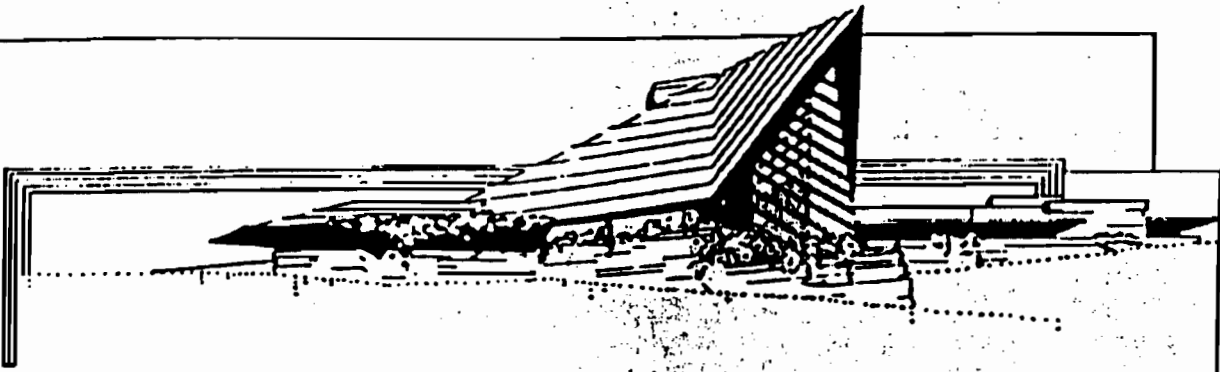


**"REVERIES OF A MID-LIFE CANCER SURVIVOR:
SOME PRINCIPLES FOR THE BONUS DAYS"**

by **DENIS COLLINS**

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THE FREE PULPIT



SERMONS FROM
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“Reveries of a Mid-Life Cancer Survivor: Some Principles for the Bonus Days”

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Today's opening reading is from Jack Kornfield's classic meditation book *A Path With Heart*. Kornfield writes about “the everyday bodhisattva,” someone like you and me, who can share enlightenment with others.

“There is no predetermined story for a bodhisattva to follow. To live as a bodhisattva is to touch the spirit of the Buddha within us and to allow that to shine through our own individual life. Buddhist history is filled with a thousand different accounts of how the bodhisattva spirit can manifest in the world. There are bodhisattvas everywhere. One of my teachers lived in a cave for many years, silently radiating compassion to the world. Another was a very wealthy businessman who also taught meditation retreats to tens of thousands of students worldwide. His master was a high-ranking cabinet minister in Burma who got the government officials in his offices to meditate at the start of each day.

One of the greatest of modern Buddhist yogis and masters was a woman who lived a simple householder life in Calcutta with her daughter and grandchildren. She taught in her one-room apartment and gave amazing blessings to all who visited her. Another was a nurse who worked with the dying. Another a teacher of young children. Some were stern, some were humorous. Some lived out in the forests, others in monasteries and ashrams, others in the middle of great cities with ordinary jobs and ordinary families.

In all of them a spirit of wisdom and compassion ran through their actions. They acted from their Buddha nature, which connected them with all beings. They did not grasp their own personal stories but lived connected to the whole. Recently some red-robed Tibetan lamas visited New Mexico. A student offered them all hot-air balloon rides. But they arrived in the morning to find that there was room for but one monk to fly. A reporter covering the event asked the others if they were disappointed. ‘No.’ They smiled and continued, ‘He’s going for all of us.’ For a bodhisattva there is joy in the happiness of all beings.”

The sermon I'm about to share with you is about my own hot-air balloon ride. You need not take the same trip I did. I pray that none of you get cancer or have to go through nine months of chemotherapy. Instead, I wish to share ten principles that stood out in my mind after being told by doctors that there was a good chance I would soon die from the cancer.

In July of 1995, while attending Business Ethics conferences in Vienna and Prague, I became very sick. I had sinusitis, bronchitis, pneumonia, insomnia and a few other illnesses. People told me the medical facilities in the Czech Republic were less than desirable so I struggled to make it through the week. Upon arriving back in Madison I collapsed from exhaustion. Two days later the doctors gave me the shocking news ... I had cancer. Worse yet, it was Stage Three cancer. Cancer comes in four stages. The first stage is introductory while the fourth stage is advanced placement! I had Hodgkins Disease.

Nobody knows why you get it, but it is very curable, if detected right away. Apparently I had it for several years without knowing it. My initial odds of survival were fifty/fifty, which I didn't tell anyone but my wife. Six months later the cancer got worse, rather than better, and on January 11, 1996, the day prior to my fortieth birthday, the doctors told me to prepare for a possible death in August. Fortunately, their predictions were wrong and I'm now almost three years in remission.

That first month I thought a lot about God, particularly as one part of my body after another failed to work well. The doctors were dumping seven different types of poisons into my bloodstream and the drugs were playing havoc on my organs. They ripped the lining off my esophagus and the only thing I could swallow were ice cubes. I'll never forget a long distance telephone conversation with my Italian mother as I laid in a fetal position on my hospital bed.

“What are the doctor's feeding you?” my anxious mother asked from her New Jersey home.

"Nothing, I can't eat," I told her.

"What kind of doctors are they? Tell them to feed you spaghetti," she insisted.

"But I can't swallow anything, it hurts too much. All I can do is munch on some ice cubes."

"That's crazy, eat some spaghetti. The noodles are nice and soft. They'll just slide down your throat."

She wouldn't let up on the issue and I'm sorry to report that I hung up on her. That made me feel miserable so I called back and my father answered.

"Why did you hang up on your mother?" he said upon answering the phone. "You really hurt her feelings."

"She wouldn't let up on the spaghetti thing," I told him.

"Well, she's right. You have to eat something." This surprised me because my father is a very quite kind of guy who doesn't like to impose his opinions on anyone.

"Dad, I can't. It'll only make me throw up."

"Good," he said. "Eat some smooth spaghetti and throw it up. Then eat some more. This way your body knows you're serious. Sooner or later it'll give up and let you eat the spaghetti." Unfortunately, I think I hung up on him too.

The chemotherapy knocked the wind out of me that summer and soon I could barely walk a block or two from home without collapsing from exhaustion. It had damaged my heart and lungs. The more my body failed, the more amazed I was at how our bodies are constructed. Everything is interconnected. Are you aware that you take about 18,000 breaths a day? You do. Our bodies are marvelous creations. As each organ worsened, I became more convinced that there must be a God who designed them. God's existence became very real to me during these traumatic months and I became very grateful for each day of survival.

It was during this time period that I began reflecting on the types of principles which were most meaningful to me. I continued thinking about this through the nine months of chemo and ever since. By

principles I mean phrases which we keep repeating to ourselves as we interact with outside stimuli. Imagine that we each have a tape recorder in our brains playing several messages over and over again on never-ending loops. These are the messages on my tape recorder.

Principle Number One: The world needs our help.

I was born in the Bronx and grew up in suburban New Jersey, a mere ten or fifteen minute drive to the Lincoln Tunnel and Manhattan. My parents are news junkies. The radio goes on first thing in the morning and remains on all day. They get to hear the latest news every hour on the hour. While growing up we got three newspapers every day, the *Newark Star Ledger* in the morning, the *Bergen Record* in the afternoon, and my dad brought home the *New York Daily News* every work day. And then there's television. News at five o'clock, six o'clock, seven o'clock and eleven o'clock. My dad, who grew up rooting for the Giants before they moved from the Bronx to San Francisco, loved it when the Yankees lost an afternoon game because he could see the low lights four times before going to bed.

We were inundated with the latest news, and all I kept hearing were people screaming out for help. The newspaper is nothing less than a cry for help. Story after story is about something wrong with the world. A murder is committed, people are starving to death, there's too much poverty, the environment is going to waste. Why do reporters feel compelled to tell us this every day? My conclusion was simple — we're suppose to do something about it! Each story hurt my conscience and I felt called to action. But I didn't really know what to do beyond getting a college degree, which leads to the second principle.

Principle Number Two: You gotta listen to the sounds of the streets.

I attended Montclair State College, lovingly referred to as the Harvard of northern New Jersey's working-class colleges. The cool thing to do on weekends was to explore the streets of New York City. I'd pay the toll for the Lincoln Tunnel as if entering a huge amusement park. I took to hanging out all day in Greenwich Village and spent a lot of time in Washington Square Park. There were many

musicians, an endless number of chess games, and a beautiful water fountain in the middle.

I'll never forget one hot Saturday. I arrived early for a chess game and saw a hippy-ish guy playing some bongo drums. "You gotta listen to the sounds of the street," he said, followed by a few beats on the drum. Then he'd share a real life story of someone's pain and suffering.

*You gotta listen to the sounds of the street...
I lost my job last week because my kid got sick and there was nobody to take care of him but me.
So I got fired.
Then he got sicker and I couldn't take him to the doctor because I lost my health coverage...
You gotta listen to the sounds of the street...
You gotta listen to the sounds of the street ...*

And on and on he went. I walked past him several times in the morning, afternoon and evening. By the end of the day I was convinced that truth is found on the street, not among our politicians or business leaders. And I'm still convinced of that. That's why I send my students into homeless shelters and low-income neighborhoods as part of their class assignments.

Principle Number Three: The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand, Part I.

I was raised Catholic and said the *Our Father* a lot. One particular phrase stands out in my mind from all those repetitions — *Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. I was a very impressionable child and soon believed that God wanted us to create heaven on earth. But I wasn't sure what this meant, beyond responding to every tragedy I heard about from the media and street musicians.

Then one Saturday during the Christmas season, while living on campus, I was having a very bad day and hopped into the car to do some Christmas shopping at nearby Willowbrook Mall. On the way there, as was my habit at the time, I lit up a joint. After three or four puffs, I was feeling simply marvelous. When I got out of the car I wanted to hug every stranger. I wished everyone could just stop shopping for a minute and say hello to their neighbor.

What happened? When I got into the car I felt angry and resentful. When I got out I felt infinite love and forgiveness. My attitude had changed. The creation of heaven on earth meant changing our attitudes. I don't mean to encourage drug use. This should be a natural experience requiring no drugs or alcohol. I strongly believed that we could all experience heaven on earth if we simply adopted a heavenly attitude toward each other. How easy it seemed.

Principle Number Four: The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand, Part II.

But it wasn't easy. No matter how good an attitude I had, I found myself living in a corrupt society. I ended up graduating from Montclair State College in 1977 with a business degree and got a job as a grocery store manager.

Supermarkets have only a two-percent profit margin. If you get three bad inventories in a row you're fired. As a result, you want to create a financial cushion, and this means ripping off customers and corporate headquarters. How many of you weigh your bananas when you get home from the store? None. We know that. We also know that you don't weigh any of your other fruits and vegetables. So we tipped the scales in our favor a little. Items that are suppose to go on sale every Saturday at eight o'clock in the morning aren't changed until five at night. Thus, only the really informed consumer got the sale price. We exaggerated our damaged goods reports to headquarters. You name it, we did it.

I felt inundated with corruption. These habits were very easy to adopt. So I packed my bags, got in my car, and drove cross county to San Francisco. Two or three weeks after I arrived a perky young woman approached me on the street and asked why I was in Frisco.

What the heck, I thought, I might as well tell her the truth: "I'm looking for a bunch of idealists living on a commune who want to create a better society." Her eyes almost popped out of her head, which is appropriate since her name was Poppy.

"You should come over to our house for dinner tonight," she told me, "that's exactly what we're all about." Thus began my five years as a Moonie.

Moonies are lovely people severely misrepresented in the media. The beautiful thing about them is that they really do want to create heaven on earth. I felt at home with them. I was no longer a social misfit. Reverend Moon taught me that it was great to try to be a holy person, but that wasn't enough. To create heaven on earth I had to create a holy family, a holy community, and a holy nation. If you don't like the word "holy", just substitute the word "just." God wants me to help create justice-based institutions. And I still do. But probably even more important, the Unification Church taught me the importance of families. That's the next evolutionary stage for everyone who wants to obtain individual enlightenment. We are meant to live in couples, and as couples we are meant to create ideal families.

Principle Number Five: God will only give you problems that you can handle.

This is the strong internal voice I heard shortly after the doctors told me I might die from cancer. There was nothing for me to fear. I certainly felt sorry about the fact that I might not see my lovely five-year-old son and two-year-old daughter grow up, but this was out of my control. I told myself that I could always videotape some parental advice and have Di give the tape to them upon their eighteenth birthdays. Cancer merely was the latest problem for me to manage, and, if I kept an optimistic attitude, I could manage it.

Every person responds to cancer differently, so I share the following very hesitantly. I found it essential to live as normal a life as possible. That's how I managed my problem. I continued with my regular teaching load and fulfilled all of my professional obligations. It was very important that I act as if the cancer was nothing but a nasty cold or virus. And by doing so, I felt God near me every day.

Principle Number Six: God is that which unites our hearts and minds in thinking and doing good acts for others.

So who is this God? My conception of God is not that of an old man sitting on the clouds with a long beard who wants to see me suffer. Instead, God is an energy force that unites all good people together. The God Energy speaks to us through our conscience and provides a very consistent message. Love and serve

others. When we do, as individuals and couples, we reflect the spirit of God. Our chore is to find the speck of goodness that is in everyone, even the most heinous criminal or boss! That is how we can experience God.

Principle Number Seven: Good will come through you if you are willing to be different and take risks.

I heard the internal voice tell me this one day while walking to my office. At the time I was wondering if any of the nontraditional things I had done as a professor in Madison were worth the effort. The answer came in loud and clear. Although we tend to be risk-averse, we should be risk-takers. But the world is inside out and upside down. For instance, professors demand tenure to protect their freedom of speech. Now listen closely and tell me how many tenured professors are saying or doing anything radical? The silence is deafening, but that's a different sermon.

But in this spirit, I wish to take a risk with you. I had an out-of-body experience while undergoing chemo. Absolutely true. If it makes you feel more comfortable, you can tell yourself it was merely a dream. But it was very real to me. It happened during my first hospitalization from chemotherapy. My white blood cell count had dipped to a dangerous 300, normal is about 4,000 to 8,000. I was a sitting duck for infections and those opportunistic viruses found my body to be a willing host. My temperature soared to 103 degrees and higher. I was in terrible shape.

One night, while in total agony, I turned the lights out in hopes of having a long well-deserved sleep. As was my habit in the hospital, I turned on Wisconsin Public Radio to hear their late-Sunday-night jazz show. I thought it'd be a nice transition to sleep. I didn't even have to worry about turning off the radio because after midnight it's nothing but dead air. They were doing some New Age space music, which I like in small doses. As I laid in darkness, staring up at the ceiling, I found my mind wandering into outer space.

Suddenly, my spirit left my body. Whoosh. My spirit headed upward through a tunnel. I looked back and saw my body lying on the hospital bed, with an IV stuck in my arm.

"Don't look back," a spiritual guide suggested. We floated through dark space for quite some time until we reached thousands of people wearing orange robes gathered in several concentric circle. I found myself in the middle of them, as if miraculously appearing on the 50-yard line at Camp Randall Stadium during the Fifth Quarter. They were ecstatic.

I arrived and a bright, warm light flowed throughout my body. I was where I was meant to be, surrounded by endless waves of compassionate love.

A beautiful woman with long brown hair, deep penetrating eyes, and a radiant smile stepped forward out of the crowd to welcome me to spirit world. The entire crowd moved closer in unison. The closer she came the more warmth and love I felt. Finally, a few inches away, she raised her arms to embrace me.

"Stop!" I shouted.

Everyone stopped, including the leader.

"If you touch me I'll die," I told her. "I don't want to die yet. There are a few things I still need to do on earth. You are all wonderful people, and I'd love to be here, but the time isn't right yet. Can I go back to my body and come back here later?"

Blissfully, she nodded "yes" and I forced myself awake.

My body was drenched in sweat. I had no idea where I was. I looked out the window and saw the State Capitol building. "What am I doing in Washington, D.C.?" I thought.

The room was pitch dark. It reminded me of a low-income housing project in Boston I fundraised as a Moonie. "Aha, I must be in Boston," I thought. But what's with the Capitol building?

"Oh, I must be in Philadelphia," I concluded. "I'm fund-raising a public housing building in Philadelphia. That's what I'm doing. Gee, it's so dark here. I better get into a lighted area before something bad happens. It's dangerous to fundraise in a dark hallway."

So I stepped out of bed, pulling the IV pole attached to my left arm to the ground.

"What's this?" I wondered while rubbing a bandage

holding a needle in my arm. Then I felt the urge for a bowel movement. I stumbled to the bathroom, pulling the IV pole with me.

Footsteps rushed my way as I moaned loudly while sitting on the toilet bowl. Oh, oh, trouble. The bathroom door swung open. I expected someone with a gun demanding the money I collected for the church. Instead, a woman wearing a nurse's outfit appeared with a frightened look on her face.

"Oh, that's right, I'm in the hospital," I gratefully told her.

"Of course you are! Are you okay?" She asked.

"Yeah, I didn't know where I was. I had a wild experience. You wouldn't believe what just happened to me."

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"We weren't sure how you were doing. You didn't look good when I stopped in earlier."

"I'm fine," I said.

"And you're having a bowel movement, that's great!"

"Nah. Nothing's coming out. I'm still constipated."

She helped me off the toilet bowl and back to bed. I pulled the chord that turned on the overhead light, raised the bed into a sitting position, and grabbed yesterday's newspaper to read again. No way was I going back to sleep, even if it was only two o'clock in the morning. I knew that if I fell asleep I would die. They were wonderful people in spirit world, exhibiting a similar level of heart, but I didn't want to join them yet. The experience was very comforting.

Principle Number Eight: We're all born with the same level of heart.

This principle follows from my out of body experience. The common attribute of everyone who greeted me in spirit world was our level of heart. We shared common moral sentiments about ourselves and other

people. This got me thinking. It is often said that everyone is created equal. What does this mean? We certainly aren't born with equal levels of skills and intelligence. Nor with equal opportunities or equal rights. So in what sense are we equal? I finally had my answer. Everyone is born with the same heart. By heart I mean the metaphysical heart, not the physical one. We are born with an equal capacity to give and receive love.

It doesn't matter if you are born in the United States, Africa, or Asia; in New York City, Madison or San Francisco; in the eastside, northside, westside, or southside of Madison; in 1999, 1990, 1956, 1492, or 353 B.C. One thing we all share in common is that everyone is born with the same level of heart.

Then things happen to us, and we respond. Our parents either love us unconditionally, conditionally, or not at all. Our brothers and sisters support us or hate us. We gravitate toward good or bad people. We grow up in certain neighborhoods and attend certain schools. As time goes on, our hearts either grow, remain the same, or contract. Then we die.

I am now convinced that after we die we end up in another dimension of reality with people whose hearts are the same as our own. Those who love and serve others unconditionally start the next phase of existence with others who have loved and served others unconditionally. Whatever your major hangup, be it greed, envy, or lust, is shared by everyone else you end up with. They are us, and we are them.

This phenomenon reminds me of a talk I heard Timothy Leary give back in the 1970s at Montclair State College. At the time, Timothy Leary was selling tickets for space ships. Timothy promised to make sure that you ended up on a space ship with people exactly like yourself. If you didn't like the ship you were on, then you had to change. Do a few more good deeds and you'll be transferred to a ship with people who do more good deeds. Do a few evil deeds and you'll be transferred to a ship with people who do more evil deeds. The choice was always yours.

Principle Number Nine: These are my bonus days. As mentioned earlier, the day prior to my 40th birthday the doctors told me the chemo wasn't working and I should prepare myself for a probable death in August of 1996. My chances of survival had declined dramatically and they started dumping huge amounts of poisons into my system because we had nothing to lose. And it worked.

Ever since then I've become very aware that these are my bonus days. I could have died, but didn't. It's been a very liberating experience. I have nothing to fear. Shortly after this new understanding, I read the following quote from Buckminster Fuller: *What is it on this planet that needs doing that I know something about, that probably won't happen unless I take responsibility for it.* Meditate on that one for awhile.

As a result of these new understandings of the purpose of my life, I did a lot of politically incorrect things, such as blowing the whistle on unethical activities in the Business School and on campus. Small changes have been made, but many of the unethical activities continue. I wished others would have spoken out and joined me, but that didn't happen. Instead, other professors and administrators continued to live in denial of the obvious. Meanwhile, I've moved on to other issues, including searching for good-hearted people who are doing their best to make the world a better place for everyone else. What better way to spend these bonus days!

Principle Number Ten: The Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand, Part III.

The last principle I wish to share is similar to two others — the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Earlier, I referred to this principle as being a state of mind and building just institutions, including the family. Now I take the phrase very literally. By "hand" I mean at my fingertips. Everyone I touch is a potential heavenly experience. Every morning I touch my wife and two lovely kids, Seth and Anna. Those are opportunities for heavenly experience. During the day I touch many others. Each person provides a unique opportunity to experience goodness. The kingdom of heaven is at my fingertips and it's up to me to realize it.

Well, that's my hot-air balloon ride! I wish to end this sermon with a short meditation. As I noted earlier, all of us have a little tape recorder playing in our minds, providing us with principles to guide our daily interactions. Let's take a minute to get in touch with those principles. If you don't like them, then think of higher level principles that would be nice to adopt. Maybe we can erase the tape and start over. After all, every day is a bonus day, whether or not you've had cancer.