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The Buddha who lives in our backyard

by Michael Leach

Soul Seeing

"You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." -- *Waiting for Godot*

We planted a cherry tree and placed a Buddha on top of some rocks beneath it, outside the big window by our kitchen table so we can look out and focus on peace. True story: The Buddha was a prince named Siddhartha Gautama who left his palace in India at age 29 to wander the world in search of the meaning of life. He was profoundly moved by all the suffering he saw. One day he sat under a bodhi tree and prayed to God for understanding. He realized that suffering is inevitable, that his response must be loving kindness, and that the purpose of life is compassion. He became the Buddha (an enlightened presence) and felt peace, even as petals from the tree fell around him like tears.

Early this morning, Vickie and I stand by the window. On the window sill, a teeny plastic flower pot with a white daisy and two yellow butterflies sits. When the sun rises higher and puts out all the darkness, the flower will wave and the butterflies dance. The toy gets its energy from light. Vickie and I look out at the Buddha sitting atop the gray stones. "Good morning, Mr. Buddha," I say. Then like George Burns to Gracie Allen: "Say 'good morning' to Mr. Buddha, sweetheart."

"Good morning ... Mistuh ... Buddha."

The words don't come easy. Vickie suffered two brain seizures recently. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's 10 years ago. The door in her brain to a thesaurus of words has been closing faster. Vickie's neurologist gave her an anti-seizure medicine that has doused her delight like a gloved hand snuffs out a candle. I will call her doctor later today and say: "What's worse, to never again have a seizure but live out your life as a paranoid schizophrenic or live a little shorter but in peace?"

We sit at the kitchen table and share a banana. "I want to put a Mary in your little garden next to the

patio," I say. "What do you think?"

"Good."

"There's a Mary Southard sculpture called Our Lady of the Garden. I showed it to you yesterday. It's whiter than snow and real peaceful."

"What?"

"Mary Southard. She's a sister, an artist, an old friend."

The white sculpture of the Blessed Mother will be perfect. Vickie has tended her little garden since we moved into this house 30 years ago. I always say, "If you die first, I'll bury your ashes in your garden. A fountain will come forth and all the people who live here for years to come will drink from your joy."

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"What if you die first?"

"Then you'll bury me first. A desert will take over, but when you die, our boys will put your ashes next to mine and a spring will bubble up and a fountain even more wondrous than the one with your ashes alone."

It's time to take Vickie to the adult day care center. It's a lovely place overlooking a waterfall where the Mianus River flows into Long Island Sound. Six aides, along with a nurse, a social worker and a program coordinator look after about 50 women and men with Alzheimer's or other incapacities or just need company from 9 to 4. They socialize, have visits from schoolchildren, pets from the animal shelter, mini-concerts from local artists, and if they can, take field trips to the beach or museum. It gives caregivers a chance to do their work or just get a break. I take Vickie twice a week and am thinking of making it three. She likes it there and Vickie, always the helper, looks after Joyce, who is about her age and also forgetful.

She doesn't want to go today. I ask her to do it for me.

We get in the car, back out and turn into the driveway of the house next door to pick up Rob. Rob is 53 years old and walks with a walker because his muscles are weak and his legs move in directions he doesn't want them to go. His dad is older than I am and recovering from a heart attack. I told Terri, his wife, that we would take Rob to the day center because he goes there too and she has her hands full.

Rob bends over, one hand on the walker, to pick up a stray leaf on the driveway and place it on the lawn. "Rob," says Terri, "don't do that. You'll just fall." Rob does fall a lot. And gets up. And goes on. He, too, has difficulty communicating, but his eyes understand suffering in others and you can tell he cares about them.

I call the doctor later in the morning, and she changes the medicine to something with lesser side effects. She says the effects of the first should be gone by tomorrow afternoon. I try to write my column for Soul Seeing, but nothing comes. I pick up Vickie and Rob at 3:30. "How was your day?" I ask her. "Horrible," she says.

We sit at the kitchen table and share a brownie. I can't make her laugh. Helping Vickie dress, bathe, all that, is nothing. Not making her laugh kills. I take her hand and we go to the window and look at the Buddha who lives in our backyard. A gopher sips at the water in the birdbath beneath him. "Sweetheart," I

say, "let's ask Mr. Buddha what we need to know right now. OK?"

"OK."

I pray in my heart to God for a miracle.

After a few moments, I ask Vickie, "Did Mr. Buddha tell you anything?"

She smiles at me. "Thank you."

The dandelion and the butterflies dance before darkness falls. Tomorrow is another day, but for now, Mr. Buddha has moved inside.

[Michael Leach is a writer, editor and publisher who lives in Connecticut with Vickie, his wife of 44 years.]

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