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Living on the Edge of Eternity

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A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life

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edge

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"LIVING ON THE EDGE"

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I climb to the top of Dun I and find (almost to my disappointment) that I can stand upright on the summit, this time neither bowled over nor held aloft by the powerful air. I find in my jacket pocket the small smooth stone I picked up on the beach the day before, and I finger it idly, thinking about Columba and his monks who lived here in the sixth century, about the Augustinian nuns who lived here in the Middle Ages, about George MacLeod and his stubborn dreams of restoration, about all the faithful who have ever sought the edge of the world in order to find the center. I remember my earlier visit to this small hill, exhilarating and a bit alarming in the sheer force of the elements, the sense of being where edges meet and disappear.

I am beginning to realize that living on the edge involves us in constantly moving on: the horizon disappears as we approach it, is revealed in fact to be an illusion. There is no edge. There is no end. The sphere is unbounded. There is only the still point of the turning world. Our only hope of wholeness lies in the dynamic integration offered us by the Cross—there can be no stasis, no escape, no fixity. Only a joyful ever-moving-on where the winds of the Spirit take us, secure only in the knowledge that wherever we are, God is with us.

As Thomas Merton said, “We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are traveling. . . . But we already possess [God] by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived. . . . But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!”⁷

Near the summit of Dun I, not a yard from where I stand, there is a heap of stones taller than I am—a cairn, or memorial marker, spontaneously created at sacred places by those who make pilgrimage to them. I gaze at the cairn for a long time, wondering how many thousands of stones compose it, holding in prayer all the people who have traveled to this place and marked their presence in so small, concrete, and anonymous a way. I realize this cairn represents a whole communion of saints, a community of people to which I belong, although I will never meet them or even know who they are.

Carefully I add my stone to the pile and head on down the slope again—strengthened by my time in this place, light of heart and hopeful of the grace to stand fast and move on ever deeper into the God in whom we have already arrived.

⁷Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Image Books, 1970), p. 508.

Living on the Edge of Eternity

by Douglas Burton-Christie



NANCY RUTH JACKSON

THIS WAS NOT A JOURNEY I wanted to make. One of my oldest and dearest friends, Donald Nicholl, was dying of cancer in England. Traveling there to see him meant, I knew, saying good-bye. And this was something I did not want to do. I did not want to face up to the stark fact of his impending death. I did not want to consider how I would live with the immense hole that I knew his passing would create. Somehow, from a distance, I had been able to sustain the illusion that he

would not die, that his disease would go into remission, that we would again walk the Pennines together, talking excitedly of our latest discoveries, of our hopes for the future. But now, handing my ticket to the flight attendant and boarding the plane, I no longer harbored such illusions. Embarking on this journey brought home to me the harsh reality I had so far been evading: my friend was dying. In doing so, it also wakened me in a new way to Donald's journey, to his struggle amidst much physical pain and loneliness to make his way along the narrow, steep path toward death, toward God.

This was a path in many ways unimaginable to me. Certainly, I have faced up to the reality of death, struggled with it in my own way. But to be on the edge of death, to know that the end of life is near? No, I have not known that reality. But perhaps this was one of the reasons for my journey to see Donald in England: to be brought into the presence of this mystery in a way that I never would have discovered on my own. It is strange to consider this. I imagined I was coming to see Donald to express my love for him, to be present to him, and perhaps be of some comfort to him in a difficult time. All of this was, I think, true. But already I was beginning to see another more fundamental reason for my trip: I was being drawn to journey with him for a time along that lonely path, to dwell with him in the liminal space between life and death that he now occupied, in order to learn something about my own life. I was being invited to receive from him another, final gift: to learn, as he himself was learning, to live on the edge of eternity.

AN IMMENSE AND MYSTERIOUS WORLD

THE WORLD on this early spring day seemed so vivid, so richly detailed, so precious. The gentle rocking motion of the train as it made its way north from London; the pale gray sky stretching over an endless green expanse; masses of daffodils blooming along the roadside; brilliant golden blossoms of forsythia against a red brick wall; tiny newborn lambs skirting across a field; crows circling; white, purple, and yellow pansies in huge mounds; two small boys running out to play soccer. It seemed important, somehow, to take note of all this, to register how the world looked and felt at this particular moment. I suppose I was seeing, or trying to see, all of this through Donald's eyes. Imagining taking it all in as if for the last time. Try-

ing not to miss anything. Trying to stay awake. This too was part of the journey.

As the train rolled north I recalled my first encounter with Donald more than twenty years earlier. I was a student at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Donald was my teacher in a class on Russian Religious Thought. We were reading Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. One day we read aloud a passage from the section "Cana of Galilee," about Alyosha's terrible disillusionment following the death of the elder Zossima. Alyosha had hoped and expected that the elder's body would be suffused with the odor of sanctity. This would have confirmed the elder's stature as a holy man and secured Alyosha in his own life path as a monk and disciple of the elder. But the elder's body instead stank with the odor of corruption, a sure sign that he had not in fact achieved holiness in his life. Alyosha's hopes were confounded by this turn of events and he found himself plunged into a deep crisis of faith.

But then something strange and unexpected happens. Alyosha, wearied and broken, nevertheless goes to kneel in vigil in the church beside the body of his beloved elder. Another monk, sitting nearby, is reading aloud the story of the wedding feast at Cana from John's gospel. Alyosha drifts off to sleep with these words ringing in his ear and finds himself dreaming of the wedding feast. Suddenly, Zossima is present to him, vividly present, reaching out to him. Alyosha can hardly believe it: "Can it be that he, too, is at the banquet, that he, too, has been called to the marriage in Cana of Galilee...?" Indeed, against all expectation, the elder *has* been called. Somehow, even in his dream, Alyosha senses the significance of this. "Something," Dostoevsky says, "burned in Alyosha's heart, something suddenly filled him almost painfully, tears of rapture nearly burst from his soul..."¹

What this "something" was Dostoevsky does not say. But he notes that Alyosha emerged from the dream transformed. After pausing for a moment over the elder's coffin, he walked firmly and surely out of the church and into the night.

Over him the heavenly dome, full of quiet, shining stars, hung boundlessly. From the zenith to the horizon the still-dim Milky Way stretched its double strand. Night, fresh and quiet, almost

¹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990). This and subsequent citations are from pp. 361-63.

unstirring, enveloped the earth. The white towers and golden domes of the church gleamed in the sapphire sky. The luxuriant autumn flowers in the flowerbeds near the house had fallen asleep until morning. The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars... Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth.

Alyosha, Dostoevsky says, did not know why he was embracing the earth, why he longed to kiss it, and water it with his tears. Only that he did, and that in that moment “it was as if threads from all those innumerable worlds of God all came together in his soul, and it was trembling all over, ‘touching other worlds.’”

I cannot say with certainty why this passage read aloud that day moved me so deeply. Was it because I sensed almost immediately the truth of the story? Because it touched upon and gave voice to my own longing to embrace and be embraced by “all those innumerable worlds of God?” Because through it I glimpsed an immense and mysterious world opening up before me—a world in which the wedding feast, the communion of saints, and the “sapphire sky” all pulsed and moved together in a single numinous reality; a world where the borders between heaven and earth, this world and the next were permeable and porous? It was all this and more. I was left wondering: could I learn to dwell

in such a world? Could I taste, even for a moment, what Alyosha had tasted: eternity breaking into this mundane world?

That these questions should have become so real, so pressing to me in that moment was due in no small part to my conviction that the one reading the passage knew it to be true. Somehow I discerned in the very tone of Donald’s voice the truth of Alyosha’s dream, the significance of his ecstatic embrace of the earth and of his spiritual transfiguration. This tall Yorkshire-

man, who had given himself for so many years to the study of Russian language and thought, seemed utterly suffused by Dostoevsky’s luminous vision, seemed himself to inhabit a world in which “threads from all those innumerable worlds of God” came together.

Alyosha “felt clearly and almost tangibly something as firm and immovable as this heavenly vault descend into his soul... Never, never in his life would [he] forget that moment.” I sensed

Something
momentous
was
unfolding
within
me

the same was true for me. Something momentous was unfolding within me at that moment. I was being drawn out of myself toward the very edge of a new world, a world suffused with Spirit. And I knew that my journey into this world would somehow be connected intimately and deeply with this man standing before me. More than twenty years later, as I journeyed north to see him for the last time, I was still plumbing the depths of its mystery.

A SPACIOUS SENSE OF TIME

P*roshloe ne proshlo*—the past has not passed away.” These were among the first words Donald spoke to me upon my arrival at his home in the little village of Betley. He had been thinking a lot about the past, about those who had gone before him but who were still intimately present to him in his final struggle. It was Pavel Florensky, the brilliant Russian philosopher and priest, who had first used this phrase in 1919: “The past has not passed away,” he said, “but is eternally preserved somewhere or other and continues to be real and really influential... everybody and everything is so closely interwoven that separation is only approximate, with continuous transition taking place from one part of the whole to another part.”² For Florensky, this was not merely an idea but a truth he felt called to live into. Which is why, when Florensky was falsely accused of organizing a nationalist-fascist conspiracy against the Soviet regime, he deliberately incriminated himself in order to save the others accused of conspiracy. As a result he was imprisoned and eventually executed at the hands of the NKVD. For Donald, it was Florensky’s witness—his martyrdom—that gave his words such power. “The past has not passed away.” Florensky’s witness was not wasted. It did not amount to “nothing in the end.” Rather, it “is eternally preserved somewhere or other and continues to be real and really influential.” As it was for Donald, who was striving to witness in his own way to the truth of the Spirit in his life.

One afternoon during my visit, I went upstairs with Donald into his “dugout.” This small room had been for many years his study, and the walls were still lined with books—of early British and Irish history, Russian philosophy and religion, theology, bib-

²Cited in Donald Nicholl, *Triumphs of the Spirit in Russia* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997), p. 190.

We underestimate the power of the Spirit

lical studies, Buddhist, Islamic, and Hindu thought—traces of a life's work of scholarship and pursuit of the truth. But the desk had recently been moved aside to make room for a bed. And the shelves near his bed had been cleared of books to make room for images of some of his beloved “witnesses”—Saint Seraphim of Sarov, Edith Stein, Raman Maharshi, the Cistercian monks of Atlas, Thubten Yeshe, Maximilian Kolbe, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and others. Here, in the company of this “great cloud of witnesses” as he called them, he was spending his final days and weeks, preparing for his final passage. Seeing Donald in the presence of these witnesses, hearing him speak slowly and softly of what they meant to him, I began to feel in a new way the truth of Florensky's words: “The past has not passed away.”

For Donald, I know these words were both deeply consoling and challenging. It was consoling for him, in the midst of what was a lonely and painful time, to know himself as living within and sustained by this communion of saints. “We are,” he said, “one in the Spirit with all our ancestors and especially with those who lived by the Spirit whilst on this earth—the martyrs in particular, the supreme witnesses to the Spirit.” To take this seriously is to discover the present moment as almost unimaginably rich and full, shot through with traces of life past and future. How is it, he wondered, that we have arrived at such a narrow, diminished sense of time? How is it that we have come to value the “contemporary” above all else and to underestimate the power of the Spirit to expand our sense of the contemporary? Facing death in the company of so many witnesses altered Donald's sense of time. “I realized . . . that I am contemporary with all who try and have tried and will try, as I myself do, however weakly, to live by the Spirit. All such people, from our earliest ancestors till the very last human being on this earth, dwell in the same world, breathe the same Spirit. We are one in the Spirit.”

This is a truth we have known and carried within us ever since that first Pentecost when the Spirit kindled in those gathered a new awareness of the truth of the resurrection. But too often, it seems, we underestimate the power of the Spirit. We sense our unity with those who are living but find it harder to imagine the ongoing influence upon us of those who have gone before or our relationship with those still to come. We struggle to understand what it might mean to say that everything, from

the alpha to the omega, is woven together as part of a single continuous whole, what it might mean to understand ourselves as living within that whole. One thing it might mean, as it seems to have meant for my friend and for so many of the witnesses in whose company he found himself journeying, is learning to live in the awareness that “everybody and everything is so closely interwoven that separation is only approximate.”

This means recognizing that our own inner lives are infinitely richer than we often imagine them to be, filled as they are with the presence of so many witnesses who have gone before us. But with this fullness comes a challenge. For if these witnesses continue to live on in our midst and shape us, are we not also called to bear witness to the truth of the Spirit with our own lives? In the larger economy of salvation might not the witness of our lives be necessary, even crucial, to others? Even if in ways utterly hidden from us?

This was part of the burden my friend Donald carried with him during his final days. If he himself was buoyed up by the witness of others, he was also conscious of the need to bear witness with his own life. Not so much through words—he could speak very little at this point—as through the disposition of his entire being. Could he realize, in some measure anyway, the transparency and purity of heart that would allow the Spirit to breathe through his life and touch the lives of others? On an even more personal and fundamental level: would he be able, as he moved closer to the threshold between life and death, to abandon himself completely to God? To hold back nothing? “Pray for me,” he implored, “that I may be faithful to Jesus to the end.”

SECURE IN JOY

I WAS STARTLED to hear him utter these words. It was not his request for my prayer that shook me, but the stark expression of uncertainty it revealed. What kind of attitude had I been expecting to see in him? Certainly not utter equanimity. I knew he was engaged in a fierce struggle. But this plea from the heart caught me up short. It compelled me to consider more carefully what kind of struggle my friend was facing. How much physical pain was he in? Did he feel lonely? Was he sad at the prospect of departing from his beloved wife and children, from a world he loved so deeply? I wondered too whether he felt fear or anxiety during the long, dark hours of the night.

His sense of isolation was, I began to realize, one of the most difficult struggles he faced. Not isolation from friends and loved ones, who were near at hand and who were a constant source of consolation to him. Rather, it was the sense of isolation that arose from his recognition that no one really knew what he was contending with. “I am bound to feel much isolation,” he said, “because for everyone I meet or speak with my death represents one event among many others—tomorrow’s engagement or the holiday planned for Christmas. Whereas for me my death is *the* event.” Not that it really could have been otherwise. But this isolation made him realize that no one among the living could really teach him about the most important question facing him: how to approach death. Only those who had experienced it, and borne witness to it—the martyrs especially—could do that. “What they teach us, above all, is to go into death wholeheartedly, to embrace the experience with one’s whole heart and in *joy*.”

This note of joy certainly permeated his final days and weeks. During that last Christmas, he found himself struck again by the characteristic note of joy that resounds through this feast. He himself was coming to know this joy ever more deeply. And coming to know, through this joy, a taste of eternity. “We have to be secure in joy,” he said. “We have to be full of joy. . . this joy is never going to end. Joy is eternal, which is why human beings have always felt they have been in eternity when they have received such a touch of joy.”

But how to be “secure in joy?” How to know oneself as living on the edge of eternity when one is facing death, struggling through a period of intense suffering? Only by embracing that suffering, and becoming purified by it. To put it in these terms cannot help but sound glib and pat. But that is not at all what I saw in my friend during these last days. Rather, he was *struggling* to accept and embrace his own suffering and anxiety and hoping through it to become a witness, a bearer of compassion for others. Central to this struggle for him was the attempt to cultivate a greater sense of intimacy with Jesus, especially by following him toward the cross. His own illness had helped him to begin relating to Jesus less distantly, less in the third person, and more, as he said, as a You or Thou. “Jesus becomes our intimate personal friend,” he noted, “when we *share* his suffering for the redemption of the world. Perhaps only then can we also share his joy.”

Many years earlier, in his book *Holiness*, he had already begun reflecting on the intimate relationship between suffering and joy,

on the *necessity* of suffering in the journey to God. At the time, he had observed: “the nearer we get to the Holy One the more intense the demands made on us if our course is to be sustained.”³ Nowhere was this more apparent than in the demands made upon Jesus, demands that left him toward the end “bewildered and distressed,” hoping that his own suffering might somehow be circumvented, his heart “breaking unto death” (Mark 14:32–35).⁴ But not, in spite of everything, broken. Why? Because in his self-sacrifice, his heart was becoming purified, suffused with compassion for all those broken and fragile beings whom he loved even unto death. And therefore suffused with joy. I think Donald had an intimation of this joy even then. Now, however, as he found himself being drawn ever more deeply into the mystery of suffering, so too did he find himself being drawn into a more profound joy.

He had taken to heart the words of the letter to the Colossians during these last months: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church” (Col. 1:24, NRSV). He had begun living intimately and palpably into the mystery of this truth as his own body gradually diminished in strength. “The word that came to me this morning,” he said, “was *ekenosen*—he emptied himself (Phil. 2). It is a word which helps me make sense of the fact that my muscles are losing their power; they are being emptied of power. I must try. . . to take it as part of the emptying of my self, the fibres of my *being* being taken apart by God so that I may become a ‘new creature.’” As his own suffering intensified, so did his awareness of and compassion for everyone else’s. “Each time I pass a crucifix now,” he noted, “I touch the feet of Jesus and call to mind the words of Pascal: *Jesus Christ est en agonie jusqu’au fin du monde.*” And I think of the suffering people throughout the world, especially now in Zaire. And I try to place myself amidst them.” Here too, perhaps, one can hear the resonance of Florensky’s words: “everybody and everything is so closely interwoven that separation is only approximate.” God’s redemptive work in us, especially the growth of compassion that comes through suffering, makes the idea of separation from one another unimaginable.

*Our
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lives are
suffused with
God’s love*

³ Donald Nicholl, *Holiness* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981), p. 129.

⁴ See discussion in *Holiness*, pp. 130–32.

INTIMATIONS OF THE NEW CREATION

THIS GROWTH of compassion in us also makes the idea of separation from God unimaginable. This is the great gift of the martyrs to us, the truth they bear witness to: that our entire lives are suffused with God's love; that we are already living at the edge of eternity. In those last days, my friend Donald seemed to have become intensely aware of this truth. Not as something altogether new or unexpected; he had, after all, been striving to live into this truth for most of his life. Now, however, came a new clarity brought about by his continual and radical relinquishment of everything but God.

Like his beloved Alyosha, Donald seemed already to be living in a new, transfigured world. "I have received intimations of what the 'new creation' might be, and what it might be to live unconditionally," he said. But unlike Alyosha, his life was drawing to a close. He was looking out onto a different horizon, already walking toward it. "I realize that such unconditional love is not altogether possible in this world for most of us. . . I need to be bathed in the unconditional love of God which is heaven, plunged in the ocean of pure love so that my whole being is cleansed of my selfishness; and my ego is swept away entirely. I have a longing for that boundless love. . ."

During our last afternoon together, we walked outside in the garden for a few minutes in silence. The sun was low in the sky. The birds had recently returned and were filling the trees with their song. The new spring grass was deep green and soft beneath our feet as we trod together the path that Donald had been walking alone these past few months. As we passed by the side of the house on one of our turns, Donald paused and motioned with his arms outstretched toward the sun, the trees, and the fields beyond. As if to say, "Look! Look! Isn't it magnificent?" As if "threads from all those innumerable worlds of God" were all coming together in his soul, and "it was trembling all over, 'touching other worlds.'" We continued walking and he motioned again and again, now toward the birds, now toward the garden, bursting with daffodils, crocus, tulips, now toward me. His face was radiant with joy.

Life at the Center— Life at the Edge

by M. Robert Mulholland, Jr.

HE WAS THE KIND of religious fanatic with which the world has been abundantly cursed. As he left the city that day, his heart burned with zeal for God. Heresy had arisen among God's people and he was convinced it was his God-given role to stamp out this pernicious movement. If this heresy persisted and the faithful tolerated the heretics, God would not look with favor upon the community. Surely he was in the center of God's will. In fact, had you questioned him about this, he

