

Life

Embracing everything between birth and death

By G. Raymond McCullough

Over the past eleven months, I have written feature articles for The Juanita Center. The topics have run the gamut: spirituality, grief, domestic violence, having fun, patience, risk taking, values, and more. Hence, the bell tolls, and the twelfth month is upon me.

Initially, I struggled with the subject of my article. I felt as if I were out of ideas and that anything creative had been drained from me. Then, as is the case with me, an idea revealed itself in the uncanny ways ideas sometimes do. I was given a handout about Healthcare Reform. In the far left hand corner, there was what seemed to be a unrelated quote. In any case, it captured my attention and stimulated a creative energy. The quote was as follows:

“To improve the golden moment of opportunity,
and catch the good that is within reach,
is the great art of life”
Samuel Johnson
(1709-1784)

This quote captured my interest and imagination. It compelled me to reflect on the articles that I had written over the previous months and the message I was attempting to communicate. Even though the topics were varied, I realized I was writing about life. I mean this is what my chosen life’s work is about: counseling individuals as it relates to the joys and challenges of life. Life truly is about the countless opportunities that are presented to us.

I want to share a personal story that began in 1986 when I was living in Japan. It was at this time that I met the man I would later call my surrogate father. His name was Lloyd and he was an American expatriate who had been living in Japan since 1947. He was retired Army and had served as a member of the United States occupation forces in Japan following the end of World War II. Lloyd married a Japanese woman with whom he

had had 3 sons. At the time I met Lloyd, he was remarried to his second wife, Kazuko. His estranged wife was living in his hometown of Toledo, Ohio. My biological father was born and raised just 150 miles from Toledo. Lloyd's sons were living in the U.S., and Lloyd had not seen them or his ex-wife for a number years. Ironically, Lloyd was living with his new wife in his ex-wife's hometown of Yokohama, Japan.

It seemed to me that our meeting (Lloyd and I) was not by chance but was predestined. At the time of our meeting, I was the Program Manager of the Addiction Recovery Service at the Naval Regional Medical Center in Yokosuka, Japan. Lloyd was a recovering alcoholic. He paid me a visit to offer his services as a guest speaker to the program I was managing. As I got to know him, I was struck by some obvious parallels in our lives. My biological father was about the same age as Lloyd, and my father had served in the South Pacific with the U.S. Marines during World War II. Like Lloyd, my father had three sons of which I was the youngest. At our meeting, I was estranged from my father. Lloyd and I would develop a deep and enduring friendship that would last from 1986 until his death in 1990. I had a relationship with Lloyd that I wished I could

have had with my biological father. I spent many weekends with Lloyd and Kazuko at their home in Yokohama, Japan. It was during these visits that I came face to face with many of my demons and I helped Lloyd face many of his own. It was Lloyd who served as the inspiration for me to reach out to my father and to calm the waters that divided us. I was successful in mending the relationship with my father before his death in 1994, and I give Lloyd credit for serving as the inspiration for my doing so. Unfortunately, Lloyd was never able—or willing—to reach out to his own sons and build a bridge in their relationship. However, I believe he found some solace with regard to his sons through our relationship.

In October 1990, I was deployed to the Persian Gulf in the buildup to the first Gulf War. In December 1990, I received a Red Cross message that Lloyd had died. This was especially unusual since Lloyd was not a biological relative. The news was devastating. Weeks later, I received a letter from Lloyd that he had written just before his death. In the letter, he left me with these final thoughts, *“When you are **teetering on the edge between life and death** and your spirit is screaming to be released from your worldly body there are two things that are important.*

The first is water because that is the only thing that seems to bring a physical comfort to your worldly existence. The next are the fond memories that you have of the relationships that you have developed over the years, if you have any. I do and you are one of them. I thank you for being a meaningful part of my life. I love you, Lloyd.”

Reading these words of wisdom from a man that I loved and who was no longer with me in this world brought a wave of emotion that ran from the tips of my toes the very ends of the hair on my head. I felt as though God were having a personal conversation with me. It was at this moment that the fear of death or the inevitabilities of war began to lose their grip on me. Weeks later and before the first bomb was dropped in the first Gulf War, I had a dream that felt more like a vision. I won't bore you with the details, but I will share some of the symbols. I was on a ship, and it was making a violent plunge into a deep, dark, tunneled abyss that seemed to have no end. At the last moment before the ship entered the mouth of the tunnel, I was thrown from the ship. I found myself sliding down the slope of an adjacent mountain that was covered in beautiful white snow. I came to a gentle rest at the base of this mountain. In the near distance, I could see white robed

figures ascending the mountain. I felt beckoned to join them, and I did. Together, we effortlessly ascended the mountain. In my dream or vision (you choose), I believe that I experienced my life and death. At that moment, I felt a sense of peace, and any remnants of a fear associated with death left me. I became acutely aware at this moment that the experience of life is about living and it is also about embracing death—and our own mortality. It was this deeper understanding that prompted me, many years ago, to write the following:

Death: The Bridge to Another Life

Death is the Transcendant's invitation to embrace all that we have become during this lifetime.

Death is the embodiment of all our life experiences.

Death is the threshold and archway that leads to existence in God's divine community.

The works of my physical life prepare me for life after this dimension.
I give myself fully to my life experiences.

I remain in tune with God's will for me in this dimension.

I live God's will.
Because, I know, living God's will prepares me for life in God's eternal kingdom.

Are you ready to embrace the embodiment of God in all things?

G. Raymond McCullough

If not for the fortuitous and uncanny meeting with Lloyd, and our evolving relationship I don't know if I would have ever experienced what I consider to be some of my great truths about life. Life is about: 1) the relationship we have with ourselves; 2) the relationships we have with family, friends, acquaintances, and the stranger we meet on the street; and 3) the relationships we have with our surroundings. My hypothesis is that all of these are a testament to the relationship we have with God, The Creator, The Great Spirit, or whatever term we choose to identify the Divine...The Transcendent.

I have become acutely aware that living life to its fullest is strongly contingent on faith. Hence I share the following:

No Guarantees in Life

Stop for a moment and experience your body as you inhale and then exhale.

This is the closest we can come to understanding what we are guaranteed in this life.

My realization and acceptance of my fragile existence anchors my faith.

This faith allows me to experience God's presence in my life.

We have only chaos in our life if we don't accept our death.

This acceptance comes easy with **Faith.**

G. Raymond McCullough
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I encourage you to enhance your overall quality of life by building and maintaining relationships that are life-giving as opposed to those that are life-draining. Life is too short to do anything less.

