

LIFE & DEATH
or
SPIRIT IS LIFE-IN-TIME & BODY IS TIME-IN-LIFE

by Ngo Dong

Within less than a year, three memorable happenings took place all too suddenly. Their effects on me have been deep and will last my lifetime.

The first event was a very sad one; it was the death of my adopted American father, Mr. Thomas Moon. He was one of the most wonderful people I have known; he was a very intelligent, independent, hardworking, caring and loving human being who exemplified a perfect model citizen. He served in the Navy during World War II in Africa; then, after his retirement, he volunteered his services to various charity clubs in his community. While he was in his mid- 60's he returned to College just for the experience of learning. He graduated with highest honors, outscoring all his much younger classmates. Several months before his death, he went through several surgeries on his esophagus followed by radiation treatments. He declined my offer to drive him between Shands Hospital in Gainesville and his home in Mount Dora. He was in his late 70's but his determination was tough-as-nails. One of our fondest memories was when I was in the U.S. for the first time (1972-73). We had teamed up as double partners in tennis and defeated the younger team which was composed of his son Tom and his son-in-law Ed. We won because we were more patient and played a smarter game. His heroic life brings to mind the traditional view of early American immigrants as depicted by John Wayne in his early movies. We miss that fighting spirit! And we need it now more than ever with the world experiencing unprecedented problems of war, economical and social disturbance, bigotry, racism, discrimination, drug use and so on.

The second event was a wonderful one, one of the happiest moments of my life. This was the birth of our first granddaughter, Courtney (Bao's daughter). She represents nature itself: pure, immaculate, simple but vibrant... a perfect symbol of beauty and love. Watching her smiling in her dreams, I could not help crying with happiness for the feeling of oneness with her. There was no gap, no barrier between us. We melted into one and we were nobody, we were free and simply very happy. I was sure my wife was ecstatic at that moment also.

One of the best way for us to escape or deal with the stress of daily life is to return to our nature, a kind of miniature nature found via meditation or contemplation. Before I began running, gardening had been my escape or means of meditation. While taking care of plants in the backyard, phone calls were ignored; the garden was in my full control and I was in charge, on top of the world. Pulling weeds by hand or watering the plants made me feel relaxed, refreshed and renewed. My thoughts flowed naturally without any pressure or prejudice. In those moments I found myself and felt freer as compared to those casual occasions when I was talking and dealing with people. When I started running ultra (50 and 100 miles), I advanced to another level becoming more isolated from the disturbances of a stressful world. By coming closer to nature I experienced a feeling of liberation (almost totally free) which culminated every time I reached the top of a mountain. Once I crossed the finish line, a feeling of exhilaration overwhelmed me and lifted my spirit up to cloud nine. It was like flying and all the pain suddenly disappeared; it was like the metamorphosis of a pupa transforming into a butterfly, flying free beneath the sun.

The third event was the most destructive to my life. I lost my dearest and closest friend in life. Our companionship for thirty years suddenly evaporated. My better half left my children and me behind without warning and my whole world collapsed on me. I felt that a part of me had died; my heart was ripped out,

leaving a big void that left my thoughts numb, dazed and paralyzed. Tears kept falling: while I was driving, while I was writing, while I was thinking... even during sleep. Inside my heart I was wilting. Weeks after the funeral, writing thank-you letters to friends was a very painful experience, my emotion was stirred up by reading their loving feelings expressed in many ways through their own experiences they shared with her; Some friends just met her once, others just knew her through her article written in Cuong Nhu Newsletter. But hundreds of people came to know her better at her funeral; they learned of her work teaching bilingual programs for Vietnamese children and of her volunteer assistance to elderly Vietnamese helping them to get their driving license in order to get a job. It was due to her that I was able achieve my dreams in serving my country during war-time as the People Self-Defense commander in Hue City and Thua Thien province. Her sacrifice in staying home and taking care of our kids allowed me to keep my ideals intact by spending the shortest time abroad. She gave me a peace of mind to allow me to focus towards building up Cuong Nhu from national to international levels. She raised my four children taking care of raising my four children who graduated from colleges as clean hardworkers and successful professionals. None of them smoke or drink. They are climbing steadily toward the top in their career. She did touched my life as well as others. She was my unsung hero! I took her for granted and now I have no chance to tell her how much I loved and appreciated her support in so many ways. Things happened too fast and too soon. For 20 years she was a fugitive of her mental illness, a disease called paranoid schizophrenia. In times of depression, she feared people were plotting to hurt her and/or her beloved ones. At other times she was serene and peaceful. In 1981, she attempted suicide via an overdose right after the campout, but we discovered it in time and rushed her to the hospital. She stayed for more than three weeks in a mental health institute. There she learned the feeling of imprisonment; visitors were allowed only limited time with her. She had since been treated with two kinds of medication, one of which is called Senequan. Her doctor warned her that this might have some side effects on her cerebral nerves. She had tendency to skip Senequan in the last few years and then since last year, menopause presented another chemical imbalance in her body. Maybe it was the last straw, the one that broke the camel's back. She felt as if her time was running out. She had to make her decision while she still had control of her mind. She didn't want to procrastinate and let her mental problems to take control over her mind. She feared the loss of her dignity. She chose the time carefully; everyone was very happy. Bao, Quynh, Anh were moving up in their jobs and Thu was in the final rounds of the interview process. I thought that it was time to reward her for the 30 years she had taken care of the whole family by letting her stay at home and freeing her to write poems or a diary of the over 40 years our adventurous life spent in war-torn Viet-Nam. The day she took her life was the same day I broke ground in our backyard to make a flower garden as her sanctuary from people in her troubled world. But I didn't have a chance! Like Quynh told me "Dad, with her mind troubled she could not be happy even if you build her a golden home."

Physically she was no longer close to us, but her love and her spirit remain forever in our hearts. Her memory will revive intensely our desire to make every effort to make her proud of her husband and children. We know that she left us happily, knowing that the family was together and stronger than ever. We light-up our love forever for her and live-up her life for all of us. For Ngo's family she was not dying, she was just away.

Thanh Chau! I know that you wait for me patiently, and I am looking forward to that day when our grand children fly with their own wings. I'll reunite with you that day.

LIGHT and LOVE

Ngo Dong and family