

May, 2012

Volume 12, No. 2

Intimations of Immortality: Subtle Experiences of Birth and Death*

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Overview

Many have noticed that the veil between this world and the subtle realms is thinner at and after times of birth, as well as at death. The English poet William Wordsworth worded this most worthily in his great poem "Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (1807):

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
 The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
 Hath had elsewhere its setting,
 And cometh from afar:
 Not in entire forgetfulness,
 And not in utter nakedness,
 But trailing clouds of glory do we come
 From God, who is our home:
 Heaven lies about us in our infancy.*

Almost as good is the little rhyme by George MacDonald my grandmother taught me:

*"Where do you come from, baby dear?
 Out of the everywhere, into the here."*

Over the years, I've been blessed to experience some of luminous and subtle dynamics inherent in the deaths of relatives and friends, in a phenomenally strange miscarriage, and in the conceptions, births, and early years of my partner Leslie and my children. These thinnings of the veil have strengthened my confidence in the reality of the soul's journey. They have assuaged and healed some of the grief I've felt when dear ones have died, revealing to me hints of the eternality of the Life which lives us all, containing both birth and death within its seamless oneness.

The following is a bouquet of true stories and poems, which hopefully carry some of the fragrant, ineffable scent of that mysterious oneness.

Key words: transpersonal, consciousness, psi, precognition, intuition,

I sing Grandma out to sea (1979)

Our first spring in Arkansas: I was a 30 year old VISTA volunteer in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, working as a community organizer. I slept on a mat on the floor of an older home there. One night I “woke” into a lucid dream: I was in my grandmother Helen Oelsner’s apartment in Kansas City. My brother sat wordlessly and somehow not fully consciously on her bed. Grandma and I were standing. We were looking deep into each other’s eyes - soul deep - and I was singing her a song in a language I don’t know. Perhaps as glossolalia, speaking in tongues? Perhaps in the Hebrew of her youth? The song was about setting sail on the great cosmic ocean. A stream of deep communion and what felt like blessing flowed through the two of us; then I woke up in the darkened Ft. Smith house, and had to get up to go to the bathroom. While briefly up, I checked my watch and noted the time.

In the morning, I was wakened by a phone call from my parents. They called to break the news that Grandma had died last night. Before they could say the time, I asked them if it was around the time I’d had that dream, and yes, it had happened just exactly then. My folks didn’t seem to register this when I told them, at least not consciously. I’d never dreamt of Grandma before this, as far as I can recall.

Two other memories tag along behind this one. First, during my junior year at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, Grandma came to visit me. As she sat with me in the Marcliff Hotel in Aberdeen, I experienced a subtle but distinct cracking sound of expansion in what I assume was a suture in my skull, approximate at my 3rd eye, then a clockwise swirling of energy there. It seems somehow linked to or even brought about by Grandma’s gentle presence.

Second, during my subsequent senior year in college at Oberlin, I met Griscom Morgan from Antioch College. (His father, Arthur, had founded Antioch, and was chairman and a manager of the massive Tennessee Valley Authority project).

An older man with substantial spiritual roots, Griscom invited my participation as an organizer in an educational project to help preserve rural Ohio school systems from mass consolidations to help the maintain the identity and integrity of local communities, and lessen the time and expenses of additional travel. In the course of our conversations, we spoke about being able to assist family members and others make the transition at death. I asked him what to do to help dying family members, and he turned to me with great intensity and said, “When the time comes, you will *know* just what to do.”

I get goose bumps from above my head all the way down into my scalp when I recall this conversation with Griscom. The confidence with which he spoke very likely helped to plant in me the seeds of deep awareness I would later need to help facilitate my grandmother’s free and peaceful passage from this world into the post-mortem realms.

First magical memories of fatherhood (1980-1981)

July 22, 1980:
We fast for a week
and pray, to purify.
There in the little cabin,
I feel the moment
our son’s light arrives,
at the point
of his conception.

That memory moves me
back to Leslie's sixth or seventh
month of pregnancy.
We lie down
on our bed to drowse
and for about ten minutes
I experience her body
and Adam's own curled up
inside her, as vividly
as I feel mine.
The current of awareness
circles through us,
as us.

That memory-link reminds me
of the morning after
Adam's birth. The doctors
won't dare let him nurse
until he spends about nine hours
away from us, for fear
that he might contract the infection
Leslie's developed during her long labor.
We pine for him
in our hospital room,
many sterile rooms away
from where Adam lies
in his lonely incubator.
Resting in our room,
I find myself profoundly
merged with him,
attendant on his gentle
respiration and heartbeat.
All boundaries dissolve
as my life force flows out,
to nurture our newborn.

"Ah...Buddha" (1982–1983)

Shortly after we purchased our first house in Fayetteville, several things happened there involving our son Adam.

One night in 1982, a few weeks after we moved in, I stood outside our back door next to him as he dozed in his stroller. He wasn't quite one and a half years old. As I looked at Adam's peaceful, sleeping face, I thought of angels and buddhas, and at that moment he joined his hands together in a prayerful way, making a perfect gassho (bowing respectfully with palms and fingers joined), and then returned to motionless rest.

About eight months later, while sleeping next to Adam, Leslie awakened from a funny dream in which I offered her a worm to eat. Adam woke as well, and said, "I like worms, Mom." Around this same

time, I was planning where to put up posters I had designed to publicize a workshop I was going to offer. Adam, leaning against my knee, said "Posters" all of a sudden. I'm sure I hadn't said the word out loud.

Many have noticed that infants and young children are open to subtle energies and communications. Leslie and I regularly jot down the above and other similar events in Adam's baby book. The most important to me of these incidents transpired one winter evening in 1983, as Adam and I lay side by side in our back bedroom. He was almost two years old. He was asleep; I was half awake. I suddenly sensed a malign presence float into the room from outside the house. It seemed to hover near the foot of the bed. As this occurred, Adam let go a long groan in his sleep: "Daddy...aahrr." Not wanting to wake him, I began to mentally repeat Guru Padmasambhava's potent mantra, "OM AH HUM VAJRA GURU PADME SIDDHI HUM," with nary a sound escaping my lips. As I did this, Adam said "Ah...Buddha" loudly and clearly in his sleep, and the malign feeling was immediately replaced by a beautiful feeling of liquid light.

Peace reigned. We rested. I never forgot this transformative moment, and often chanted the mantra during the next eight years.

When we invest mantras and other traditional spiritual practices with some measure of genuine faith and trust, they may help us tap into the power of our own wholeness. In 1991, I vowed to Tibetan Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche to chant the Vajra Guru mantra every day for the rest of my life. That has been a most rewarding practice.

White light, white heat (1985)

I was experimenting with long water and juice fasts. Around the end of the second week of a cleansing fast, I was present as Leslie gave birth by cesarean section to our second child, Amy Claire. We rested and blissfully bonded together for several days in our hospital room before taking her home.

We felt the sacredness that haloed Amy's birth as we relaxed "into the here" in the hospital. I was in an altered state already from my long fast. The day after our daughter's arrival, I took an afternoon nap and found myself in a highly charged condition, keenly aware that I was free in that moment to surrender identification with ego and merge with "the everywhere," the transcendental Light. I opted for that choice, and after making a brief transitional passage through deeply-held psychophysical tensions, I disappeared into sheer boundless white light for an indeterminate time. I then spontaneously "reappeared," walking through part of the hospital in my astral body, radiant and heavy with blessing, before finally returning fully to my body and my familiar human personality.

After a few minutes of absorbing the power and wonder of the mergence, I sat up and began to tell Leslie what had just happened. She said, "You have a white light around your head. I've never seen that around anyone before." Evidently, I'd come back from my sojourn beyond form "trailing clouds of glory," which were momentarily visible, at least to my generally down-to-earth, partner.

What's shakin'? (1987)

On a number of nights, I came to bed last. It's our gigantic Family Bed, with Mommy, Daddy, Adam, and Amy all aboard. On some of these late nights, when I finally hit the hay, I'd lie awake awhile before sleep and notice that the massive old futon bed was vibrating. I couldn't figure this out. The

only rational explanation would be a big street cleaner or some other heavy machinery nearby shaking our house, and with it the bed. But no mechanical sounds resounded.

After a few nights of this, I traced the mysterious shaking back to its source: Leslie's uterus! I felt a strong vibration starting there, and emanating outward evenly to the whole bed. The family slept right through it. I finally brought this up to Leslie, and was surprised to learn that she'd noticed the bed vibrating, too. I said, "Leslie, we'd better really watch our birth control. It feels to me like there's a soul wanting to come in here."

Not absolutely knowing this was so, we took a cautious course, adding extra safety precautions. But Leslie got pregnant anyway. The day the test came back positive, we two (now three) sat outside in the front yard and had a thorough discussion about the pluses and the minuses of bringing a third child into the world. We wanted this baby to be totally wanted, so we began to talk seriously, in order to air and hopefully to clear any resistances (mainly mine) to having a third child. Right after we had voiced all of our negative concerns, Leslie suddenly stood up, rushed upstairs to the bathroom, and effortlessly miscarried.

We wondered if the soul that vibrated us and later was physically conceived against all contraceptive odds, had then responded to our reservations by voluntarily departing. We ached and grieved and then moved on. We never felt the Family Bed vibrate that way again.

My father's prescient prophecy (1996–1997)

We had celebrated Christmas at my parents' home in Shawnee Mission, Kansas, and now as I followed Leslie and our two children out the door, my father bid a disconcerting last goodbye to me: "Goodbye, Geoff. You know, I might die and you'll get all I have." I was utterly surprised. Dad was in good health as far as any of us knew. I turned around, re-entered the house and put my arms around him, saying, "Dad, I hope it will be a long time before that happens. I love you." Then we left. But I couldn't shake myself loose from the queasy feeling that I got from Dad's last words.

This turned out to be the final time I ever saw my father, Geoffrey A. Oelsner, Sr., in the flesh. He died of an abrupt heart attack just after finishing dinner with my mother in Phoenix, Arizona in March of 1997. In retrospect, I recall how he took me to see his lawyer and good family friend during that same Christmas visit, to better my understanding of some complexities of his estate. Did Dad have some presentiment of his passing? If so, he never discussed it with my mother.

Yes, that prescient moment at my parents' door was the last time Dad and I met in the flesh, but quite possibly *not* the final time we ever got together. That's a cherished story for another occasion.

John Locke dies as I try to reach him (2000)

My friend, Dr. John R. Locke, was the Founder and Director of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Arkansas. A tremendously popular teacher beloved by many in our community, he also was a scholarly author, a translator of Rilke and other poets, himself a poet, and a dedicated practitioner of Buddhist meditation. John was a man of manifold sensitivities, and a mentor to many younger people like me.

I rarely called him, but on August 28, 2000, I felt a strong urge to be in touch, and phoned his number at the University of Arkansas. I was greeted by a secretary in the office who told me in a hushed,

greatly agitated tone that John was in his office with a student advisee. At this point, I heard a gun shot. As far as I've been able to determine, this was the second time the student fired on John. The third shot killed him.

Moments later, the disturbed student turned his gun on himself, and blew himself away with two more bullets. The entire campus community and John's large circle of friends were shocked and deeply grieved. I was asked to present a eulogy for him at the memorial service, which gave me the opportunity to share some of his poetry. I subsequently penned a poem for Dr. Locke myself, an exact transcription of a dream-vision in which I saw the poem as a lofty, luminous tree with a column of words superimposed upon its ascending trunk. I clearly heard these words intoned at the same time that I read them. The poem is a meditation on the unbroken continuity of life and death, and the Wholeness that holds them both.

Dream tree poem

In Memory of John Locke

*This is written as a tree
completely swathed in gauzy
energy rears its bare limbs
and climbs up through the filmy
blue solution of the sky.
In this kinetic photograph,
the nimbus round the branches
flames like ever-burning fuel.
A narrative is heard that's
also written, consonantal with
the plunge of tree trunk,
thus: "In friends, the Higher
Life is fed by those who die,
and that life lasts as
it adds life to all those
friends who still live on.
Can the tree itself be
strengthened by the joy in
this exchange? I don't know,
but..." Here the words fade
out, but in the living image
"those who die" are present
as dead branches on the tree.
The whitish incandescence
licks round them undiminished
on the page. Then suddenly
the dream's completely gone,
leaving only
native joy.*

My brother dies (2003)

I fell asleep and was suddenly caught up in a semi-lucid dream state in headlong, panicked flight from church to church in what seemed to be downtown Kansas City. I looked in through church windows, then rapidly flew on. I even peered through the window of a Buddhist place of worship. (Some months later, I actually saw this building, which houses the Rime Buddhist Center in downtown Kansas City.) I was fearful, propelled forward by forces beyond my understanding. I ended up floating near the ceiling of a large, dark, musty room, thinking that this must be what it's like to be a confused, earthbound ghost.

Another baffling aspect of this dream experience involved a struggle to breathe, which began to make sense to me when I learned the next morning from my mother that at the time I had the dream, my brother choked in his sleep - a combination of sleep apnea and congestive heart failure - then fell out of bed and died on the floor of his apartment in Kansas City.

I was left with questions: Had I taken on some of the distress he experienced while dying? Was this highly unusual dream in any way helpful to him? I hadn't known my brother was about to die, but I had sensed the possibility as much as two or three weeks prior. We had spoken on the phone less than a week before his death, and at that time, he said, "I love you," to me three times, with extreme sweetness as we told each other goodbye. That turned out to be our very last goodbye.

Two vehicles, bumper to bumper, abandoned by two women drivers (2004)

I was considering a trip to California, and as I usually do before making plane reservations and other travel plans, I sought inner guidance about the rightness of my timing. I fell asleep and dreamt I was driving on a freeway in a big yellow school bus, chugging along in the fast lane. Then I had to stop quickly, and did, just in time to avert a collision with two cars, abandoned, bumper to bumper, which I somehow knew had been driven by two women who left them there.

I woke and my interpretation of the dream was: take it easy on this trip - that is, stay out of the fast lane! I figured my anima would appreciate the slowed-down pace of a good vacation. But first, before I went traipsing off west, Leslie and I decided to visit my mother in Kansas City. We packed and got ready to go, and right then Mom called us to report that my dear cousin Gerda was in the hospital, most likely hours from death. The timing was striking; we were able to instantly hop in the car and drive up to Kansas City. I met my mother at the hospital. Gerda's eyes were glazed, but she saw that I'd arrived. A smile played on her lips, then she closed her eyes as I began to slowly stroke her brow over and over again with great tenderness. I was inviting her to rest, and to let go. My mother sat there watching as I stroked Gerda's brow like this for about an hour.

Gerda never opened her eyes again. When Mom and I went out to get some lunch, she quietly died. My mother's final obligation to Gerda is completed, but now she was dreading all the stressful work a funeral entails. I offered to say a brief five-minute eulogy at Gerda's funeral, but to my surprise Mom said, intensely, "No! At least twenty minutes!" This would take a lot of work to pull together, but I recalled an interview that I'd taped with Gerda a few years back about her childhood in Posnen, Poland. Once back home in Arkansas, I listened to the interview and crafted a thoughtful, heartfelt eulogy at least twenty minutes long.

I was oddly agitated, anxious the whole week prior to the funeral service. At one point, I broke down in tears and told Leslie, "When my mother dies, I don't want to be the one to do the eulogy for her." I couldn't account for how stressed I felt. My mother was very wrought up about all the little details to be

dealt with, as well. During the same week, our daughter Amy found a button that read “I Love Grandma” near her college dorm, and drew the button in a doodle in her journal. And one of Amy’s closest friends dreamt that she was crying over the loss of a relative.

The day arrived (Friday the 13th) and off we went to Beard’s Funeral Chapel, where my father’s, then my brother’s services had been held as well. Mourners arrived, and I soon rose and began to speak. I voiced my appreciation of my mother’s care for Gerda in a few well-chosen sentences early in the talk, and speaking on, was just barely aware as Mom left the room. I was so focused on carrying out her wishes that I was again only peripherally aware when a little later Leslie also left the room, along with one other woman whose name I don’t know.

As I concluded the eulogy, Leslie re-entered the chapel and said, “Geoff, you’d better come with me, something’s happened to your mother.” I quickly walked back to a little side room where the unknown woman (who turned out to be a nurse) attended to my mom, whose color was very pale. Mom saw me, then just after that, exactly as with Gerda the week before, she shut her eyes, and never opened them again. The ambulance arrived and took her to the hospital emergency room, where tests were taken and a kindly, honest doctor told us that she’d suffered a massive stroke and had about an hour to live.

We were given a curtained-off area. I’d never pictured being with my relatives at any of their deaths, except my mom. I stroked her forehead and told her that she could let go. The doctor told me she very probably could hear, though not respond, and since this would be her last unmet concern, I reassured her that we’d find a good home for Tenzy, her little Lhasa Apso Terrier. Phone calls weren’t supposed to be allowed in this quiet space, but suddenly a phone rang by my mother’s bed, and a friend who Leslie had briefly contacted with the news about my mother called to say a home’s been found for Tenzy. We didn’t know why or how the hospital let that call through, but we shared the news with Mom. Her last obligation was met! Soon she passed peacefully - the second woman to leave her earthly vehicle - so soon, so close behind the previous one, my cousin Gerda.

Many people have noticed a proliferation of synchronicities and signs of communication with the “other side,” both prior to and after someone passes away. Leslie and I experienced additional synchronicities in the days after Mom’s death. We also received a distinct sense of her presence: As Leslie sat with my mother’s body, she saw a kind of mandala of my mother and father ice-skating joyfully around in a circle, finally reunited. Soon after, she learned that my parents always loved skating together. In the evening after Mom’s death, I had a vision of her gazing into my eyes, which was followed by a near-lucid dream in which I found myself in a rarified, high alpine setting. The earth there was covered with crystals emanating rainbow light. We found some solace and inspiration in these apparent intuitions of reunion and presence.

Conclusion

The confidence-building experiences shared in these poems and stories have been instrumental in my own development and personal healing process. And, they have made it easier for me to bring healing, caring, centered attention to the dying, and indeed to people at every stage of the human life cycle, from the intrauterine phase onwards.

**From the book *A Country Where All Colors Are Sacred and Alive, A Memoir of Non-Ordinary Experience and Collaboration with Nature* by Geoffrey Oelsner, Lorian Press, 2012)*

Geoff Oelsner began writing stories, songs, and poetry at the age of 14. As a licensed certified social worker in private practice of psychotherapy in Fayetteville Arkansas, Geoff also utilizes poetry therapy and music therapy. He is committed to sharing the healing and inspirational power of poetry, music, and story with the community.

His new book is *A Country Where All Colors Are Sacred and Alive, A Memoir of Non-Ordinary Experience and Collaboration with Nature*. Everett, Washington: Lorian Press, 2012.

www.lorianpress.com



To see Geoff's poetry, and to hear all his recorded songs at no charge, you can visit his website at www.geoffoelsner.com

A long time environmental activist and researcher, Geoff is presently involved in several environmental initiatives, including the Psi-Sci Alliance project, which brings together established climate scientists with highly qualified intuitives to innovate new approaches to addressing and ameliorating climate change.

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