example of a lute to illustrate the non-materiality of the mind. “There is no heap or store of unarisen [mind] prior to its arising. When it arises, it does not come from anywhere or go anywhere. The plucking of a string is an event, requiring the lute, the string, the pick, and the effort of an efficient cause (in this case a musician). In Buddhist language, both the mind and the sound of the lute “not having been, are brought into being, and having been, they vanish.”

The neuron is something that stands at the intersection of space and time, much like the string of a lute. As a physical object (a living cell), it is of course extended spatially. The fact that there are so many neurons in a brain, and that each is connected to so many others in a web of such daunting complexity, invites the compelling project of mapping out its master wiring diagram. But the essence of a neuron is its function, the fact that it “fires” from time to time and that these action potentials interact with one another as they cascade through the architecture of the brain—much like what happens when a string is plucked.

From the perspective of lived experience, where things are happening in the head is irrelevant, while when they are happening is of great importance. We experience the flow of events, not the interconnection of structures. The practice of meditation involves listening closely to the music of your mind. We are not concerned in the moment about how things get to be the way they are, only that they are so very much exactly what they are. When a musician loses herself in the music, the instrument falls away—much like Dogen’s “casting off the body and mind.”

What consequences does this have for the way we live our lives? Notice that the story begins with the king’s sense of the way we live our lives? Notice that the story begins with the king’s sense of 

I’m still burrowing. Here at the hospital, we witness the dark side of impermanence every day. The hemorrhage that floods the brain on the eve of a long-anticipated cruise, the tumble from the ladder, the drive-by shooting. The still-born twins, the metastatic rampage, the overdose. As chaplains, every day we tend to the dying, their families, and their caregivers—and still it is difficult to fathom that we too are really, truly going to die.

Even in Buddhist circles, traced on the ever-shifting ground of birth, aging, sickness, and death, many of us have neglected to sign advance care directives or even designate someone who can make decisions for us when we are no longer able. My own form needs updating; it awaits somewhere on my to-do list. There’s always tomorrow. Until there isn’t.

At work one evening a nurse asked me to see an elderly woman whose husband’s health had taken a sudden turn for the worse. In intensive care, Claude was sedated as machines ensured continuity of his essential bodily functions. Willie, his careworn wife, broke down and sobbed in my arms; they had been married for six decades, and she wasn’t prepared for widowhood. We prayed.

The following afternoon I approached Claude’s room with a sharp pinch of dread; clearly he would not recover, not even enough to go home to die. But the atmosphere was unexpectedly welcoming, with music playing softly in the background and Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance. Claude had transitioned to “comfort care”; he was awake and alert. Gone were most of the tubes, beeps, and bustlings. The priest had been through. Family members were en route.

“I’ve been blessed by the love of a good woman, and I have no doubt where I’m headed,” Claude told me. His serenity and faith enhanced the room’s warm glow. Willie’s grief had become deeper, yet more accepting. Later on, as his family surrounded him in love and song, Claude did go gentle into that good night.

It was as “good” a death as can be imagined. What made it particularly poignant is that Claude knew he

:: OFF THE CUSHION ::

The Eternal Care Unit

BY PAMELA GAYLE WHITE

To what shall I compare this life of ours?
Even before I can say it is like a lightning flash or a dewdrop it is no more.

—Sengai (1750–1837)

When I was in retreat, death and impermanence—death’s harmonic base—provided the background tone of every practice, from preliminary contemplations to yoga focusing on the dissolution of the elements and aggregates that occurs when we die. For months, maybe years, my beloved retreat master, Gendun Rinpoche, answered virtually all my questions (even the most abstruse) with a laugh and the suggestion that I delve deeper into impermanence.
was about to die. Most of the dying people here are too sick to truly take stock of their situation; few are as lucid as Claude was. Some go in gratitude for how their life has blossomed and for the seeds they have left behind; others depart in agony or anger, praying for a miracle of healing to the last breath; yet others, seemingly unaware, simply slip away.

What would it be like to know that death looms? Last autumn, at the Buddhist Contemplative Care Symposium in upstate New York, I attended a workshop during which we were invited to close our eyes and imagine our funeral. The workshop leader asked who was having the hardest time dealing with our own death. I was surfing that one pretty comfortably until I pictured a memorial of sorts and there was Moune, my sweet shaggy dog, whining softly and looking around for me. That’s when my anguish cracked open. My Moune without me.

There was a discussion after the exercise. A young woman said that even though she’d spent a good deal of time contemplating and practicing with the subject, she still couldn’t imagine being dead. Her comment was left dangling, but it had weight. Death is uncharted territory for this unlikely, transitory medley we think of as “me.” We’ve been programmed for life since beginningless time; programmed to use our perceptions as the building blocks that make existence seem solid. How could we imagine not perceiving? How could the world possibly continue to spin without us? Since it doesn’t make sense, it may seem easier to just pretend it’s not there. The Voldemortish “That-Which-Must-Not-Be-Named” aura doesn’t help. Euphemisms abound: pass away, croak, meet one’s maker, bite the dust, shuffle off this mortal coil. . . . A nurse on one of my floors calls it “heading for the ECU: the Eternal Care Unit.”

But it is, inescapably, death. It can be a great relief to embrace the inevitable, to give voice to it, to hold it, and, finally, to leave the mystery unsolved. In The Cancer Journals, the poet Audre Lorde wrote, “What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?”

 Naturally, I wonder what it will take for me to be able to die, like Claude, unafraid and in peace. I’m praying that I will be ready, inspired, and awake. That I will not be hampered by too many burdens of regret or unfinished business or important things left unsaid. That curiosity, connection, and gratitude will get me through. Though he died almost two decades ago, I can imagine asking Gendun Rinpoche for advice on how best to prepare for death. And I hear him urging me to reflect on impermanence, now, and laughing.

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:: AFTERLIFE ::

Sweating in the Desert

By Sandy Boucher

In memory of Ruth Denison, one of the first female dharma teachers in the West, who passed away in February 2015 at the age of 92.

Most old students could take you to a place at Dhamma Dena Desert Vipassana Center and describe a day—or days, or weeks—of labor. “I painted that roof, all afternoon one day in the hot sun.” “I dug out the cactus garden behind Ruth Denison’s kuti.” Ruth’s listing for the women’s retreat used to read “All women welcome for work and meditation” (my emphasis). When Ruth bought a little nearby house from an unfortunate young family (living in the desert requires a strength and resilience that this couple, after many babies and a struggle with alcohol, could not muster), we women were called to follow Ruth down the short stretch of dusty road. Inside the rooms, we stood knee-deep in junk and filth. The young parents had given up trying to maintain cleanliness and order, leaving the bathroom full of dirty diapers, the

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