

THE KNIFE EDGE OF PEACE

By Michael Ventura

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For a bread-and-butter writer, a professional, to write a paragraph a day not meant for publication is a discipline that frees the spirit to go where it needs to and speak on its own terms to the only one who's listening: the scribbler. "Walking the knife edge of peace." That's how such disciplines were described by a Zen sage (whose name I've forgotten). Sometimes, over a sequence of days, the paragraphs seem to circle a single concern, a hidden depth -- as when m'lady and I, not long ago and not far from the Red River, watched seven hawks hover on updrafts with wings outspread above something hidden in the arroyo. The hawks never dived. They seemed content to circle, like these paragraphs, above something tantalizing deep down. I'm printing them because later a hawk spoke to me in my sleep, spoke words I didn't retain, but I took that to mean that these paragraphs wanted to fly off into the gray sky of the page. August 21: For every dream that is lost there is a secret dream that takes its place -- secret even to oneself. The task, when you lose a great dream of your life, is to begin the discovery of the secret dream. Trust what whispers to you. Your life is a labyrinth, in places it runs underground and in places it is open to the sky and seems to have no walls, and in places it seems nothing but the streets and malls of your many and conflicting obligations (which always began as invitations, which you accepted, whether you admit your acceptance or not); parts of your labyrinth you have built yourself and parts of it seem set there for you in advance as a test (and that test is a form of welcoming); and in every single act of this life you participate in the ongoing Creation of the universe (yes, you are creating a bit of the universe -- some small part has been entrusted to you alone). Why does it frighten you so, the possibility that there's a reason that you are here? Is it because the condition of that reason is that you will never know it? If you're looking for something to remember, remember this: Your life gains strength most from your openness to what you will never know. And when your secret dream (secret to you) suddenly manifests in moments of the day -- then something is whispered to you. It is not whispered in words, which makes it harder to hear; yet upon the hearing of these whispers the fragile word "happiness" depends.

August 22: It is easiest to know nothing on the days of ill health, heartbeat irregular, voice strangely gravelly and thin, a whisper, and no strength in my legs or my hands. Flush. Clammy. Puffy. Heart working too hard. Sometimes not a day like this for months, and then it comes again to remind me that I must die. It is easiest to know nothing then -- all these tentative explorations that seem, on healthier days, to be solid, crumble. And the truth -- that I know nothing -- is like a sudden cool breeze on a muggy day, signaling that the weather will break. One day these sensations of illness will not pass; they'll get worse; I will die. I hope I can give the moment of my death the honesty of knowing nothing. What I think I know will fall away like clothing, and what I am can stand naked and die honest.

August 23: The memories I think I have -- these memories have me. They try to reconstruct me every day in their image. I have learned that my truest integrity is to resist

them; to hold them off and let this new day create itself, moment by moment, unencumbered, making itself up as it goes along, discovering beauty anew, a quiet and stunning surprise.

August 24: To step clear of every definition of myself -- to stand free of definitions. It is possible, if only for moments. Perhaps moments are enough. To step free, and then, inevitably, to step back -- for the definitions are unavoidable, even necessary. But when they cease being a choice, when they become merely an agenda, a kind of doom sets in, and then I call that doom by my name. Psychology shifts you from one definition to another, and that may work for a time but it is not enough; meditation too is useful, but after the stillness you must move again, and so often you move straight back to where you were; but perhaps to envision every definition of oneself as a door through which you can pass both ways, into and out of it, making a choice -- the choice to be *and* not to be. Neither, in itself, is enough; but both, together -- *that* may be "the knife edge of peace." I want to learn to say my name as though I'd just heard it for the first time.

August 25: There is nowhere to go, and no way to stay where you are. That lesson is learned over and over, each time with a severe (though muted) sense of shock. There is nowhere to go, but you *do* go. There is no way to stay where you are, but you never really know *where* you are or what "staying" would consist of -- for you stay, yet feel absent. You appear to be still, but you feel you're leaving. And you think you're leaving, only to discover that this, too, was subterfuge, and that really you're about to return. And where you are is a vast unmapped place that is always foreign and in which you are always a stranger. No one accompanies you on these journeys; and you take these journeys every day -- a journey to a place you never left and cannot leave. This only feels confining when you let yourself forget that every moment is too vast to clock. But when you remember the moment's vastness -- that can be so frightening, it's not surprising that we opt for the illusion of confinement.

August 26: There is a shattering without which you cannot be whole. The whole thrust of American life now constitutes a desperate attempt to avoid that shattering. So we have the spectacle of so many successful Americans with spirits broken by their effort to remain unshattered. So my prayer must be: Dear God, don't let me succeed in being safe; shatter me.

August 27: Your journey is a living thing that suffers you to take it. For it is your journey, and no one else's, and will remain untaken forever in the universe if you don't take it. The sad faces of so many are the faces of the rejected journey. And the ache you feel in the world is a world collapsing of journeys untaken.

August 28: I wanted to find a clarity that could bring tenderness to the lives I touch. ("Only the truth is kind," Mikey told me long ago.) And I wanted to find a tenderness that could bring clarity to the lives I touched. Since it became evident, fairly quickly, that I could not save anyone and that I wouldn't know how they should change even if I could change them -- I have tried for clarity and tenderness, because one or the other, and sometimes both, is always possible. And without the possible I am lost.

August 29-September 4: Too ill and confused to compose a paragraph.

September 5: Several nights ago I dreamt of my first love. Antonia. Thirty years since we were lovers. Twenty-five since I last saw her. And it has been years since I've spoken of her to anyone. Yet there she was, unbidden -- that brilliant, tender, disarming smile, and those large brown eyes that looked upon the world with such a troubled wonder. I remember an old Jewish woman in the Bronx who stopped me on the street, tugged at my sleeve: "Oh you're the young man -- you're the young man -- with the pretty wife!" Several times in those years old people would stop and say such things -- Toni's radiance, unselfconscious and unaffected, seemed to touch people who were close to death. In the dream, I was standing at a lectern on a stage about to give a talk, and Antonia was sitting in an evening gown on a chair also on the stage, her skin much lighter than in life, but smiling that same unforgettable smile. She and everyone in the hall were waiting for me to speak, but I had no idea why I was there, or what Antonia was doing on the stage, or what I was expected to speak about. I looked at Toni in confusion, but she seemed confident that I'd discover the reason and find something to say. Then I woke. I lay there beside Hannah -- we married a few weeks ago -- and realized it was to Hannah I was supposed to say something. I watched her sleep and wondered what it was that needed saying. And I wondered too at the sweetness of life, and the secretive ways of that sweetness, to bring a beloved lost face into the present as a reminder that, no matter what cruel lessons experience engraves upon us, every great love is a first love -- and that no one and nothing we've loved can ever be utterly lost -- and that you wake from one dream called "forever" into another dream called "today," and both ask nothing of you but the truth.

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