Opinion
Spirituality
Soul Seeing



(Unsplash/Jamie Templeton)

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Last night, Vickie and I watched a documentary about Leonard Cohen on Netflix. Cohen was a Canadian musician who became a Buddhist monk and wrote unforgettable songs like "Hallelujah." In the documentary, he tells a story from the Bhagavad Gita about a general named Arjuna who did not want to kill others in a righteous war against evil.

"The general," says Cohen in his deep soothing voice, "that great general. He's standing in his chariot. And all the chariots are readied for war. And across the valley he sees his opponents. And there he sees not just uncles and aunts and cousins, he sees gurus, he sees teachers that have taught him. He sees them. And Krishna, an expression of the deity, says to him, 'You will never untangle the circumstances that brought you to this moment. You are a warrior. Embrace your destiny, your fate. Know what your duty is. Do it with love in your heart. And do it without hesitation.' "

The Gita is a myth that teaches truths about ourselves, the roles we regret and try to forget, the faces we try on that inevitably crack and crumble like Halloween masks, and the indestructible Self we really are that never dies because it is never born and always lives. Cohen, channeling Krishna, says to Arjuna, "Understand that they [personas] have already been killed, and so have you. This is just a play. This is my will. You're caught up in the circumstances that I determine for you. So arise! Stand up and do your duty."

As the documentary continues, Bono and Beth Orton and Rufus Wainwright and others sing Cohen songs that once you hear you never forget: "Tower of Song" ... "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in" ... "I'm Your Man."

"I'm your man." I could never remember all the circumstances that brought me to the place 15 years ago where Vickie began to remember nothing, including how to eat with a spoon. But I do remember a moment 50 years ago lying in bed in a rectory in the middle of the night, lonely and not wanting to be a priest anymore. I didn't have what it takes.

I thought how comforting it would be to go to bed each night and wake up each morning with a woman at my side whom I loved and who loved me and how my singular duty would be to love and protect her till death do us part, even if she got sick before I did and I'd have to take care of her for the rest of my life.

I asked God for a miracle and said if I broke my vow to be a priest forever I would never break this one. I would be her man, in sickness and in health.

Did I know then that Vickie, an embodiment of intelligence, would get Alzheimer's at 57? Was the message to me, be careful of what you wish for because you might get it? Or was it, embrace your destiny? Know what your duty is. And do it without hesitation.

For a while, I shook my fist at God like Job. Fifteen years later, I have come to know: My calling is to be here with Vickie as she forgets the lines in the play and becomes more and more the divine expression she really is.

I'm good with it. The last few years have been among the best of my life.

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In the morning, our caregiver Silvia is here to help Vickie bathe and get dressed and to feed her breakfast. We're at the kitchen table, me in front of the sliding glass door to the patio. Just behind it is a garden Vickie tended for 30 years. Half buried in snow is a statue of Congregation of St. Joseph Sr. Mary Southard's Our Lady of the Garden. Vickie sits next to me by the huge window with a direct view to a Buddha statue that sits under a cherry tree with Christmas ornaments tinkling in the wind on its naked branches.

Silvia brings a bowl of Life cereal (with cinnamon) topped by strawberries to Vickie, then sits at her side and feeds her spoonfuls. Vickie gazes at Silvia like a baby regards her mother, never looking away, eyes full of trust.

"Vickie *linda*," says Silvia, who is from Venezuela. "*Eres mi Buda*."

"She's your Buddha?" I ask her.

"She teaches me. She's my Master. She shows me that life is from inside. Some people they have all things money can buy but no peace. They look at Vickie, they think maybe she is broken, but you look inside and you see light and her light shines everywhere. Vickie *linda*, she has beautiful life."

"That's beautiful, Silvia. I'm used to thinking I'm here for her but she's here for me too. We're teaching each other, aren't we?" I talk to Vickie, "We have a good life,

huh, Sweetheart?"

Vickie nods. "Thank oo," she says. She understands everything until her brain starts to get tired around 10 a.m. You can't tell by her tired appearance late in the day but the eye of your soul still sees all the intelligence in the universe glowing inside her.

"Silvia, what you say about Vickie being your Master makes me remember: Did I ever tell you what a psychiatrist taught me about the statue of the Buddha and the statue of the Thinker?"

The Thinker (Wikimedia Commons/Tammy Lo)

(Wikimedia Commons/Tammy Lo)

"Thinker?"

"It's a statue by Rodin of a tortured soul. A naked man bent in an uncomfortable position, with his right elbow on his left thigh and his hand holding up his chin. Every muscle in his body is tense. His face is a fist. He's thinking, calculating, trying to figure everything out. Then there is the statue of the Buddha."

We look outside the window at Mister Buddha, as we all call him, who presides over a concrete bowl of icy water pecked at by a bluebird. A couple of squirrels join in.

"See how the Buddha just sits there, eyes closed, not thinking about anything but contemplating everything. His hands on his lap, every muscle relaxed. But he has large ears and hears our suffering. He sees us and gives us all his calm, his peace, and his peace increases and he gives us more, like a fountain that keeps filling over. That's why I put him there, where Vickie can see what he represents from her favorite chair. I want her to see peace."

"Vickie *es la señora Buda*," says Silvia.

"She is. And I'm the Thinker." We laugh.

We're quiet now. I think again of Our Lady of the Garden, the mother of God who also sits with peace, on a bench in the snow, just waiting for the flowers to rise again. I appreciate that the flowers that come to us in spring were already killed and the flowers absent in winter never died.

"Look at the flowers," Jesus said. "Just look. They don't fuss or worry or obsess. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was adorned like one of these."

That brings to mind the song "Don't worry. Be happy," and then something Dr. Thomas Hora, the psychiatrist, used to say, "Everything everywhere is already all right." Thoughts bounce around my head like balls in a pinball machine. I remember a quote from Meister Eckhart: "We are all meant to be mothers of God."

Silvia is washing the dishes. Vickie is looking at me. Her look creates a little crack in my brain. Just do your duty.

I take the green bib from Vickie's neck and wipe a strawberry stain from her lips. "I love you," I say. "I love oo," she says.

[Michael Leach has been shepherding NCR's Soul Seeing column since its inception in 2011.]

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