

## BEING MORTAL RETREAT — Essays, Week II

*Pir Elias Amidon © Sufi Way*

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### *Quietness*

Say you wake up one morning and notice that something is different about you. There's a beautiful quietness *inside* your body that you haven't felt before. It seems to emanate from the middle of your chest, a clear quietness opening from your heart area, filling the entire volume of your body. You sense how your skin envelopes this silence, but inwardly it seems to be without limit. The quietness disappears into the depths your body without coming to a boundary.

It's an unfamiliar feeling but not alarming; it has a peaceful and spacious quality to it. So you sit in a chair and allow the inward quietness to have its way with you. You notice that you can't really stand outside of the quietness to look at it — it takes up the whole interior of your body. There's no place for you to be except within the quietness and pervaded by it.

Your attention is drawn to the boundary of the quiet where it touches the inside of your skin. You feel how this inner silence defines the shape of your body. And then an extraordinary thing happens. The quietness within you seems to open right through your skin and expand outwardly, or perhaps it's just the opposite: the quietness of space outside your body instantaneously meets the quietness you feel inside. You are within the quietness and simultaneously held by it. Encompassed.

Although it's purely intimate with you, you sense the quietness also has a numinous feel of *otherness* to it. You *are* it while at the same time it's infinitely beyond you. Your private experience as a sensate body and distinct person arises within it and is somehow an expression of its vast, silent, and indefinable presence.

As you sit there experiencing all this, you feel a great tenderness — the quiet that pervades you and encompasses you is alive with a kind of tender warmth, though not a warmth of temperature. It's intimate and dear and tender and not even approachable by these words. You feel safe.

After some time you get up from your chair and begin to attend to the necessities of the morning. At first the presence of the boundless, intimate, and safe quiet is still palpable to you — it's everywhere as you move around and as normal sounds and sensations occur. Its intimacy unites

with the phenomena of the world around you — you are within everything while at the same time you remain your unique bodily experience.

The sense of tenderness pervades your awareness of the people and things you encounter. When you touch something, a button on your shirt, a piece of toast, a cup of coffee, your touch seems to come from the tender quiet you have recognized. When you listen to someone speaking, and when you speak, the words seem to come from and be held by the same tender quiet. The sense of safety makes you gentle and unhurried.

Later, when you realize the world's noises and your own thoughts and feelings have obscured the all-pervading quiet, you start to feel annoyed with yourself and with the people around you for taking the quietness away.

That's when a second extraordinary thing happens. As you notice your annoyance, you see it for what it is. You see it's given you a position from which to complain. The moment you feel the constraint of that position, you experience yourself outside it, as if you no longer needed to care whether the quiet has been obscured or not. You relax. The feeling that you're missing something falls away, and in that instant, glory be, the tender quietness opens from your heart again as if it never left.

## *Autumn Light*

*for Pierre Delattre*

Walking through a park you pass an old man sitting on a bench. He's watching children out on the grass playing and tumbling in the fallen leaves. You see the wrinkles and lines in his old face as you pass. What kind of life carved those lines? Hieroglyphics of stories even he probably can't remember. On a whim you sit on a bench down the path across from him, and wait.

You wonder about him. He just sits there watching the children, or looking up into the trees. You wonder what he's thinking. Is he thinking? Maybe not. Does he have ambitions? Does he make plans?

A little breeze scatters leaves along the path, and more leaves flutter down from the branches to join them. You wonder what it's like to be old. You decide to pretend you're as old as he is, with the majority of your life behind you — just another old person on a bench in a park somewhere on an autumn afternoon.

You imagine first that being old must feel a little cranky, that you'll be annoyed that your youth has passed and that your body hurts and no one cares about you. But then you look over at the old man and notice he has a slight smile on his lips. He doesn't look cranky, if anything he looks contented.

So you try feeling that way, contented. You put the same slight smile on your lips. You look lazily out across the park. A thought comes up about your next appointment but you know the appointment is still two hours from now, plenty of time, and you already know what needs to be accomplished when the time comes. Other thoughts float by but you're an old person now and you just pretend those thoughts don't matter. They're not really interesting anyway.

You invite yourself to feel fine just sitting there with nothing needing to be done. Just sitting, enjoying the autumn light sifting through the trees. At first it feels a little odd, this sitting quietly without the familiar pressure of wanting to distract yourself or get the next thing done. But you keep on with the experiment, letting yourself feel old, contented and at ease.

And then something extraordinary happens, all by itself. You couldn't explain it if you tried. It's as if the space *between* things goes right *through* things, right through you and the park and the old man and the children playing. You sense a spaciousness and closeness that's so familiar it feels like it's you, and yet it's everywhere, completely empty of anything and yet full of everything at the same time. And the autumn light is just the same — the slant of the sun seems like it's passing through your body and through the trees and the ground, as if everything is transparent even though everything's right here too.

And there's something else, something even more intimate. The familiar place that's felt like the "you" inside of you, the you behind your eyes, the place of you that agrees with itself and quarrels with itself and makes judgments about everything, that place is suddenly so sweetly quiet and wide open and transparent too, just like space. You've never felt anything like this before. There's an expansiveness everywhere that's so vast and at the same time so intimate and lovely. It feels like you're in love with everything! Your heart has burst open. The enormity of what you're feeling is so unexpected and beautiful that you wonder if you're going crazy.

You look down the path at the old man on his bench and see he's looking at you. He winks.

## *Love and Death*

Lying there, looking up at the doctor and your next of kin, you grow uncomfortable with their concerned faces. You close your eyes so they will think you need to rest. You hear them back out of the room and the soft click of the door. You can still hear them speaking out in the hall, most of the words indecipherable except for the doctor's, who you distinctly hear say, "It won't be long now."

It sounds like a line from a movie you saw once — *it won't be long now* — but this time it's about you. Ah, so this is my deathbed. The words form again in your mind, "my death-bed," and again, "my death-bed," as if repeating them will make you believe it's true. My time has come. A quiver of fear — or is it excitement? — flashes in your stomach, but it doesn't last. You lie there without moving. It's quiet in your room. You're thankful they brought you home; the hospital with its noises and interruptions is not a good place to die.

You feel wide-awake, but as you cast your mind over the history of your life, letting images from different periods arise, you fall into a half-dream state and drift. Gradually you sense a presence close to you, although no one has come into the room. It's not a presence you can identify, but it feels somehow familiar. Kind. Is it an angel? It's asking you something. You strain to hear it, and then the words become clear.

"Have you loved well?" it asks. That's all, nothing more.

You hear the question echoing down the corridors of your life, doors opening on moments you're sure bear witness to your failure to love. You know this feeling, this old feeling of unworthiness, of having failed somehow. No, I haven't loved well, certainly not well enough, good God all the times I was self-preoccupied instead of loving, impatient instead of gentle, oh God...

You feel the weight of judgment — your own, the angel's, God's — fall on you like shovelfuls of earth, darkening and compressing against you. You strain to breathe. But now in the darkness you sense something else — at first it's faint, then unmistakable — it's the smell of earth, the smell of soil in a garden where you once knelt, the dark, loamy, sweet smell of fertile soil breathing into you. How lovely it is!

Now chinks of light appear beneath you — it's strange, there's light beneath you and you feel yourself falling into it, but suddenly everything turns around and what felt like down a moment ago is now up, and you're looking up into blue sky and as you breathe it feels like you're breathing in the whole wide sky, clear and fresh. How lovely it is!

There are a few puffy white clouds balanced in the sky, precious against the blue. Two birds glide over the landscape. You hear leaves whispering in the trees. So beautiful!

Now you are walking. There's the familiar stride of your body along the path, confident that it knows how to adjust each step around the small stones and the tilt of the ground. You remember this, how beautiful it is to walk, to feel yourself glide along past the trunks of trees, how lovely it is!

Suddenly it all becomes clear to you: the enormous gift your life has been, all the moments given you to love — the wonder of it! — to have received this chance to breathe this air, to walk in this body on the earth. Gratitude wells up in your heart: Oh yes, I have loved this!

Now you are no longer walking, now images as real as life are passing through you, images from your earliest memories, flashes of wonder in your child eyes, your mother picking you up, oh! riding your bike through leaves fluttering down around you, the images that come are as numerous as those falling leaves, tying your shoelace for the first time and looking up smiling, holding your first friend's hand, kissing, that feeling of soft lips kissing yours, two hearts kissing, how I have loved this! And each tender, shy love I have taken in my arms, each one, each one loved, longed for, each one! Images of love pour through you in a great current of gratitude, alleluias of white birds flying up, images of stairways, carrying groceries, cooking dinner, children playing under the table, their laughter and nonsense talk, oh how I have loved this! And laying my head on my pillow so many times, its touch on my cheek, the open window in the morning billowing the curtain, the smell of coffee brewing, music from a neighbor's radio, sunlight on the porch. I remember! The images continue, beyond telling, and your heart feels like it's bursting with gladness. You feel yourself coming apart as if a child was blowing on a dandelion puff. You want to say something, one last shout to everyone everywhere, one last whisper in everyone's ear as you come apart, you want to say, *Love well! Love well!*

When they come back into your room they see you lying there, a little smile on your lips, very still.