

ESCOM Journal

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Jeff True

INSIDE: The Thankful, Grateful, Graceful, Remembered, and Party Animals

To Gratitude from Grief

I really dive into things. This is true for me with both grieving and giving thanks after the passing of my wife a year ago. Many people lost Kathleen, their friend, their fellow dog walker, their mom, and their Buela. She was multi-faceted. Having been so close for so many years, it makes sense that I now feel solo along the trail. My camping companion and Camino partner are no longer with me. What forks in the road to take?

I experience grief deeply, in waves rather than constantly. Kathleen's departure has cracked my heart and emotions wide open after 50 years of walking the paths of marriage and family together, not to mention sharing a life filled with wagging tails and meows.

A guest will notice my intensity about death from articles and books stacked up. Will they think me obsessive to have completed two rounds of Andrew Holec's *Preparing to Die* program? As an alum, I can enroll at a discount if only as an opportunity to listen to other people's stories. It provides a common environment in which to view death in a more holistic and expansive way.

I have attended at least three monthly gatherings of Death Café in Marin. and I tune in as often as I can to Suzanne Giesemann's *The Awakened Way* YouTube programs on Sunday morning. I put off and then watched documentary film *Wolf's Message*. After meeting up via an online class with Bill, a widower who shared that he felt "alone but not alone," I find myself part of a circle of people, self-identified or not, who experience their departed one as still present, though in a different way. Already my experience of deep frequent grieving is providing a light at the end of the tunnel.

Recently, there have been deaths of three iconic and prominent personages, Dolly Parton, Gloria Steinem, and Wendell Berry. As Wendell expressed at the end of his poem, *The Loved Ones*: "They live now in the permanent world. We are the absent ones."

Neighbors who knew Kathleen from our thousands of dog walks around our neighborhood wondered where she was. I told them. And now they kindly inquire at times, "How are you doing?" My answers vary. "Comes in waves." First, a missing ...deeply ... not here. Later, as more and more time goes on, an alchemical transformation appears alongside the grief: gratitude.

So, why gratitude? I do not want to have a heart attack, for starters. I do not want my health to go downhill any more than it already has. Kathleen, who the morning after she departed sent me the message, "George, it's all okay. Just let it go," now sends me the message "Stay healthy." "There are the grandchildren to love, and you are called to do so on my behalf also."

Again, why gratitude? That this wonderful joyful amazing person came into my life to begin with. The Taylor-Johnson temperament analysis and Myers Briggs tests forecast that we did not match up. However, we both were Gemini and deep down there were ample simpatico roots and feelings of radical love. And a whole string of wagging tails from Marin Humane, sparking joy. Gratitude. It all led to Life equals Love in Full Expression.

How does grieving move into gratitude? Gradually. It increases as the process evolves and happens more fluidly. Hearing Kathleen say, "I'm ok, pay attention to those around you to love," I feel she is urging me beyond grieving. She has reached the permanent side. I, the absent one, want to learn to live with her as she is now.

Now, from grief to gratitude, when a pang of missing comes up, a vision arises of her together with her other-side family and friends next to her. I, still riding the waves of impermanence, am buoyed by their mysterious accompaniment. A smile appears. A spring to my step. A fresh day. Thank you. Gratefully.

George Ferrick

After Ashberry

The shadow has become September again and all the while the lemon tree sleeps fitfully behind the white pickets of the fence wobbling like rotten teeth. The very act of seeing has become a crime. They say truth, like a fence, is debatable, as Egyptian lilies open their silky tongues to the sun (which used to be a god). They open without our intervention (a miracle). All these flowers know what to do. Why don't we? Two empty yellow chairs sit waiting for a conversation, preferring existentialism. The table yearns for a bottle of Chateau Beychevelle and a cigar. No need for cheese and crackers. Can we still break bread?

A spurious wind drives leaves to madness as violaceous morning glories wind their way around trash cans, as if to say, see how pretty we look. Even your garbage is worth decorating. The lost art of seeing. Texting emojis like carving cuneiform on clay tablets. Sumerians even had similes. Now we have simulacrum. Or lazy crumbs. Thought history cloudy, as machines chase every syllable worth nothing, but making millions. You will have more leisure time, but I forgot to pay the water bill. I forgot to drink water. I forgot, forgot. What's for dinner? What's for lunch? The freezer is too full.

Mars is the new country, but are there spices? What kind of pearl can grow, and is breathing still relevant? Discovery is so old fashioned when you can stream a stream and birdsong on television, while your world has caved in like the big sinkhole in Nick Cage's Malibu driveway. They found porta-potties floating around in his pool.

The day frets all night and keeps us awake. We wish for things we don't want. Our dreams are cars driving around looking for something to do. Hoarding clouds. The map has disappeared into a screen. The left hand no longer likes the right in an endless fight. Eventually blue and red become a muddy tyrian, even royals will not wear.

The last ride on a swing, can you remember? The smell of iron and hot sun. The grass beneath your bare feet. Not wanting to put your shoes back on.

Marcia Taylor Smith



Louis Windhurst



Harvey Abernathy, God-Rays



Janet Frankfield

Appetizer

"Sometimes something happens [in life] better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins"- Mary Oliver, "Don't Hesitate"

We hadn't been dating very long when I took my girlfriend to the Cliff House Restaurant in San Francisco—back when it was an elegant destination place. To set the scene, picture a small vase with colorful flowers on a white linen tablecloth, silverware carefully placed and spaced, seated next to a window looking out on a Pacific Ocean filled with the rippling diamond reflections of a bright afternoon sun.

I ordered an appetizer of fried calamari with dipping sauce. When it came, it was loaded with calamari

rings—but also tentacles. We started eating with the forks we were given, dipping into the sauce talking about the view.

When my girlfriend turned to look at the seals engaged in a raucous barking conversation on Seal Rock, I put a tentacle in my mouth letting the squid legs hang off my bottom lip. You know, like Humphrey Bogart smoking a cigarette in *To Have and Have Not*. I continued to talk, squid legs wiggling and wagging the whole time. I don't know what made me do it; perhaps an unconscious relationship test?

Anyway, when she turned her eyes back my way and spied the dangling tentacles hanging from my mouth, her face held the briefest expression of disbelief, followed by astonishment. Then she burst into laughter.

Thinking back on that day, if it was a test, we both passed. I learned she has a sense of humor to my liking. She learned I have a sense of humor to her liking—albeit the humor on my part is tinged with a sense of goofiness that perhaps she has more endured than enjoyed over time. For, you see, my girlfriend that day at the Cliff House is now my wife and has been for the past 36 years.

That moment of comic intimacy on that afternoon over three decades ago, to quote Mary Oliver, "was better than all the riches or power in the world." It wasn't the instant that love began, it had already begun—more like an instance when love deepened.

Larry C. Tolbert



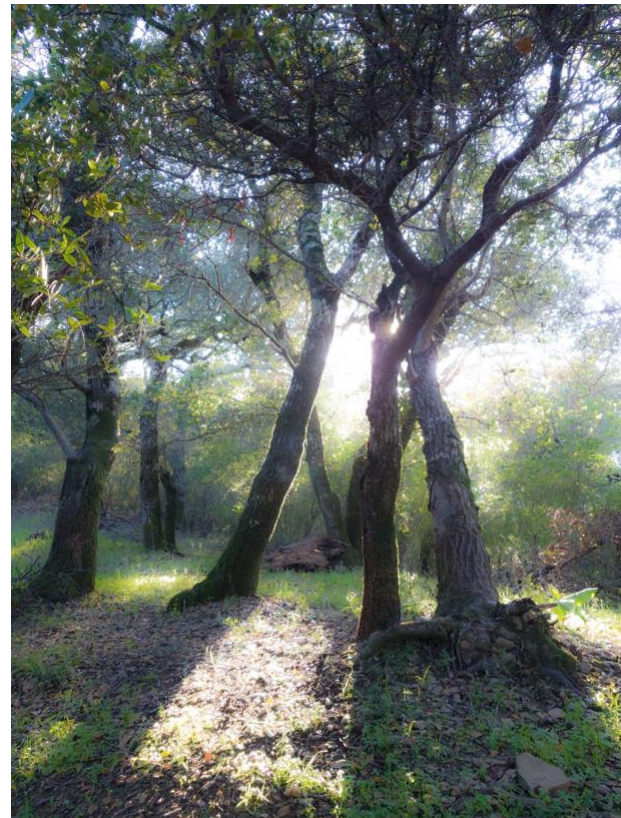
Laura Milholland

Tradition

As the days grow shorter
and darkness comes earlier
I feel myself opening up
expanding...
looking forward to the holiday activities
we celebrate every year.

It's tradition that bring us together
a human family carving pumpkins
planning costumes
making sure we have enough treats
for the ghosts and goblins
who will be knocking on our door.

Shopping for Thanksgiving dinner
remembering to buy a few extras
for the local group that makes sure
those who have nowhere to go
are fed and feted
taking time to volunteer.



Fred Kral, Solstice 2016

Rejoicing in the light from Hanukkah menorahs
Christmas trees
Solstice candles in friendly windows
shining
into a darkness
that envelopes
a reminder
the light always returns.

Anne Mulvaney

Anne, who contributed to many issues of the Journal, passed away on September 15. In gratitude and remembrance this is a reprint of one of her poems.

The Holly Tree

The old holly tree was elated by the thought of joining her oak friends uprooted a few years prior in a wild, windy storm. Sylvanus had hurried them into the heavens sparing them from a chainsaw dismembering. As their green spirits brushed by she felt envious of their untethered freedom. Her boughs had decked more than enough halls and her roots had been embedded in this spot at the bottom of the garden far too long. She also missed the cat who for years curled napping in the hollow the base of her trunk. After waking and a downward stretch, he would always give her a vitalizing bark scratching. The koi pond soon to be built where she stood would finally free her to join them.

Sarah, in a rush to check her fruit cakes, lay the holly and her clippers on the counter and pulled off her gloves. The cakes were not done yet, but their perfume already filled the house with Christmas spirit. She turned from the oven and reached for the holly too quickly, pricking her finger. A pinpoint of blood bloomed the same shade of red as the holly berries. She never picked holly without thinking of Jack, her husband Tom's best friend. "Hey Sarah, would you like to come cut some holly? Our tree is loaded with berries."

She knew the tree was doomed to make way for Jack's long desired koi pond. When seeing the familiar old tree's dark, thick trunk and graceful shape she'd said, "Oh Jack, isn't there another place to put your pond?"

Jack, a sought-after landscape designer, often compared his garden to the cobbler's children without shoes. Busy with clients' gardens it had taken him longer than he hoped to complete his own garden's design. The koi pond was the final touch- the centerpiece at the bottom of the garden with paths leading from both sides up through the natural rock formations that graced his property.

Once the tree was removed she and Jack honored it, planting cuttings from its branches in their gardens and Sarah decked her house in holly- -an orgy of it- -every Christmas. She had a bloody finger to show for it.

The koi pond quickly became Sarah's favorite place to meet for tea. Jack and his partner Michael provided mugs, and a thermos of tea and Sarah baked scones or cookies for her and Tom's contribution. Sitting on comfortable benches with a view of the pond, the koi never ceased to amaze them with their variety. Sarah's favorite was large and peach colored with a perfect cream oval behind its head.

At the last of these teas, Jack, always full of energy and on the go, shared that he had been losing weight, and an MRI revealed a small tumor on his thyroid.

"My doctor is afraid it might be cancerous," he said, "so wants to remove it." He assured us it was a simple procedure and nothing to worry about. He had surgery a few days later.

As Jack drifted back to post-op consciousness, he felt an unusual buoyancy. And there to greet him was his beloved cat Zipman and the holly tree he had sacrificed to the pond, their spirits reaching out to him. He'd had a stroke during the operation and died. Oddly he felt no despair, instead excitement gripped him as he realized the immortal adventure ahead of him.

At first, it felt odd to not have a body, but he soon adapted. He missed it most when he stopped to check on Sarah. They were kindred spirits the moment they met and she had become his dearest friend. He always wished he could give her a hug when he visited.

Sarah's house was warm and fragrant with cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice but Jack sensed her absence as soon as he arrived. He always looked forward to watching her delft hands shaping piecrust or chopping garlic. She couldn't have been gone long as he could see lively flames flickering through the glass of the wood burning stove at the far end of the kitchen. He and Sarah both loved to cook and another thing he missed about life was eating.

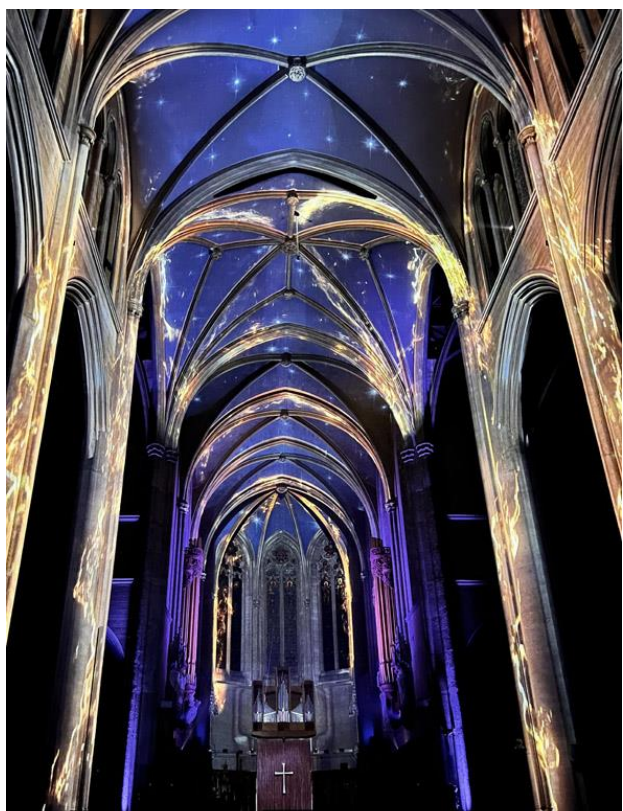
He glided down the hall and into the bedroom where he remembered sitting with Sarah on the bed, their heads bent over a book on English gardens. *Did she still have it?*

After rinsing her bleeding finger, Sarah cut three sprigs bright with berries from the branches on the counter to add to a vase of yellow roses she placed in the guest room to welcome her mother who loved them so. Entering the room, she shivered and glanced down to make sure the heating vent was open. Adding the holly to the roses was the final touch. The room was ready for her parents' arrival.

Then she noticed the book lying open on the bed. A frisson ran through her; it was the book on English gardens that she and Jack looked at together not long before he died and it was opened to a garden that held at its center an old holly tree. *Had her thoughts of Jack while cutting the holly boughs, conjured him up?*

Sarah recalled that golden autumn afternoon visit to the koi pond realizing when her thoughts turned to Jack, his spirit would be there with her.

Susan Connelly



Ema Drouillard



Susan Connolly

Show Gratitude Like a Dog

I want to show you gratitude
like a dog —
how they look into your eyes,
blinking slowly,
while you pet their heads.

I will let you run your fingers
through my hair and
you reward me with
your soft, upturn smile.
This is all I need.

I want to nestle close to you
on the sofa,
exchanging body heat and
feeling so calm, I lose
all alertness from outside.

I can do this if I trust you;
let us feed each other,
go for long walks,
maybe twice a day.
I want us to show gratitude
just like two dogs.

Lorraine Ortega



Tami Tsark, Holiday

Mother's Stitches

San Francisco, 1954,
My mother crossed an ocean

with a degree from Penn,
and a belief in learning,

The door looked at her
Chinese face
and remained
a door.

So she climbed the stairs
of Chinatown,
where sewing machines hummed
above and the markets and restaurants.

Thousands of needles crossing cloth,
thousands of mothers who had crossed
oceans.

My mother sat among them,

pressing her pedal
over and over.

The needle descends,
The needle rises,
The needle descends,
The needle rises.

A seam becomes a dollar.
A dollar becomes dinner.
Dinner becomes strength.
Strength becomes school.
School becomes possibility.

Possibility becomes
a son
walking into medical school.

I did not know then
what Mother left
beside that sewing machine

I never asked
what dreams she folded
between pieces of cloth.

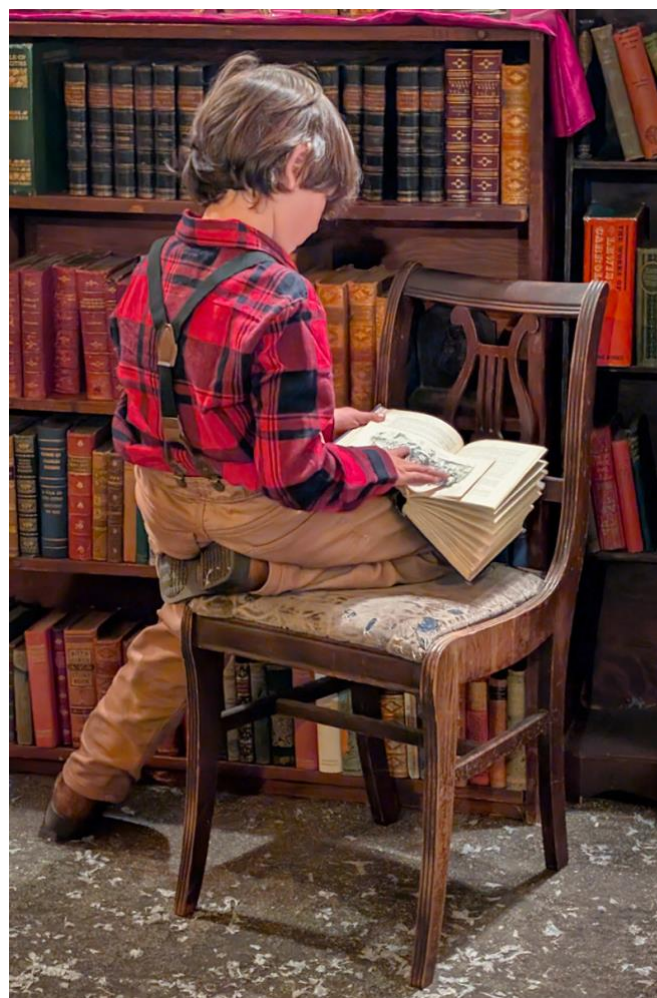
What part of herself
she tucked beneath each seam
so her children might have more.

Ray Fay, M.D.

*This poem is from Ray's new book of
poems, "Becoming". Now available on
Amazon.*



Tom Gannon



Harvey Abernathy, Quiet Moment



Susan Connolly

The Grace of Ciao

I'm not sure what that was,
only that, for the while,
it was good for my soul

Suddenly, briefly, for the moment
we were simply
together again,
the distance between us – disappeared:
a clear connection
And it was good for our souls

And then, the silence was built between us,
an access door closed
without word or sign
Or moment of farewell

I hold what has changed without retreating my heart
I bless what was, without asking it to return as it was
I live openheartedly in the quiet,
Trusting that Love does not disappear when voices do

To self for future reference,
lesson carried forward
I will love without defining it
to anyone, including the beloved,
without giving it a name,
without defining its shape
or its place in my life

And ask nothing of the beloved
but to have been love
while it was.

-- Terry Deddo

The Silencing of a Hush

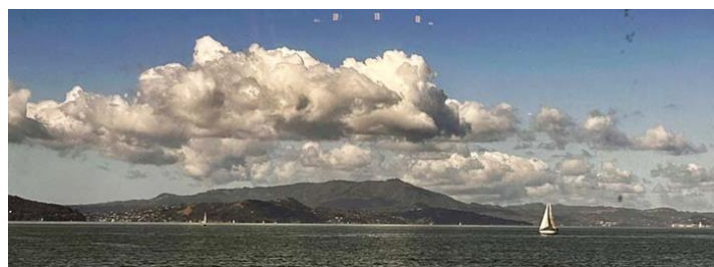
Beneath the heat under moonlight
Needles click and stitch
Sticks that matter
Silencing clutter turning to knit/pearl gather.
The type of crafting
Hears a phone ring.

Crochet monkeys
Singing to pillow snugs
Hooked up pink pig
Sound asleep in glass empty of drink,
The animals party with me
And my friend Alexa.

Shall place a sombrero over
Doof the mockingbird's head
Remember all that's gone unsaid
By myself, called as lonely but that synapse is misled.

The borderline won't know it seems
Caught in their dreams
Partying without any rise
Above bottom line I surmise.
On the line
As if another realm
Challenged by rigor mortise,
Birds will sing of bells that ring
Crocodiles with timer set clocks
Are partying,
Where sunset isn't frightening
Nor is the Mandolorian's homecoming.
At last the punishment is ending
As the God again
Reaps investment from smiling.

Karen Arnold



Marilyn Bagshaw



Joseph Cillo

Party Animal

My favorite party animal was Peggy. She came from West Virginia coal country. Her father was vice president of a coal company in Logan, and Peggy remained a country girl at heart—direct, practical, robust and wonderfully feminine. She wore her hair cropped short. “Why so short, Peggy?”

“So I can sleep late and get going quickly.” That was Peggy. Life presented problems. Peggy eliminated them. She had a pug nose, couple of freckles on her cheeks, and heart-shaped sunglasses. I don’t know that heart-shaped sunglasses can tell you everything you need to know about a woman, but they tell you considerably more than ordinary sunglasses.

For a while, Peggy lived in a Manhattan apartment. On Halloween, she would go door to door carrying an empty wine glass. She’d knock. The door would open. Peggy held out the glass. “Trick or treat.” That was Peggy.

Once, when I visited Peggy, she said, “You have to see my new art collection. Follow me.” She led me to the living room couch. “Lie down and look up.” I did. Paintings and posters covered the ceiling. That was Peggy. Another time, while we were dancing, I said, “Peggy, something has come between us.” Without missing a beat, she replied: “That would be me.” Then she crossed her eyes. That was Peggy.

But my favorite Peggy accessory wasn’t the sunglasses. It was her flask. Peggy carried what I came to think of as a female flask. A man’s flask is a rectangular metal object intended for a hip pocket and designed to suggest that its owner has recently returned from shooting grouse. Peggy’s was discreet. It belonged in a purse. And it contained Sloe Gin.

At a party, Peggy would order a Coke. Just a Coke. To the

casual observer, she was possibly the most temperate woman in the room. Then the purse would open. Out came the female flask. A little Sloe Gin went into the Coke. The flask disappeared. Peggy took a sip. And civilization continued.

I admired the whole operation. No bartender. No complicated drink order. No discussion about whether the martini was dry enough. Peggy had achieved beverage independence. Other women carried lipstick, tissues, aspirin and perhaps an extra pair of stockings. Peggy carried Sloe Gin. If civilization collapsed between cocktails and dinner, I wanted to be in Peggy’s group.

I have known plenty of people who qualified as party animals in the conventional sense. They drank too much, talked too loudly, danced too late and occasionally woke up wondering where they had left their shoes. Peggy didn’t need any of that. She brought the party with her.

So, whenever I hear the expression “party animal,” I don’t picture some fellow with a lampshade on his head. I picture Peggy. I picture the cropped hair and the heart-shaped sunglasses. I picture her crossing her eyes on the dance floor. Then I picture the purse opening. I picture that little female flask appearing. And I picture Peggy quietly improving the world—one Coke at a time. -- Joseph Cillo



Leigh Nicolaisen



Tom Gannon



Nancy Pappas



Laura Milholland



Marilyn Bagshaw

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!



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ESCOM Journal

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Send your FINAL work to denizespringer@gmail.com

All submissions must be original work by ESCOM members.

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Submissions are accepted only after the email announcement about the theme for the next issue (usually last week of month before deadline). Themed entries are given priority.

Please submit **only one** piece of written work or no more than **three** image files per issue.

PROSE (750 words max) must be single spaced, left margin oriented and in Word doc format (no pdfs of written work). Author's name must appear on work.

POEMS or PLAYLETS: 50 lines max, including stanza breaks, in Word doc format (no pdfs).

ART and PHOTOGRAPHY: Borderless images only in pdf format, file size no larger than 300kb. File name should include title and name of creator.

Misspellings, grammatical errors and erroneous line breaks could be mistaken as the author's intent and not corrected in editing. **Please proof your work (including image captions) before submission.** Updated copy will not be accepted after submission.

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