and I traveled together during her spring vacation. Lass went back to school. I was running out of money and visited my sister, her husband, and my baby nephew before I returned to the States. They were stationed at an American Air Force base in Aviano, northern Italy.

Then I got a crazy idea. I bought a bike in Aviano. I had camping gear and a backpack. With this external combustion machine and camping gear, the only real expense would be food. I knew nothing

about bikes, so I bought a lightweight racing bike with those skinny tires, when I needed instead a sturdy touring bike.

It did not occur to me that this was an unusual thing to do. I was 23. It was just a good solution to diminished funds that would extend my stay in Europe.

I hit the Alps on the second or third day. Walk up the passes, coast down them. Toward the end of each day I walked my bike into the woods and put up the tent if it looked like rain.

A big highway crossed over Brenner Pass from Italy into Austria. The old road was almost unused. I spent a glorious Sunday afternoon coasting on that old road from Brenner Pass all the way down to Innsbruck, passing through towns where people walked in their Sunday best after church. I stayed with Lass for a while in Munich, then biked on through the rest of Europe. I learned the hard way that the Black “Forest” is actually a mountain range! In all it was six or seven countries: Italy, Austria, Germany, France, probably Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands. From Rotterdam in the Netherlands I took the ferry to England.

Not only did I camp across Europe by walking my bike into woods, but I also skinny dipped across Europe, finding discreet spots in rivers or ponds to bathe. I stayed in hostels a couple of times when I was feeling sick.

Three years later, when Lass was 24 and I 27, we biked across part of Maine, took the ferry from Portland to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, and biked all around Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton Island. In the gallery here you can see us somewhere on an endless long hill on Cape Breton. (The buff thing has been impermanent, of course.)

Paddle and Portage. In 1968 Lass, her long-haired dachshund Madel, and I canoed for two weeks in Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park. Then in 1971 we three returned to Algonquin for a month-long canoe trip. We carried all of our food for a month. By the fourth week we were so protein deprived that I was trying to catch fish with my hands. On the second or third night the bulb of our flashlight died. Extra batteries? Check. Extra bulb? Oops. Thus we lived for weeks in the wilderness without light. By paddling and portaging we got out into remote wilderness and heard wolves howl at night.

One morning little Madel ran out of the tent barking fiercely. I ran out behind her to find her about six feet from the tent, directly in front of and below a huge bull moose, who looked down at her, confused and probably bemused. I grabbed the dog, two feet or so from the moose's snout, apologized to him for the fuss, and scuttled back into the tent. An eagle decided that Madel would make a good meal and circled above us for a whole day as we paddled down a river. For a few days we dispensed with clothing altogether. Clothes-free in spectacular wilderness -- it doesn't get better than that!

I see why the hospice advises us to tell our stories. I sit here at my computer with a heart running over with gratitude. To be healthy enough, to have enough moxie to take on the risks, to appreciate what was happening as it happened -- I brimmed with rapture before I began spiritual practice. And being poor through most of my life was no hindrance; these activities cost so little. I've had plenty to whine about in this long life, and so much too to celebrate.

Love, Eric



JUNE 2, 2024 #1

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Honoring a Life: Physical 3  
Seeking Mom*



A hypnotherapist guided me into a light trance. “Picture yourself standing in a room. There is a door in front of you and a door behind you. At any time, you can leave the room through the door

behind. Now invite anyone who needs to talk with you to come through the door in front.”

Mom came. She had been dead for decades. Mom told me that she had never been able to get close to me because I was male. She had been hurt too badly by males.

I felt immediately the truth of what she told me. I knew for one thing that my father had been a terrible choice for her. There must have been others. Whatever resentment I carried toward her for being shut to me melted right away. “Mom, as a man and as your son, I give you this blessing: May you never again be harmed by anyone male! I bless you with my unconditional love.”

Somehow or other harm by men would probably explain her mystery.

If Tao Kolvig had lived just a few more years, I might have been spared decades of looking for her. She was 46 and I eighteen when she died. With all that figuring-out --gender, sexuality, race, ethics, values, and lots more -- adolescents are necessarily self-absorbed with what almost amounts to self-creation. By my post-adolescent twenties, I would have had questions.

Mom had an exotic backstory: Born on the Island of Pappuaanah in the Cook Islands of Southern Polynesia, her full name was Pappuaanah Musomon Aatteio, “Swamp Rose of Pappuaanah,” shortened to Tao. Her grandfather Petao was a full-blooded Polynesian who married a Spaniard, and her father Manaku married a Frenchwoman, which made her one-fourth Polynesian. Her mother died giving birth to her. When she was twelve she traveled with her father to Hawaii, where she married someone named Joseph Lewis. He was killed by a car

three months later. Their son Licao was born on Pappuaanah and died at nine months old. So by the time she was thirteen or fourteen, she had been married; she had been widowed; she had had a child; and she had lost the child. The story goes on from there.

Was that exotic story true? As soon as genetic testing began, I tried to find out if I had Pacific Islander genes. With each improvement in genetic testing, I tested. And then, after a lifelong desire to go to the Cook Islands, I went.

Probably I would never have gotten there without the best kind of encouragement from my dear friend Fran. “Let’s go together!” she said. So we went. Fran, a veteran traveler, was the ideal companion for the journey.

And what a journey it was! If you choose to read my brief memoir of that trip in January 2005, you will see why the people of the Cook Islands entranced me. I liked them and loved them more than any other people I’d known, including my own American people. I wanted to be part of them.

There’s a big physical adventure coming, I promise. But first let’s finish with Tao Kolvig. It’s wonderful to be entranced, but that condition doesn’t allow for much clear seeing. Years after that journey to the Cook Islands, I remembered that no island called “Pappuaanah” exists there. I remembered that the islands are volcanic. “Swamp Rose of Pappuaanah” came from a place where swamps do not exist. I remembered that four older Cook Island women from the Mormon Church’s Family History Centre had told me that the people my mother claimed as her



family -- Petao, Manaku, Kielo, Licao -- did not have Cook Islander names.

Enter yet another friend to whom I owe so much gratitude. Robert, if you read these words, thank you! I joined Ancestry. Robert, a gifted researcher, went to work. Robert found Mom.

My mother was Charlotte Hirschfeld who grew up in Queens, the borough of New York City. Robert found a news article that might hint why Charlotte of Queens disappeared and then reappeared as Tao of the Cook Islands. But we'll never really know. Mom, your secret is safe with you. You chose to live in disguise for a reason. Your choice is fine with me. You did what you had to do in order to be safe and to get by.

Okay, what appears below, the adventure, is an excerpt. It's the five-page, last section, "The Passage," of the eleven-page memoir I wrote about Fran's and my time in the Cook Islands, "Faraway Home: A Passage." If you would like to read the whole memoir, it's here: [https://www.dropbox.com/scl\\_fi/658li07tbdrrwm1eo5nrqy/FARAWAY-HOME.doc?rlkey=pltzfo8eyc750uu95xl82rcqm&st=k1sqngof&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl_fi/658li07tbdrrwm1eo5nrqy/FARAWAY-HOME.doc?rlkey=pltzfo8eyc750uu95xl82rcqm&st=k1sqngof&dl=0)

Just one explanation. The last sentence of "The Passage" mentions "The Polynesian God." Here, pulled from the memoir, is who he was:

Naturally, with all of this wholesome sensuality all around, I fell in love at least once a day. One bus driver, who had more magnetism than a year's worth of Oscar winners put together, I called The Polynesian God. Our most significant exchange was about moose.

"Have you seen one?"

“Yes, many.”

“Are they as big as a cow?”

“Bigger, quite a bit bigger.”

Eyes-of-a-god open wide. “Really?”

“Yes. I hope that you see a moose sometime in your life.”

“Thank you!”

### The Passage

If you have stayed aboard this far, I want to end this little memoir by describing to you a passage. All my life, since I was a small child, I have wanted to go to the Cook Islands. At last it has happened, and this event, coming near the end of our visit there, was for me the climax of the journey.

The islands configure this way. The land is surrounded by lagoon, which in turn is surrounded by coral reef. Beyond the reef moves the open sea, which drops immediately to great depth. I loved swimming in the warm, limpid lagoons, especially after we respectfully adopted Black Rock as our swimming hole. But from the first day I felt confined by the reef. Somehow this pilgrim could not journey to the place of his ancestors without getting to the open ocean. I didn't know why this was necessary; I just knew it was.

One day early in the trip Fran and I tried a reef walk. Wearing reef shoes, we made our way across the lagoon at low tide with calm surf, climbed onto the reef, and stood there briefly at the edge of

the sea. Then I tossed out a playful taunt to the great ocean. “Aw, c’mon, you can do better than that. Bring ‘em on!” You just never know when you’ll need to use a president’s words.

“What are you saying?” Fran yelled over the sound of the surf. Almost immediately the great ocean playfully responded with a bigger wave breaking over the reef, then a bigger one, and then a third that swept us off our feet and dragged us across the coral. I grabbed for a handhold to stop our slide and slashed open my right hand. Coral cuts are a no-no. The cut was not deep, but the blood was copious. That was our last reef walk.

After that tantalizing close encounter with the open sea, I watched keenly on Rarotonga and then on Aitutaki for a way to get out to sea. Trying to swim from the reef would be too close to willful self-destruction. But there were about three narrow gaps, called “passages,” from Rarotonga out through the reef to open water, and there was Rarotonga’s tiny harbor in Avarua. I looked around the harbor hoping to find a kayak to rent for a jaunt out, but no one rented them there.

Then came fierce storms with high seas thundering over the reef into the lagoon. Even after the storms had gone, the big surf continued day after day. At times it was too rough to swim even in the usually protected lagoon. We were quickly approaching the time to leave the Pacific. As that end neared, getting through to Mother Ocean became my highest priority. With those big roaring waves it didn’t look likely.

Finally I went to Muri Lagoon at least to gather information. This lagoon is tourist central on Rarotonga, a large, gorgeous body

of water with picturesque small islands and with, I guessed and hoped, at its end a passage through the reef.

The big guy who rents kayaks on Muri Lagoon is a warm, engaging jewel of a man, half Tahitian and half Cook Islander. I wish now that I had learned his name. He explained to me that people could not take his kayaks beyond a certain island in the lagoon because of danger at the passage.

Aha, so there is a passage.

I told him that I would like to paddle through the passage, that I was not seeking thrills but rather hoping to honor my ancestors, and that I would not hold him liable for whatever might happen. Mentioning ancestors gained his interest and sympathy. He agreed to rent me a boat and even offered to give me his personal kayak, a better craft that would give me a better chance.

“But,” he said, pointing to the high surf crashing over the reef, “if you try to go through the passage today, I guarantee that I will have to call the rescue squad.” That was kind of a big “But.” He explained in a friendly, kind way how big waves mixed with coral reef pose mortal danger, including a vacuum current that can suck a small boat to the bottom. “Whenever they can’t find a body, I always know where to look.” He had heard that the high surf was supposed to last for another week. That would be well after our departure for the States.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m no fool. I take risks but not crazy ones. That’s how I’ve lived to be on the verge of 60.” I had been moved by the offer of his personal boat and thanked him with feeling. If the seas

stayed high as predicted, he wouldn't see me again. If they calmed I'd be back.

The next day we got up early for a swim. The sea was much calmer. I hustled to catch a bus for Muri Lagoon, guessing that my best chance would come about 10:30 that morning. The tide would turn then, with no strong current running either way. I couldn't know then that this quieter surf was a brief, providential window. Within hours the waves would be booming again.

"You're back," the jewel of a man said.

"It's calmer," I answered. "What do you think?"

"Well, it's calmer."

I asked if I needed my reef shoes. "Wear them, just in case something happens."

"If something happens, I'm staying at the Oasis Village Motel, and my passport is here in my day pack." I set the pack on a shelf.

As he had promised, he gave me his personal kayak and told me not to try entering the passage if the currents looked choppy or confused. I gave him my word on that. He was the expert.

That very small boat was another jewel. Molded cheaply out of purple plastic, nevertheless it lay very low and stable in the water. Within a few strokes I found it gracefully easy to maneuver. I was well equipped.

It was a long four kilometers or so down the lagoon to the passage. As I approached that goal, it did look almost daunting. Because of

the surf it was hard to see for sure, but the opening through the reef looked quite narrow. On both sides of that opening the big waves broke and smashed with power -- power -- across the reef into the lagoon. Clearly, if I wanted to enjoy my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday I couldn't get involved with that. But the waves did not break at that small grace of an opening.

I told myself that I would paddle slowly and carefully and just check it out. The currents were not choppy or confused. Almost before I realized it I had passed through all that thundering water, kind of like the Israelites but without the reassuring presence of Moses, into the open sea. Now to get out beyond those breakers. The swells out there were so much larger than I'd imagined, massive, high. But that little purple boat just bobbed up one side and down the other. When I felt far enough out to be out of danger from the surf, I slowed enough to feel one of the most thrilling moments of my life.

This was not a time for playful taunts. It was a time for reverence, gratitude, and awe. In that tiny boat, not so much longer than my outstretched legs, I felt the primal, immense, kinetic power of the great mother sea. I could probably survive if I bowed to that power and tried to work with it, but not if I opposed it.

Despite the majestic scale of the rollers, it was actually pretty safe on the open sea, as long as I headed directly into the swells and didn't get caught by the strong contrary wind. I had never before paddled a kayak more than a few hundred feet. What a splendid craft this one was.

What happened then was unplanned and spontaneous, prompted by a thought of my mom. I found myself calling out in a loud voice

to my ancestors. I called them one by one, beginning with my mother's native name. "Pappuaannah Musomon Aatteiio, Mother, I'm doing this for you!" Kielo her brother, my uncle; Licao her long dead son, my brother; Manaku and Jeannette, my grandparents; Petao and Rosita, my great-grandparents -- one by one I addressed my dead Pacific kin to let each know that I was there on the ocean for her or for him. Then I addressed all of the generations I do not know, all the way back. The shamans say we can heal back seven generations. Why not all of them?

Then I called to my dead American kin, one by one: Brother Chris, Sister Beulah, Father Einar.

My Danish ancestors had been seafarers too. I named every Kolvig I could remember, back to Great-great-great-Grandfather Frederick Abraham Kolvig, who died at sea in 1819, age 34, saving another man's life. The boat with two aboard capsized a mile from land. A passing boat came to help. When they were going to take Frederick, he shouted, "Take Anders. He can't swim!" He was a good swimmer and reached the capsized boat and clung to the keel. When they hauled him onboard, he was dead from hypothermia. "I am here especially for you, ancestor Frederick Abraham Kolvig." Then I addressed all of the paternal generations I do not know.

Finally I called to myself. "I am here for myself too, here not to die but to live. I am alive, and I am the living vehicle for those I love who are not alive. I am here for us all."

It was a good spontaneous ceremony. It climaxed and fulfilled my journey to find a land and water, with their people, I could call home. All my life I have been an outsider, crouching warily in the twilight margins beyond the firelight of my culture. I could not

stand in the center of a people and place marred by genocide, slavery, empire, and greed.

There on those massive swells of the open sea, just outside the passage to the lagoon and the Polynesian land beyond it, I floated in the center of something, in the center, in the heart where I could belong.

In the end I know that I belong only to emptiness. But something earthly in the heart longs to belong to something earthly in this world, even if it is only an illusion and a dream. The something in me chose there.

It had to be brief. I had known from the beginning that the greatest danger of this little jaunt would lie in the return. I could not afford to wear out my energy on the open sea. The passage had been obvious and clear from the lagoon. From out there at sea, bobbing from top to trough of those high rollers, it seemed like threading a needle with off-and-on sight. If I mistook the place there would not be a second chance.

It had been quite simple to point straight out into those big waves. But running before them, when I could not see them coming, was different and harder. Each one picked up the little kayak and thrust it forward toward the lagoon.

I knew from whitewater canoeing that I needed to move faster than the water in order to maneuver the boat. If coming out had been careful and slow, going back in had to be a dash. The big swells carried me swiftly. I paddled hard. My mind felt preternaturally alert and concentrated, watching the breakers crashing on the reef and



gazing for that narrow place where they did not break. Remember to breathe!

Somehow it worked. Once I reached the safety of the lagoon, I stopped to collect. Unconsciously I had been gripping the kayak paddle so hard that every knuckle hurt sharply as I pried off each hand.

High tide had passed. All the water in the lagoon was rushing toward the passage to get out. Paddling for about four kilometers against that current and a headwind was a bear of an effort and an anticlimax. This old body was ready to stop when I finally reached the kayak rental.

“I’m glad you’re back,” the jewel of a man said. “I was worried for you.”

“If you were worried, then what a gift you gave when you gave me your own kayak. If I had been lost, you might have lost your boat.”

He wanted to charge me only ten dollars NZ. I gave him more. He would never know all that I had just received thanks to him.

Another islander there said in a friendly way, “You know, people go out there and don’t come back.”

“It was a reasonable risk, and I’m glad I took it.”

Then I, Eric, son of Pappuaannah Musomon Aatteiio and in that moment a warrior worthy of my kin, bowed to my noble lavender barque on the beach and walked to the road to meet the bus. I looked forward to a good rest and a cold Cook’s Lager. As the bus

approached I couldn't help peering to see who was at the wheel. If it was The Polynesian God, this would be a perfect day.

February 2005

Love, Eric



JUNE 2, 2024 #2

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Honoring a Life: Castello on My Mind*

Dear friends,

My plan for these memoir-sketches has been to share four big physical adventures and then some internal adventures: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

Here's a little adventure. I wrote it with the title "Brag" for friends as a kind of spoof. For others the climb I describe is minor exercise. For me then it was a risky big deal because by then my lungs were dying.

For three years in my late twenties and early thirties I lived and worked in Florence. Three years was long enough for Italy to feel like home, and it has remained a beloved home in my memory. I have loved Italy with 50 years of devotion. At the last possible moment for it, in September 2022 I traveled back to Italy in order to say goodbye. My friend Pez made that visit possible. I needed a minder to lead me to the right track in the train station and to organize care if I collapsed. Pez was a minder extraordinaire and a wonderful companion. "Tell me," she said, "when you're annoyed with me." I never was. It was a trip where everything worked right.

The adventure's coming, but first let me share something else. We spent all three weeks of our trip in one place, Varenna on Lake Como near the Swiss border. I chose this small town because it has the lake in front and a mountain behind — no room for growth or sprawl. Most of its “streets” are stone stairs or pedestrian walkways. It's also very old, a Roman town. Its main church, San Giorgio, sits comfortably on the spot where the Roman temple once stood.

One morning I was having coffee on the main piazza or square with a nice view of beautiful, 14<sup>th</sup>-century San Giorgio. I realized that this piazza has been the civic and religious center of Varenna for thousands of years. A few love letters back I wrote about expanding into old age and death. In that piazza, which is unlike any place I could find in my own country, my heart expanded into a light, pleasant trance. I watched people walking across that space, some hurrying, some strolling. Then I “saw” people hurrying and strolling in that same place through centuries — 30, 40, 50 generations — same human bodies, different clothes. What usually seems so solid in the moment dissolved into a dream-reality. I was a ghost watching ghosts.

Words of the Buddha came to mind:

See all this passing world  
as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,  
a flash of lightning in a summer cloud,  
a flickering lamp, a phantom,  
a shadow, a rainbow,  
and a dream.

Brag

Dear ones,

Mind if I brag a little?

From the day we arrived here in Varenna, I've had Castello on my mind.

COULD I get up there? No, what am I thinking, with the whole system gradually on its way out? Well, maybe if I took all day? No, that's just pazzo ("crazy," but a much more dramatic descriptive word than ours when the Italians pronounce it: "che pazzo!"). But I could try. I could die trying, which would be a fine, heroic-ish, and characteristically Eric way to go.

So today I decided. My phone can take pictures but is useless here for communication. I gathered provisions, screwed up resolve.... and went.

Here's what we're talking about. Can you see the castle on the height above the town? THAT.

I took the path on the left, very steep in places. Slowly, heavens so slowly. Mindfulness and concentration helped. Could it happen? Yes. It was the Matterhorn for terminal lungs. Hell no, it was K2 for terminal lungs.

When I got up there, I was surrounded by eerie, haunting figures. I figured out that they were Death's agents come to collect the ripe old one with the hiking stick. Too bad, mopey suckers, not this time!

The beer at the cafe up there was refreshing and well-earned, but it didn't help overcome fatigue and a body all seized up from auto-elder abuse. I stumbled down the right side, bunged up and satisfied.

And now, let's see: Mix a Campari spritz? Aperol and prosecco? Or pour a glass of Chianti?

Love,  
Eric





**JUNE 16, 2024**

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Honoring a Life: Intellect*

Dear friends,

The last time someone counted, Laconia, New Hampshire, where I live, was home to 17,086 people. For ten days each June about 300,000 visitors descend upon those 17,086 souls for Motorcycle Week, now in its 101<sup>st</sup> year. It thrilled me as a child in the 1950s.

Last year I lived through Motorcycle Week at home. I live near Winnepesaukee, a very big lake whose length runs east to west. This means that no one can drive north/south for its 21-mile length. All the traffic on the south side of the lake has to drive on just one road, which lies about 30 feet from the deck of my home. Hundreds of thousands of motorcycles 30 feet away! Constant! Mufflers be damned! Oh, was my equanimity ever challenged last June. This was good practice, which is technically known among us Buddhists as an AFGO, another fucking growth opportunity. I grew.

A continuous stream from those 300,000 visitors is roaring 30 feet from my deck as I write these words in calm quiet. My beloved partner Marc has come to me from Flagstaff, Arizona, where he lives. Marc and I are spending ten days together far from Laconia,

at Crescent Lake. We are staying in a beautifully-preserved lake cottage from the 1920s. So peaceful! At this moment as darkness comes on, it feels like a heaven realm, this blessed lake. For the first time in many years I have heard here the haunting cry of a loon.

And having fled cacophonous chaos for gracious peace, I am now able to write this love letter to you.

Can you remember a quick turning point in your life? Before that moment your life was on a distinct track. After that moment your life pivoted onto a new track. That instant when I was filling out the pre-physical questionnaire for the draft and spontaneously answered “yes” about having sex with a man, was such a moment — utter change from one life direction to a different one.

Another of those moments came to me in the early spring of 1959, when I was a thirteen-year-old eighth grader at Laconia Junior High School. Our home room teacher announced that nearby Tilton School was offering a scholarship competition.

I didn't even know what a prep school was. If it was offering scholarships, it had to be better than Laconia High School. Something bold in me told my mother that I would need a ride to Tilton on a Saturday. I took a standardized test. Then I needed a ride on another Saturday so that Tilton School's headmaster and I could interview each other and negotiate a scholarship. I then announced to my family that I was going away to a boarding school on a full scholarship.

Who knows what bold thing prompted me to apply? Several decades later I have probably figured out what that bold thing is. More about that later. For now let me give you some sense of the track I

was on before this life-changing turning point took me somewhere else. We were very poor working class. Until I was eight there was no shower or tub; we bathed, such as it was, standing in front of the kitchen sink. Alcohol kept our family in unpredictable misery. My parents divorced when I was ten.

Laconia then was a gritty factory town set in natural beauty. My family and my town were both dead ends for me. By going off to boarding school, I was leaving both behind. Even if I hadn't gone away, I probably would not have gone full-tilt into self-destruction like my sister and my brother. Learning and addiction do not mix well because learning requires a clear mind. I always knew that my brain would be my ticket out.

Our group of scholarship boys cut a swathe through Tilton School. The place gave us much and asked much of us, and we delivered. I emerged with an excellent academic foundation.

Only one thing left a shadow on my four years at Tilton School, something that has gotten me into trouble repeatedly through my life: fierce resistance to authority embedded itself in my spirit in reaction to my angry and sometimes violent father. The school had a public speaking requirement for seniors. I waited until almost the last minute. As graduation approached I chose to lead chapel, which was held every weekday evening. That school year I and others had organized to remove the compulsory nature of chapel because it forced Jews, Catholics, atheists, and agnostics to attend what was explicitly a Protestant Christian service, thereby violating our First Amendment right to freedom of religion. The school's administration and board of directors refused to drop required chapel.

I chose to meet the requirement for public speaking by introducing a recording of the actor and Beat poet John Brent reading his poem “Bibleland.” Brent wrote the poem in response to someone’s plan to build a theme park like Disneyland based on the Bible. Here are some fragments from the poem that have stuck in my memory. They will give you the gist, but don’t count on accuracy.

*Take the Golgotha Express train ride right up Calvary Hill and view the full-size replica of Christ on the cross, which contorts on the hour! Bumper car through the Stations of the Cross! Pull the hidden string and hang Judas Iscariot! See “Tarzan of the Jungle Meets Jehovah, Desert God of Vengeance” in Color Dynamic, Sound-Sational, and real Smell-o-Mazo 657!*

Some faculty walked out. The headmaster convened an emergency faculty meeting. Many teachers argued for expelling me. The school’s chaplain saved my butt by arguing that the poem could have been written by a devout Christian offended by the idea of Bibleland.

Where to go to college? I applied to three places: Harvard because it was Harvard; Dartmouth because it was in northern New England, my home turf, and because it owned its own ski area; and Middlebury, in northern New England, with its own ski area, and, above all, with women. At that time Harvard and Dartmouth were all-male. I had gone to an all-male secondary school. In college I needed to be among women.

Middlebury College turned out to be ideal for me. In winter I scheduled classes in the morning and skied in the afternoon; forged deep friendships, many of them lifelong, including one with a teacher; learned as much or more from my peers as I did from my teachers;

and soaked up as much learning as I could, first as a history major, then as an English major.

The place desperately needed to modernize, and I helped. An elite group, the Blue Key Society, oversaw silly, demeaning freshman hazing. I vowed to myself that if stayed at the place, I would abolish freshmen hazing. In two years I was elected to Blue Key and engineered abolition. Vietnam was just starting to heat up when I arrived at Middlebury in 1963 to find a two-year ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps) requirement for all men, complete with uniforms, shiny shoes, and rifles. ROTC class had crude anti-Communist propaganda. I did one year. Then the fifteen top men in the sophomore class announced that we were boycotting the second year of ROTC. The college had three years to abolish the requirement or have their best male students fail to graduate. Eventually, and in time for us, Middlebury kicked ROTC off campus.

In my junior year through no merit of my own, I became the most prominent student at the college. In that year we students voted to abolish our Mickey Mouse student government. Only one student entity, the Student Educational Policy Committee, a small thing doing good work for the college, had not been part of the student government. Suddenly we were the only student entity left standing, and I as its chair was the only student with any standing to speak for the whole student body. Oy! Among other accomplishments I called what was probably the first boycott of classes since the college began in 1800. It lasted one day; it was about curricular reform; and it was successful.

I graduated Phi Beta Kappa and magna cum laude, with a prize for being the best student of English. That left me free to go anywhere

for graduate school. The college's finest gift to me had been splendid friendships. There were two other important gifts. One was that Middlebury College embraced me as a meritocracy. Though I was still very poor, scraping by with summer earnings and survivor's checks from Social Security, I never experienced classism. Middlebury at that time was second only to the University of Virginia for the highest proportion of students from rich families. My fellow students embraced me for my gifts. Thus did I shed any embarrassment over the poverty of my beginnings and of my present, and thus throughout my life I treated everyone without class prejudice.

Finally, college gave me my intellectual awakening. As a sophomore I slick-talked my way into a Shakespeare seminar open only to juniors and seniors and taught by a brilliant professor. I loved Shakespeare, and I realized that I loved in two ways: esthetic love for beautiful language; and also love for ideas. Ideas excite me. They give me pleasure. Just a couple of months ago, in the darkening twilight of my life, I came upon an idea, new to me, about European history, a mega-concept that connected and illuminated several other concepts. I got so aroused! I had a calling.

If sufficient health allows it, the next love letter will finish some thoughts about the role of intellect in my life. In the meantime, may you enjoy the miracle of breath.

Love,  
Eric



JUNE 22, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*The Only Thing that Matters*

Dear friends,

On Tuesday a hospice nurse with 30 years' practice with the dying came to see me. Based on what she could see, she felt that I will transition soon — “transition” being the euphemism of choice in the hospice industry. She may be mistaken, of course, but for now I defer to her expert judgment and experience.

You and I have been good for each other here in our little corner of Caring Bridge. None of us could have predicted what we have made together here. For me, your love has made the difficult easier. And I think that for you my love and my words have also made the difficult easier. Thank you — thank you lots — for your serendipitous gift of friendship and love to each other and to me.

If these were the last words I would write to you, what would they be? The words are oh so familiar, quickly read and easily forgotten. But I repeat them anyway because they describe the way to freedom. I have a terminal illness. If I accept what I cannot change, I do not suffer about this illness. In fact, I do not suffer about it. I live near a large, beautiful lake. It would be wonderful to paddle my



sea-worthy kayak out around the islands and to swim in the clear, deep waters of Lake Winnepesaukee. That cannot happen. I accept and do not suffer.

I will probably die soon without seeing the outcome of a grave challenge to our democracy and to our constitution. I accept and do not suffer. (From an expanded view, I feel optimism for you with this challenge because I know that all people deep down want to be free. Substitute “freedom” for “peace” in these words from President Eisenhower: “I think that people want peace so much that one of these days government had better get out of their way and let them have it.”)

For most of my life I have had a body that people have seen as desirable. Now this body is misshapen, grossly overweight. Its legs are swollen, with its lower legs covered with sores. I do my best to accept this body as it is. That’s the hardest thing for me to accept. I mostly succeed, so I am mostly free from suffering over this condition that I cannot change.

Isn’t it all pretty obvious? If you cannot change the circumstance, accept whatever is unpleasant to you, and you will not suffer. Allow what you love to pass away. We have to practice — again, and again, and again. If you’re suffering, it means you want something. Let the wanting go, and watch the suffering go with it. Loss is certain. Accept loss if it can’t be changed, and by your acceptance you free yourself from suffering. Identify what you fear most. Imagine what you fear most is actually happening and you cannot change it. Imagine that you accept, even a little, the thing you fear most as it happens. Notice how the fear lessens, and how your suffering lessens.

Does what I write here make sense to you? It's not theoretical. It really works. I see every day that it works. This is all you need to know in order to experience freedom today, tomorrow, always.

Love, Eric

PS. If you would like to have something to remember me by, please consider using the thin little bumper sticker, "Be Good to People," which is also the name of the web page where the stickers are sold. I have one on the back of my car, one on the back of my iPad case, and one on the back of my bike seat. Use it as a reminder to let be whatever you can't change. There is no better way to be good to yourself. By the way, I'm pretty sure that this bumper sticker in my back window, plus the white hair, twice spared me a speeding ticket. My last and only speeding ticket was in May 1965. That's 59 years without a speeding ticket! I speed all the time. What, me worry?



JUNE 28, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

*Intellect 2*

Dear friends,

Warning. This love letter is more boring than the last letter.

When I learned a few days ago from a sage old nurse that I would probably start “transitioning” soon, I figured that I might have enough time for only one new love letter to write to you. So I shot my wad on the most important subject I know, how to free ourselves from suffering, “The Only Thing that Matters,” June 22, 2024.

But then -- why the hell is this pattern familiar? -- two other sage old nurses came to me with the opinion that it won't be soon. I am hereby swearing off sage old nurses. Thus what follows is not yet another last-communication-from-the-one-who-is-dying. It's just a plain old mundane account in the “Honoring a Life” series of being at Yale English in its heyday.

Now that you have been warned, if you get bored it's on you.

One little check mark with a pencil at the draft physical — unplanned, extempore — spared me the need to move to Canada.

The University of Toronto would not have been a good fit. Now after an unexpected gap year driving and biking around Europe and working as a roofer in Vermont, I moved to New Haven to see if I could hold my own at Planet Earth's most noteworthy English department.

Yale was just hard. It offered nothing like the big, warm network of loving friends I had found at Middlebury College. This was a cool professional school that felt for all the world like capitalist corporatism. You did it if you could. A lot of people couldn't, or wouldn't, do it. I have never worked so hard before or since. Luckily I had an inner resource that gave me an edge. Way back when I was five or six and just learning to write, I had the conviction that I needed to be "Dr Kolvig." I would cover pages signing my name "Dr Kolvig" or "Doctor Eric Kolvig." Maybe my five-year-old spirit guessed even then that my brain would be my ticket out. Whichever, that spirit was not going to leave Yale without that handle.

There were compensations. I came to love the chair of the English Department, who opened up the novel for me. And my most beloved mentor came right at the end of eighteen years of classwork. His name was Maynard Mack, and did he ever do honor to Shakespeare in seminar. Mack said little in class. Instead, with some magic from Prospero, his mere presence brought out our best work.

Maynard Mack gave me a gift whose significance I really learned only decades later. He began his recommendation for me with the words, "A man of splendid force, Kolvig will be..." Splendid force? Mack saw many years before I did a radiant, stable power that had nothing to do with Eric's personality or character. I came to know it as the bodhisattva.

At the time, the degrees lined up this way. The MA came after two years of coursework, the MPhil after coursework and passing the oral exam, the PhD after completing the dissertation.

The oral exam had the feel of the Spanish Inquisition. You sit facing the line-up of six members of the faculty. I had studied for six months for an exam that lasted an hour and a half, feeling extra motivation because a dear friend had flunked his oral exam.

The guy responsible for flunking my friend was six feet seven inches tall. He always filled the room. On the morning of my oral exam, a Saturday, I went out for breakfast and saw the very-tall William K. Wimsatt in the restaurant. Why is he on campus on a Saturday morning unless it's to fill the room where I'll be answering questions in about an hour? I slipped myself another hit of speed. As it turned out my friend's flunker had some other room to fill.

They asked questions about English and American literature. One question sticks in memory: What are the six important similes (a kind of metaphor) in John Milton's "Paradise Lost"? That poem in the Penguin edition is 453 pages long. We agreed on four important similes and agreed to disagree on two.

It was hell for me to find a dissertation topic. It had to be original, never treated by anyone else. I would find something good, then discover that it had been done. Finally I came up with a juicy topic I liked. It involved initiation from shamanic spirituality and also from Carl Jung's archetypes. I wrote up the proposal for the dissertation with an intellectual's love for big ideas. I was just ready to submit the proposal when the new number of Dissertation Abstracts came out. Someone at Vanderbilt had written her dissertation about the subject.

I went to the director of graduate studies and said, “Give me a subject, and I’ll do it. Otherwise, I’m outta here!” “Why don’t you go to Vanderbilt? Read the dissertation. If it’s good, you’ll need another subject. If it’s bad, you will have a subject.” A friend drove with me from New Haven, Connecticut, to Nashville, Tennessee, and back. The dissertation I found in the bowels of Vanderbilt’s library was surprisingly bad. I had a subject. That was 1972. Today you can find that very same dissertation in less time than it would take you to fill up your car’s tank for a long trip.

When we first-year students had just arrived at Yale, the chair of our department met with us. Ethically he needed to tell us that when we finished, there would be no jobs. I like probably most of the others thought that I’d get lucky. I wasn’t any luckier than others. There we were, having worked our butts off, all trained and shiny and certified, with no jobs to be had.

Then something exotic happened. Two good friends were involved in a college in Florence, and they would love to have me join them. Hell yes.

Love, Eric

FROM MARC WORTHINGTON

JULY 3, 2024

DISPATCH FROM THE FRONT

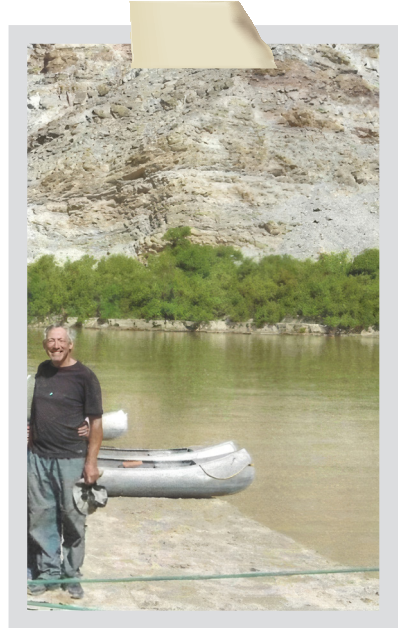
*Eric's Passing Tuesday, July 2, 2024*

As Eric used to say, hello friends .....

In the midst of our tears of love and gratitude, with sadness, overwhelm, and time distortion, we say goodbye to our loving partner and friend Eric who transitioned in the early morning hours of Tuesday July 2.

Through Sunday June 30, he was talking with friends and visiting with family. You will not be surprised to learn he tried to write a final CaringBridge post on Monday night,

less than 8 hours before death. Even at the last he had more he wanted to say and more connections he wanted to make. You may still read a version of that message in a future post, as remembered as much as can be by Christina (Luna). Luna was with him until his last breath, as was Ruby his cat.





Eric's final dying process was so rapid that Marc was unable to get to NH, and only made it as far as a Phoenix airport hotel. So rapid that helping with the CaringBridge post attempt on Monday evening was a multi-city four person effort of Sue in Flagstaff, Marc on a moving airport shuttle bus, and Eric and Luna in New Hampshire.

Words cannot convey how much it meant to him and to us to have the time with all of you through CaringBridge and other means of communication and connection. Thank you.

And so, as it turns out, all the nurses were right. He was, indeed, very close to death at the time of his second to last posting. He was, also, very strong, as other nurses noted.

Please bear and be with us as we grieve, appreciate, and reorient. Our ability to respond is challenged to say the least. More later, in this time of new endings and new beginnings.

Blessings and best wishes to you all,  
Sue and Marc



## ABOUT ERIC KOLVIG

Eric Kolvig's talks can be found on Dharma Seed:  
<https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/66/>

Eric Kolvig, Ph.D., was a Vipassana teacher whose example touched thousands of practitioners. He led meditation retreats and gave public talks around the United States and abroad. Eric emphasized “grassroots dharma,” building spiritual community in democratic, non-authoritarian ways. As a gay man, he was one of the first teachers to foster queer sanghas, and he was also one of the first teachers who was open about using Dharma to cope with severe mental illness. He co-founded wilderness retreats and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning and Intersex (LGBTQI) retreats in the Vipassana tradition. Eric served as the resident teacher for the Vipassana communities in Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Eric studied and practiced for years under the mentorship of prominent teachers at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA, and he also trained in the Zen tradition. He worked with many teachers including Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg in the lineage of

Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, and Richard Clarke in the Zen lineage of Roshi Philip Kapleau.

Eric held a Ph.D. in English from Yale University and edited a number of books on Buddhist topics. Acting from an inclusive understanding of the path to liberation, Eric worked for wholesome change in our community through compassionate action in the world.

Eric Kolvig taught from 1985 through his retirement in 2015. After retiring as a dharma teacher, he moved to rural New Hampshire

From Marc and Sue Worthington

From the years Eric, Sue, and I lived as family, we are very aware of and appreciative that Eric had a larger than life impact in this world in his presence as a Buddhist teacher; friend; LGBTQ, community, peace, and environmental activist; PTSD and depression survivor-thriver; wilderness lover, and ultimately lover of life and that which supports freedom and relieves suffering for all beings.

He brought many new and amazing people into our lives, and we are grateful. We also appreciate how Eric helped open and deepen our connections with those to whom we introduced him. It was a rich and love-filled shared journey, with many benefits to the three of us, and to others, past, present, and becoming.

## AFTERWORD

From the evening when I first encountered Eric at Mt. Cloud Zen Center in 1997 until our last conversation in June 2024, when he enthusiastically gave me tips for an upcoming trip to Sicily, I felt led by his example of love and openness. Eric embodied life fully. In his presence, I always felt empowered to take the next step in my practice and my life.

When I started reading and absorbing Eric's posts from hospice on Caring Bridge, I knew they could be a huge gift to the world, which motivated me to create this e-book. Eric gave me the go-ahead instantly and Brian Lesage immediately agreed to write the foreword. Within minutes, an idea that surfaced in my morning meditation became a reality.



Eric and Lissa on the Santa Fe River Trail 2013

Photo by Orlando Leibovitz

Lissa Reidel

# GRATITUDE

To Eric Kolvig for being sublime and for responding to the idea of an e-book with such enthusiasm.

To Leigh Brasington for inspiring me with his Dharma e-books and for ongoing technological advice.

To Brian Lesage for all your support always and for providing the beautiful foreword.

To Mark and Sue Worthington for your loving friendship, for your constant loving support of Eric and for your participation in this book.

To Sara Grant and Martha Abatuno for support and proofreading.

To the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha

