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An Ode for St. Cecilia's Day

by JAMES MCCONKEY

I WAS PRIVILEGED, on April 14, 1993, to inaugurate the Colby series of nonfiction readings in honor of Edwin J. Kenney, Jr. In prefacing my reading of Ed's own last work—the autobiographical essay "Waves," in which he speaks of his mother's death from breast cancer from the perspective of his knowledge that he, too, has cancer (a rare form he valiantly battled against for years)—I spoke of my long friendship with both Ed and his wife Susan, a friendship that began in the days before their marriage, when both were graduate students at Cornell and I was chair of their separate graduate committees. And I spoke of the last time my wife and I saw Ed; we had come to Waterville the previous fall to see him and Susie during what turned out to be the last interval of relatively good health he was destined to have. The four of us drove into the mountains on a day of brilliant sunshine to see the foliage as it was changing into its reds and oranges and yellows; it was a marvelous little journey that included a good meal in a country restaurant. Physically weakened though he was, Ed retained his generous spirit, all the qualities that make him a bright presence in our memories, and I remain grateful to Susie for encouraging us to come for a brief visit at an appropriate time and to Ed for maintaining that spirit.

But I don't want here to repeat in detail the remarks I made on the evening of April 14; rather, I wish to say something about "Waves," and about my feelings as I was reading it, and to conclude with an excerpt from my own work that I had planned as an accompaniment to Ed's essay, but decided not to use. Above, I say that "Waves" was written from the perspective of Ed's own knowledge of the cancer that sooner or later would take his life; but it is another perspective—a spiritual insight—that truly informs it, and permits him to speak forthrightly about his mother's illness as well as his own. That perspective, of course, comes at the end of the essay, as he describes the people waving to him from the shore as he tacks his sailboat about. Initially, he perceives the people on shore as possessing the perfection and beauty of a painting and then as part of a living tableau—as a vision of human unity that includes him. The wave of the major shorebound figure becomes "not a wave good-bye, signifying death or estrangement, or loss, but a welcome, beckoning me back into the life of the world."

Given the fact that Ed was to die shortly after completing the final draft of this essay, a reader might be forgiven for assuming that at least part of the depth of feeling this moment gives him is, whether he is willing to admit it or not, a

consequence of his sense that the wave *is* a final “good-bye”; but such an assumption would be mistaken. In preparation for this visionary moment, Ed writes, “My illness and my sailing have been inextricably bound up with one another . . . I love the concentration that being out there by myself requires, the complete and necessary attention to the act that can paradoxically render things of the world so precisely and luminously, which has always given me an extraordinary sense of well-being while at the same time abolishing my sense of self.” From whatever knowledge of such moments my life as well as my reading of Augustine and others has granted me, I know that the happiness, and unity, that they provide come from the power of such moments to expunge the sense of one’s separate self, of one’s isolated and self-conscious identity.

Reading that essay aloud to a roomful of people was a singular—an extraordinary—experience for me. At first, the “I” of the essay was a separate person, and I was aware, in saying “I,” that this “I” was not I, but another writer making certain choices or stylistic decisions different from the ones I would have made; but the further I got into the essay, the greater my identification with that other “I,” and during that description of the wave made by the major figure on the shore, I vanished not simply into the teller but into his vision.

I realize that in the sufferings and indignities of his disease, Ed (being human) was not always as triumphant over his mortality as he is in this essay. As a final statement, though, “Waves” represents a spiritual victory, and as such can enrich every reader of it. I was going to follow my reading of it, as I have said, with an excerpt from my own writing—one about a spiritual victory obtained by another long-time friend of mine; it comes near the end of the last essay in the final volume (the recently published *Stories from My Life with the Other Animals*) of the lengthy autobiographical work I’ve been engaged in for more than thirty years. From the belief that my auditors and I already had vicariously experienced enough of the ordeals that sooner or later will face nearly every human being, I read instead a lighter and wholly self-sustained bit of autobiography. What I didn’t read then, and now append below, comes from a piece celebrating the powers of music titled “An Ode for St. Cecilia’s Day.” When I was a young teacher in a small Kentucky college, my wife and I became friends of a drama instructor and his wife; in this essay I call them P.C. and Linda, and also invent names for their children. A few years back, just as the Gulf War was about to commence, my wife and I stopped in Portsmouth, Va., to see P.C., now a widower, and his handicapped son, Ted. Most of the necessary expository material is contained within the telling. Like “Waves,” this is the account of a spiritual victory over painful odds. I give it here as a tribute to Ed and Susie as well as to P.C. and Linda; the final passage of this excerpt applies, I think, to Susie as well as Ed, for the victories over vicissitude that both of them have achieved—something I would have said on April 14, had I not chickened out from the reading of it.

"An Ode for St. Cecilia's Day" (excerpt)

IN JANUARY OF THE present year, with the Gulf War imminent, both Jean and I became apprehensive and restless; all of my own old abhorrence for humanity's long and banal recourse to military might had returned. We decided to commune with the alligators, egrets, and herons in the Everglades—and we decided to drive to the southern tip of Florida in a leisurely manner, stopping off at places we'd never been. We must have wanted, above all, to see P.C., for we contacted him—to make sure he and Ted would welcome a visit—before we made any other plans.

Though we found P.C.'s house—a brick bungalow on a corner lot in a quiet residential district of Portsmouth—without difficulty, we thought, at first, that he and Ted weren't at home, for nobody responded to the first ring and we could see or hear no signs of life within. We rang the bell again. Some inner door apparently was opened, for we heard several voices, raised maybe in argumentation; none of them sounded like P.C.'s. I was checking the address I'd written on a slip, to make sure we'd made no mistake, when Ted, P.C. standing behind him, opened the front door. Both of them were smiling. "I remember you," said Ted, shaking my hand; but thirty-five years ago, when we had last met, he had been an infant. Now he seemed a boy of twelve or thirteen with a humped back. "He remembers you from some old photographs," P.C. said gently before embracing Jean and me. The four of us then stood without talking, trying to adjust what we held in our minds to what we saw, waiting for the old images to dissolve, like ghosts, into the present selves. It takes but an instant for this to happen to friends who have been absent from each other for years; after it does, the youthful image can't be recalled until a second physical separation turns both past and present into images that are apprehended simultaneously in a kind of double vision that, like a stereoscope, provides depth.

P.C. was not nearly so tall as I remembered him. The slight stoop had become a considerable one, as if in sympathy for his son's deformity; and the thinness of his frame—which had accentuated his height—was gone, though his face remained gaunt. I thought it strange that he led us beyond the large living room with its comfortable-looking couch and chairs as well as its piano to a much smaller room without windows. The voices I had heard came from the television in this room, tuned to a soap opera. The only other light came from a bridge lamp between a worn overstuffed chair (an opened book lay on its seat cushion) and a sofa.

Ted turned off the sound of the television and showed us the machine P.C. had bought him for the hooked rugs he made. The machine stood in a corner of the room, by a straight-back chair that faced the television. P.C. pointed to the intricately-patterned rug that covered much of the carpet on the floor. Ted, he remarked, had made that rug, as well as the antimacassars on the sofa arms. He had also made the hall runner and any number of throw rugs elsewhere in the house, and—since it took so long, even with the machine, to make rugs or wall-hangings and other holiday gifts for his relatives—Ted was already at work, P.C. said, on his presents for the following Christmas.

Jean and I both praised his work, for it was carefully done and the patterns handsome ones; we wondered that he didn't sell them, through some arts and crafts shop in Portsmouth. Such a suggestion alarmed P.C. more than it did Ted, who simply said he had fun making them while he watched the soap operas and his Dad read a book; P.C. said, "It just wouldn't be *right* to sell them." His every gesture indicated a protectiveness of his son. Probably he felt that the selling of the rugs would be an exploitative use of Ted's handicap.

Ted was engaging in his openness and vivacity. He still seemed to be a boy—but one who could combine the simple language of a child with such words as "proclivity" and "comprehension" and "convolutions" and who would intersperse his conversation with phrases like "What I really mean to say, Dad, is . . ." He could recite the intricate plots of half a dozen soap operas, laughing at the silliness of them. When I made a pun, he understood it at once, stomping his feet to express his delight—a response so enchanting to me that I made a half dozen more, something I normally can manage with such profusion only after drinking half a bottle of wine. He showed Jean and me his prized collection of picture postcards—most of them photographs of mountains or monuments—sent to him over the years by relatives and family friends on their vacations. Before passing each one to us, Ted would examine it himself, his eyes shining as if he were seeing it for the first time. I could understand now why P.C. had brought us into this dark and womblike space in the middle of his house—this and not the living room with its piano and conversational grouping of furniture was the center of the life he shared with Ted, and he wanted to include us in its intimacies.

That evening, Myra, the daughter we had known in Morehead—the one who, like Larry, had studied piano with Fran—joined the rest of us for dinner at a restaurant of the kind that serves Italian food and that, run by a family, welcomes all members of anybody else's family. P.C. said that he had often gone there with Linda and the children. Though he hadn't been back for several years, the proprietor and many of the old customers greeted him and Ted as old friends; and other diners, familiar with him through the plays he once had directed, came to our table. Another family entered the restaurant, the father and grown son wheeling a litter on which a young woman lay. Despite her illness or handicap, she waved and smiled to the customers and waiters who applauded her. It was a good restaurant, and I was glad P.C. had brought us to it. Ted was normally on a strict diet, but had permission from his doctor to forego it on occasions as special as this one. P.C. reminisced about our Morehead years, remembering in particular another special day—the one that ended with the singing in the magical church by the river.

Toward the end of our long conversation at the restaurant, I asked Myra if she remembered the night—Ted had not yet been born; she had been maybe five—that she had cried, simply because P.C. hadn't punished her. Linda had been called out of town because of some emergency; P.C., desperately trying to complete the blocking for his upcoming production, had ignored Myra's attempts all day to attract his attention through acts of increasing mischief. But after he had put her to bed, her loud sobbing did draw his attention at last; when

he came into the bedroom to take her in his arms and ask her what was wrong, she had replied, "Daddy, I did one bad thing after another all day long and you didn't even spank me!" The Myra who was more than forty said that since Linda's first stroke, P.C. had given his complete attention to the needs of his family, and it was too bad he no longer had the opportunity to be distracted from them by the profession he also had loved. It pleased her to see his happiness on this night, for it seemed to her that in his devotion to Ted he was slowly retreating from the rest of the world. Myra visited them so frequently, in the evenings after work and on weekends, that she kept half her wardrobe at the house. She obviously worried about these two family members she loved so much—her seventy year old father and her thirty-five year old sibling who remained his young child.

Ted not only set the table for breakfast the next morning, but made toast and bacon and coffee for Jean and me; as recompense for his hearty meal the night before, he ate only a small bowl of his prescribed cereal. After breakfast, he left for the inner room, to work on a rug while watching television, and P.C. invited us to drink our second cups of coffee in the living room. It was here that he finally began to talk in detail about what had happened to him and his family in the years since we had been separated. He spoke of his and Linda's growing concern about Ted, and of the many fruitless consultations with the family doctor and an array of different specialists over an impairment only they, the parents, could notice at first. Until Ted began to limp and sometimes fall, the problem was considered a psychological one. Had it been properly diagnosed in time—a cyst at the top of the spine prevented drainage from the brain—Ted might have suffered no abnormalities.

Linda and P.C. had tended to Ted in the precarious months following his surgery. Now, years later, he not only had lived far beyond the prediction, but actually was beginning to mature physically: he was approaching puberty more than two decades late. P.C. believed that Linda's anxieties about Ted had contributed to, if not caused, her first stroke. *Her* specialist predicted that she would never regain her ability to speak, but P.C., who had considerable knowledge of speech disabilities, thought otherwise. He gave up theater, that time-consuming passion, so that he could spend hours each day working with Linda. In order to support his family, he began to teach evening courses in composition at the local community college, two or three or more each session. . . .

"Wait a minute, P.C.," I said. "Those are just as time-consuming, they're the courses you used to hate for the hours they took." I interrupted him, I suppose, because his voice, in telling this story, was again taking on that shy or apologetic tone that I once had associated with fabrications. The narrative was so painful to hear that I wanted to discover some error in it.

These evening courses, he said, met only once a week, and all of the grading for them could be done at home, by Linda's bedside or wheelchair. Though she had no way to tell him so other than with a nod, he knew she desperately wanted to learn to speak again. Her energy was so limited that she needed to rest—time

enough for him to grade three or four papers—between the exercises he was coaxing her to do. Those exercises were futile. Suddenly one day he remembered Linda's love of music, of singing in particular. He wheeled her to the piano—the one they had bought for Myra in Morehead. He hit a key. "A," he sang. She opened her mouth, but made no sound. He hit the key again and again, singing "A," for she clearly was trying to sing it; and finally she made a quavering sound.

Using the piano keys, he taught her to sing "A" through "G." How she learned the rest of the alphabet, I don't know; perhaps—as I had done, in the bathtub with Larry—P.C. turned to the "Alphabet Song." Patiently he taught her, still at the piano, to sing words, and finally short sentences. Meanwhile, she was trying to learn to walk as well. After some physical therapy sessions at a clinic, she was able, so long as P.C. supported her, to take a few steps, and finally to walk without his assistance. She was never able to communicate without the help of melody, though. Throughout their remaining years together, they spoke together wholly in song, using the tunes—many of them hymns—most familiar to her. ("Do you want some toast, dear Linda?" is what I imagined him singing, to which she sang back, "Why, yes, my darling man.")

At this point, I no longer could bear to listen to such a narrative being recounted so mildly, so humbly, by a voice I knew so well, and fled to the bathroom to wipe a cloth across my face and then to stare at the strange image—a cowardly lion with a disheveled white mane, or maybe just a sad-eyed clown—that I saw in the mirror.

Later that morning, as we continued our drive toward the Everglades, Jean told me, as matter-of-factly as she could, what I had missed. Linda would take short walks outside, but only if P.C. accompanied her or at least stayed in sight. They increased the length of these walks until it was clear to him that she had the strength to walk around the block by herself, something she was afraid to do. "You can walk around the block alone," he would sing to her, for he knew that she needed to feel more confident and independent. "No, I can't, I can't, I can't," she would sing back, in this familiar duet from the opera of their lives together.

One morning he accompanied her down the steps and to the sidewalk, singing to her that today, for his sake if not for her own, she had to walk around the block alone. "I can't," she sang. "You must," he rejoined. "I'll try," she sang, and he turned his back on her to reenter the house before she could change her mind. Hidden behind the drapery of their living-room window, he watched as she looked toward the closed door before slowly moving along the sidewalk. She turned the corner by their house, and was lost to his view.

P.C. told Jean that the next half hour was the longest of his life. For the last fifteen minutes of it, he waited outside, pacing back and forth on the lawn. Thinking that she either had fallen or somehow had become lost, he was about to search for her in the car when he saw the small figure that just had turned the distant corner of their block and was walking with such studied deliberation toward him that, like an image in a dream, she seemed to be making no progress at all. P.C. is, as I have said, a stubborn person, and so he didn't rush to her. He remained at precisely the point on the sidewalk at which she had begun her

journey, but his arms were upraised in victory as he sang down that long block to her, "You're going to make it, I knew you could." When her weaker voice became audible, she was singing, "Yes, I can, yes, I can"; and they were both still singing as they embraced.

After she had finished this story, I asked Jean if P.C. had named the melody that he and Linda were singing at its triumphant conclusion. "No," she said. "I think it should have been from 'The Ode to Joy,' though." "Let's imagine it was, then," I said.

"All right," Jean said, and began humming its grand tune. I joined in as best I could in my off-key way. We kept our eyes straight ahead, not looking at each other, though she reached for my hand and held it as we drove down the coastal highway.

* * *

RETURNING HOME FROM the Everglades, we listened on the car radio to news of the Gulf War from nearly the moment of the initial announcement; and, on television screens in various motel rooms, saw the permitted film clips of bomb hits and the like. Whether that brief war was truly a victorious one, I cannot say; the many parades this Fourth of July suggest that it was, despite its aftermath of suffering and death to innocent people, and maybe it assures the oil for more pleasure trips of the kind we took. Such a victory—as well as many others of the sort that are made into novels and films—means far less to me than the one gained by Linda and P.C. If the story of their final years together were made into a film, it would end, of course, with the embrace, and "The Ode to Joy" would resound as the credits rolled.

Victories like that rarely conclude actual lives, though. Ahead of Linda were the two strokes yet to come, as well as the second series of singing lessons under her obstinate husband's resumed instruction. Dying, she could say—*sing*—her name and a few phrases, an accomplishment, as I have reported, that is a solace to her husband, who lives on, with their handicapped son. A longtime acquaintance of mine at Cornell, who now is an emeritus professor of classics, tells me that Herodotus records a remark of Solon to Croesus to the effect that a man's life can be called fortunate (*eutuches*) before he dies but can only be regarded as truly prosperous (*olbios*) when it has been completed. "Look upon that last day always," the grimmer Sophocles has his chorus say in the concluding passage of "Oedipus the King." "Count no mortal happy till/he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain." Still, it does seem to me that certain victories can be significant enough to inform the rest of our lives with their meanings, whatever the final outcome—an informing that, even if it is lost to us at the very end, is available to those who survive as chorus.