

FOUR TRUTHS ON A CROSSTOWN BUS



By Krin Van Tatenhove
With Bushi Yamato Damashii

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Dedicated to the nexus of all beliefs,
and hearts seeking to live there

Cover art by Yasmin Gudino

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1. *Life is full of suffering.*
2. *Suffering comes from attachment and desire.*
3. *It is possible to end suffering.*
4. *The end of suffering comes through right thinking and right action.*

- The Four Noble Truths of the Buddha

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. – John 3:8

Standing at the bus stop, Phil was bone-tired. The sounds, smells, and sights of Skid Row were as smothering as the summer humidity. During the first months of his post at a local homeless shelter, the bustle was exciting. Now it felt like a dark tide that never ebbed.

The bus pulled up, brakes hissing. With a number of others, he mounted the steps for his 50-minute crosstown ride. The driver barely acknowledged him as he flashed his pass and turned his eyes to search for a seat. Some other passengers met his gaze; most didn't. The thing that always struck him was the rainbow of humanity. Skin colors, costumes and languages gave witness to a city teeming with diverse cultures. A microcosm of the world.

In the third row, a turbaned woman with ebony skin sat holding the hands of two girls. One child, blonde with green eyes, had a golden cross around her neck. The other, dusky-skinned, had a Hindu bindi in the middle of her brown, old-soul gaze. All three of them smiled at Phil, lifting his spirit a bit.

The only seat available was halfway down the aisle next to a middle-aged black man. With his loosely fit orange robe and shaved head, he was most likely a devotee from the nearby Buddhist temple. Phil swung his '64 frame into the seat just as the bus lurched to a rude start.

"Good day to you," the man said immediately.

Phil was ashamed to admit it, but he felt like turning away. After counseling the destitute all day, he needed this daily ride for decompression. Like a diver coming up from the

depths, helium bubbles of exhaustion in his blood, the bus was his hyperbaric chamber. Still, he forced the words to his lips.

“Good day to you, also,” he said.

“Your fatigue is evident,” said the man. “If you prefer not to talk, we can enjoy relative silence in the midst of this cacophony.”

Something in the intelligence, candor, and kindness of the man’s tone was a tonic to Phil’s mood.

“No, it’s OK. It’s just that I deal with people all day long.”

“I would assume so from your nametag,” said the man. “Thank you for dedicating your life to service. It’s a path I’ve also chosen. In fact, this bus ride is heading to a privileged appointment of mercy. By the way, my name is John. At the temple they call me Abbot.”

“So you’re the person in charge?”

John smiled.

“We like to think in concentric rather than hierarchical ways, but yes, I’m the leader. What’s your position at the shelter?”

“I’m also the Director. My name’s Phil.”

Phil offered his hand and John took it. There has been much written about styles of handshakes and what they communicate: too firm, too limp, too shy, too aggressive. Phil felt in that clasp the touch of a man he could trust. Someone whose hand you would want to hold in the valley of shadows.

“And you’re right about the exhaustion,” Phil said. “Our City Fathers and Mothers want to quote statistics about cleaning up the streets, but from my perspective,

homelessness, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness – they’re all alive and well. I’d say they’re thriving.”

“A lot of suffering,” said John. “For some people, life is full of pain they can’t seem to escape.”

“I guess that’s what we both try to offer,” said Phil. “A chance to take a different path.”

“Indeed,” said John.

“I’m curious,” said Phil. “You look American, and your accent sounds vaguely Southern, but here you are with your robe and shaved head. What led you on this path?”

John laughed. “You’re a keen observer. I was born in Atlanta of middle-class parents. I grew up in a supportive, progressive neighborhood. My folks were good to me and did their best to provide. But it was still so damn parochial, and we lived against the American backdrop of systemic racism. I was restless inside, so restless it caused a lot of anxiety. After college I went on a Peace Corps assignment to India. That’s where I discovered Buddhism.”

“Did you stay and study?” asked Phil.

“Yes. For seven years. But because I saw such a need for the Buddha’s teachings in this country, I returned and served in various capacities until I was asked to lead the downtown temple in this teeming city of ours.”

“How did your family react to all that?”

“Not well at first. I come from a long line of Bible-believing – some would say Bible-thumping – Christians. Having a Buddhist son was definitely not part of their script, not in their wildest dreams. But over time, as they saw the peace and purpose my new life gave me, they came around.

We just agree not to talk about faith issues. Or politics. Or world issues. Which is just as well for me, because I believe the real evidence of our beliefs is seen in our daily interactions with human beings. Words can be so damn cheap.”

The bus came to an abrupt halt. Two mothers with children in tow climbed aboard. One of the babies was howling at the top of her lungs. The mother’s eyes were dispirited, zombie-like, as if she’d given up. When she sat and offered her breast, the baby quieted. Outside on the sidewalk, a young man and woman, entwined in tattoos, were equally entwined in a passionate kiss. On the ledge of the building above them, pairs of pigeons strutted and cooed in their age-old dance.

“How about you?” asked John. “What’s your story?”

“I was born in San Francisco,” said Phil, “near the end of the Hippie Revolution, which my parents embraced wholeheartedly. They dragged me all around the country in buses and beat up cars or just by hitchhiking.”

“How did they support you?”

“Whatever odd jobs they could get. Mom was good at cutting hair and Dad was a self-taught carpenter.”

“Doesn’t sound like an easy life.”

“It wasn’t. When we weren’t crashing at someone else’s pad, we were in a tent at some makeshift commune. They never enrolled me in regular school. I didn’t know any better. Finally, my grandmother on my mother’s side got Child Protective Services to intervene and she took me into her home in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I hated her for it at first and missed my parents. But then I discovered something wonderful.”

“What was that?” asked John.

“I loved school. I loved the reading and the math and the interaction with teachers. I loved the challenge of stretching my mind. As it turned out, my parents were never fully out of the picture. They finally settled in New Mexico themselves and we have a pretty good relationship today.”

Phil’s eyes strayed to the street. The bus passed an alleyway cluttered with parked cars and people huddled against brick walls. At the far end, against a chain-link fence, someone had hung a blanket with a psychedelic peace sign emblazoned on it. Someone else had taken black spray paint and cancelled it out with an X.

“So how did you come to your vocation?” asked John. “The shelter you lead is Christian-based, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Like you, I’ve always had a quizzical mind, a restless spirit. After a lot of searching, I found my faith at a liberal Protestant church in Albuquerque. A friend invited me to worship and that’s how it began. The people there saw gifts for ministry in me and encouraged me to go to Seminary. I tried being a pastor of local churches, but my heart was always with those in the street. Like my parents I drifted around the country, working in various ministries that served the poor until I ended up here.”

“What about family?” asked John. “I see you’re not wearing a wedding ring.”

Phil swallowed and looked absently at his left hand, as if the ring mark would still be there, a tattoo from a former incarnation. Even now, the memories could be an emotional speed bump.

“That’s a painful subject,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” said John. “I don’t mean to pry.”

“It’s OK,” said Phil. “I was married and divorced, one of the most painful events of my life. In our own rights, we’re both decent people, but we didn’t seem able to give unconditional love to each other. She grew tired of my restlessness and job insecurity. We drifted apart emotionally and spiritually. It was a death experience, hands down. Most of the time I feel like I’ve dealt with it, but the wound can open up again very quickly.”

Phil avoided John’s eyes and took a deep breath.

“But there’s a great consolation,” Phil continued. “I have remained close to our only child, my son Jason. He has grown into a remarkable human being and we get to see each frequently.”

“The old adage is true,” said John. “Charity begins at home. I’m not sure I could pass the test of marriage, so I’ve stayed single.”

Phil sighed and shrugged. “Anyway,” he said, “here we are.”

John suddenly laughed with unexpected volume and hilarity. It was close to a donkey’s bray. People from nearby seats turned as if they’d been slapped upside the head. Even the driver peered through the rearview mirror to see the disturbance. Rather than be offended, Phil found himself grinning.

“What’s so funny?”

“Reminds me of an old Beatle’s song,” said John. “*The Long and Winding Road*. Just thinking how different the

pathways have been that brought us to these seats of an inner city bus on a crosstown route.”

“Do you believe in fate?” asked Phil.

“No,” said, John. “But I believe that each new day presents us with opportunities to grow in wisdom and love. It’s up to us to receive the schooling.”

“I have a different take,” said Phil. “Sometimes what we call coincidences are actually divine appointments. I know it sounds like God as a Grand Chess Master, but you’d be amazed at some of the so-called ‘chance’ meetings I’ve had.”

“I can live with that,” said John.

“Good,” said Phil, warming to the topic. “Because of all the other belief systems on this planet beyond my own, I’ve been most interested in Buddhism. Even though 600 years separated the lives of Jesus and Siddhartha, I think they would have enjoyed each other’s company immensely if they’d met.”

“Perhaps they’re meeting by proxy right now,” said John with a playful grin. “Perhaps you can introduce me more fully to Jesus and I can introduce you more fully to the Buddha.”

“Sweet,” said Phil, sitting up straighter in his seat. “So let start with a question. A few moments ago you said that for some people life is full of pain they can’t seem to escape. That’s the first Noble Truth the Buddha taught, that life is full of suffering. Correct?”

“Yes,” said John. “Siddhartha led a privileged life as a Brahmin prince. His father tried to shield him from the realities of this world, keeping him cloistered on the grounds of their estate. But Siddhartha ventured out and saw the

things we all see: poverty, illness, death. It changed his life forever.”

“I wish that were true for everyone,” said Phil, “I wish the that the mere sight of someone else suffering would move *all* our hearts with enough compassion to change.”

“It’s true that Siddhartha had an enormous capacity for compassion,” said John. “All his teachings stem from it. In fact, one of the names we attribute to him is ‘the merciful one.’”

“In that regard, Jesus and Siddhartha were similar,” said Phil. “I’ve always been struck by passages in the Gospels that say in every village Jesus went to, they brought out the sick and the dying for his healing touch. He never turned anyone away.”

“In a lesser way,” said John, “you and I can relate to those kinds of demands on our lives.”

Phil’s mind flashed through a montage of the day’s events. Even though much of his time was spent administrating a huge facility, he also kept active as a case manager. Today he had counseled a young man in his 20s, a male prostitute whose meth addiction had landed him in the gutter.

“I’m sure we’ve both seem our share of suffering,” said Phil. “But honestly, I’ve always thought that Christian and Buddhist understandings of suffering are radically different. Buddhists seem to focus on the liberation of the individual. In other words, we need to set ourselves free so that we can be released from existential pain. In contrast, I see Christians looking more to the oppressive structures of society. We recognize how injustice can cause suffering for people that is

outside their own willpower. Things they didn't choose. Unrelated to their karma, if you will. It's trendy in pop psychology to say that there are no victims, that it is simply a matter of our perspective. That's not always true."

"I see your point and why you would make this comparison," said John. "But remember that some very famous Buddhists have been involved in trying to influence our world on a broader scale. I think of Thích Nhất Hạnh and his activism for peace during the Vietnam War. Or the Dalai Lama confronting the unjust policies of China."

Phil nodded, just as an ambulance careened rounded a corner next to the bus, siren screaming, piercing the inner world of the bus with its harsh reminder of reality. His eyes lifted to a car advertisement plastered above the bus windows. It read, "Live life to the max!"

"Maybe it's more helpful to think of it this way," said John. "Whether we choose a path of activism or monastic devotion, we *all* must overcome the attachment to this world that Buddha teaches in his second noble truth. Our clinging to illusions, our indulgence in desires that lead to death, our insistence on our own egos – all these we must let go of or we will never truly live. We will never discover who we really are. Think of what Jesus did just prior to launching his three-year ministry."

"He spent 40 days in the desert, fasting and praying."

"And what happened during that time?" asked John.

"He faced multiple trials from Satan. He was tempted to turn stones into bread, to gain control of the world as an

earthly King, and to use his miraculous abilities as a show of power. The story is full of rich symbolism.”

“How do you interpret the symbols?” asked John.

“Traditionally, we think of them as the temptations of greed, pride, indulgence of the flesh. I agree with that viewpoint.”

“But Jesus overcame them all.”

“Yes.”

“Do you know about the legendary story of Siddhartha sitting under the Bo Tree?”

“A bit. Tell me in your own words.”

“Siddhartha was tired. He had tried traditional paths to inner peace and enlightenment, but he was still suffering. He knew he was not fully awake. So he sat under a tree and reportedly said, ‘Let my skin and sinews and bones dry up, together with all the flesh and blood of my body! I welcome it! But I will not move from this spot until I have attained the supreme and final wisdom.’”

“Then what happened?” asked Phil.

“The story says that Mara – the Lord of Desire – came to him in multiple visions, tempting him in every way. But just like Jesus, Siddhartha resisted. He had a vision of all his past lives, understanding how his choices and behaviors had led him to that very moment. Finally, near dawn, Mara made a final assault, saying to Siddhartha, ‘Even if you attain this ultimate wisdom, who will testify that it actually happened?’ Siddhartha simply reached down and touched the ground as his witness. The earth shuddered, flowers flowed down from the Bo Tree, and Mara and his army of demons fled.”

“It’s a beautiful story,” said Phil, “one that makes me even more convinced that Jesus and Siddhartha would have enjoyed each other’s company.”

For some reason, the dusky-skinned girl near the front of the bus leaned into the aisle and turned to face Phil. Again, he was struck by the dark depth of her eyes. He smiled at her and lifted his hand in a small wave. She waved back.

“So,” he said, turning back to John, “the leaders of both of our movements proved in their lives that we can overcome temptations, illustrating the third Noble Truth: we can eliminate suffering brought on by our attachment to illusions.”

“Yes,” said John. “But it takes *so much* practice. So many intentional choices.”

“Explain that from your Buddhist perspective,” said Phil.

“Well,” said John, “it first means a detachment from the obvious materialism of this world. Siddhartha spent many years as a wandering ascetic before his enlightenment, abandoning possessions. If I understand the Bible, Jesus took a similar path, divesting himself of material goods and preaching on the road for three years, even claiming that he had nowhere to lay his head. A homeless itinerant, reveling in the present, accepting life on life’s terms.”

“Very true,” said Phil. “And a large portion of his teachings were about the deadening influence of wealth. You probably know his iconic words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But*

store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

“Most Buddhists do not believe in heaven,” said John, “but if you consider it a blissful state of mind rather than a physical place, then Jesus’ words are timeless for *any* spiritual path. So many people die without seeing that the false security and fleeting happiness of things is so shallow compared to deeper enlightenment.

“Exactly,” said Phil. “I’ve always loved a quote from a sermon by C.S. Lewis. I’ve memorized it. ‘We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.’”

John chuckled and nodded his head.

“But in America,” Phil continued, “a nation that idolizes wealth as a sign of success, this isn’t a popular message. Honestly, when I look at many of the churches and ministries within my own tradition, it’s embarrassing. So much emphasis on their own buildings and budgets. I don’t think our so-called megachurches would even recognize Jesus if he walked through their doors.”

“I hear you,” said John. “But it’s not much different in Buddhism. The Buddha asked his followers to never make an image of him to worship, but now we have jewel and gold encrusted temples all across the world. We human beings require so much mindfulness. It all starts in our brains. We

need the redirecting of our thoughts into new pathways of right thinking.”

Phil nodded. “Jesus tried to teach this throughout his ministry. I think of his famous words, again from the Sermon on the Mount. *Which one of you, by worrying, can add a single hour to your life? Look at the flowers and the birds. They are so beautiful, and if God takes care of them so lavishly, won’t God take care of you?*”

“Always one of my favorite passages from the Bible,” said John. “If that single teaching were practiced in depth by every human being, there would be a worldwide revolution.”

“OK,” said Phil, “but let me change the subject. Despite the beauty of his teachings and actions, Jesus couldn’t avoid suffering. I think of him weeping before the tomb of Lazarus. I think of his angry outbursts towards the Pharisees and his exasperation with the lack of faith among his disciples.”

“Buddha didn’t teach some kind of numb detachment from life,” said John. “There is great beauty in deep feelings, even grief. In the story of Jesus and Lazarus, Jesus let himself experience a momentary flood of emotion, even though the story says he would raise his friend from the dead just a few moments later.

“The secret is to let these emotions pass through us, teaching us what we need to learn, but not letting them ensnare us for too long. Life is a process. You Christians use the term ‘born again.’ We Buddhists use the term ‘enlightenment.’ But the reality in both our traditions is that this liberation, this new life, happens one day at a time. It is a process of staying aware and utilizing our spiritual tools.”

“That’s so true,” said Phil. “God knows I’m a work in progress. I would assume you are also, John. I’m sure you and I both have our own demons, our own temptations to get entangled.”

“I’m sure,” said John.

They looked deeply into each other’s eyes, an implicit invitation to take their encounter to a deeper level.

John guffawed, not as loud as the first time, but definitely straight from his belly, like a reincarnation of Budai, the laughing monk.

“I’ll go first,” he said with a wink. “For me it has always been my ego attachment to showing off my intellect. I was a teacher’s pet and know-it-all in school. During college I was on a debate team, determined to always be right. During the seven years of my training in India, my teacher said he would not certify my release to teach until I had learned to master this form of hubris.”

“But he let you go, and you say you still struggle with it until this day.”

“Yes. Especially when I’m given a public forum through my interfaith involvement. I love having the spotlight, showing off my understanding of various faith traditions. I love to show how I’ve become liberated from sectarian narrow-mindedness. It’s pretty humorous. The difference now is that I have tools to catch myself and return to what Buddha called the Middle Way. My teacher released me because he saw that these tools were developed enough to get me back on track. Otherwise, I would do more damage than good in the world.”

“For me,” said Phil, “it’s an ego issue as well. What I would call my ‘prophetic pride,’ a mini Messiah complex, as if I’m one of the few crusaders who truly understands the systemic evils around us. As a good friend of mine says, ‘There goes Phil again – a man on a mission!’”

“There’s nothing wrong with having passionate purpose,” said John. “How does it cause you suffering?”

“Because no matter how hard I work, there are new waves of poverty, indifference, racism, addiction, and ignorance crashing on my doorstep every morning. I get discouraged. Even depressed sometimes.”

“So how do you deal with it?” asked John.

“I remember a story,” said Phil. “Jesus was at a meal with his disciples when a sinful woman came in and began to anoint his feet with costly perfume. One of the disciples grumbled because the money used to buy that ointment could have been used to feed the poor. Jesus said, ‘The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.’”

“I don’t completely understand,” said John. “How does that help you?”

“It reminds me that this world is perpetually full of troubles. Pain and poverty will always be with us. It’s good that I have chosen a path to try and alleviate some of it in my own humble way. But I also need to enjoy the presence of Christ, the One who has taught me my true worth and flooded my life with grace. He is here through the Spirit, and when I’m grateful for his revelation of love, it sets me free again.”

“That’s beautiful,” said John. “I think that neither of us needs to feel ashamed that we struggle. Both of us are trying to exercise right action and right thinking, trying to find the Middle Way which was Buddha’s final Noble Truth.

“This process lasts until death. Look at the last week of Jesus’ life. His anger with the Pharisees reached a crescendo. Then they tortured him and hung him on a cross. But even in those final moments, rather than hang onto anger, he said ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ In essence he was refusing to hold onto the ways of this world, releasing his spirit into absolute freedom.”

“You know the story well,” said Phil.

“One of the greatest ever told,” said John, who suddenly glanced outside the window, as if he had lost track of time and place. He glanced down at his wristwatch, his face taking on a different countenance, more focused, more intense.

“I’m almost to my stop,” he said. “It’s not my home, but a place I visit once a week. A place I go because I thought I was bringing blessings. I found out instead that the visits have blessed me a hundred times over.”

John smiled and gently took hold of Phil’s arm.

“Would you be willing to join me on this visit? You could still get back on the next bus and make it home. I would enjoy your company. So would the people I’m visiting.”

Phil’s impulse was to decline. After his painful divorce, he had no one to go home to except his cat, but he had grown to enjoy his routine. He liked his solitude, grabbing a beer, sitting in front of the evening news. Down time. Alone time.

Then he thought of how rich the past half hour had been, an unexpected odyssey into new thinking, perhaps a new friendship. Who was he to resist the course of this divine appointment?

“I’d love to join you,” he said.

“Excellent!” said John.

Like a weary elephant bearing cargo across long distances, the bus groaned to a stop as if it would protest further progress. John rose, followed by Phil. When he passed the young Hindu girl she suddenly, tenderly, reached out and touched his hand. Phil looked down and their eyes locked again. He put his hand briefly on her head. The ebony-skinned woman attending her didn’t object, as if fleeting and meaningful connections between souls was a normal part of their lives.

“Blessings,” said Phil, then descended the steps. When both of them were on the street, John firmly grabbed Phil’s arm. The strength in his hand made Phil focus on John’s stature. Even under his robe, you could see he was built like a fullback: wide shoulders, strong arms, a bundle of energy.

“This way,” he said.

They walked about a half block through congested sidewalk traffic, then took a right. Immediately they came upon a tall apartment building long past its prime. Dark rain streaks veined the walls, and a few of the windows were boarded with plywood. One was still unfixed, a black eye on the building’s face. Lifting his gaze beyond its summit, Phil saw the sun slide from behind a cloud.

“We’re going to the fourth floor,” said John, striding into the small foyer and pressing a button.

A man’s voice came over the intercom.

“Is that you, John?”

“It is, my friend.”

“Come on up.”

A buzzer sounded and John pulled open the door to the stairwell. It was narrow, the carpeting old and soiled. An overhead fluorescent light had a bad bulb, flickering its weak strobe, slanting shadows like a scene from *Nosferatu*.

John strode strongly upwards and Phil followed. When they reached the fourth floor and entered its hallway, the musty smell was nearly overpowering. Decades of cooking odors saturated walls that were festooned with faded brocade wallpaper. Indistinguishable flowers. A dusty window at the far end let in scant light.

The door to the third apartment on their right opened and a man stuck his head through. He was tall, black, in his mid to late 30s. His delicate features surrounded expressive eyes that lit up with recognition.

“John,” he said, with obvious affection.

The two of them hugged, then the young man turned his gaze to Phil.

“This is my new friend, Phil,” said John. “Phil, meet James. I hope you don’t mind that I brought him.”

James paused for a moment, searching Phil’s eyes, then said, “Any friend of yours, John, is a friend of ours. Please, come in.”

In stark contrast to the building's shabby condition, the apartment was immaculate. The carpeting had been stripped to reveal hardwood buffed to a luster. A combination of Ikea furniture and Art Deco pieces created a modern but surprisingly warm environment.

And yet, Phil's eyes were instantly drawn to an incongruous sight. Stationed against the far wall was a full-size, adjustable hospital bed. A man who appeared to be older than James lay there, his skin as pale as the bed sheets. His matted dark hair glistened with sweat. Oxygen tubes ran from his nostrils to a tank on the floor. Someone had carefully shaved him and trimmed his moustache, an obvious act of devotion. When the three of them approached, he seemed oblivious to their presence.

"Carlos," said James gently. "John is here and he brought a new friend named Phil."

As if his eyelids were lined with lead, Carlos slowly opened them. He tilted his face and managed a weak smile, as wan but achingly beautiful as a cold winter sunset.

"Welcome, Phil," he whispered. "Thank you for coming."

Then he closed his eyes and seemed to drift away.

The three of them stepped back a few paces.

"He's declined greatly since last week," said John.

"Yes," said James. "The Hospice nurse says he'll probably go in the next 48 hours."

John put his hand on James' arm. James sighed in a way that shook his whole body.

“I know we’re no more privileged than others,” he said, “but it doesn’t seem fair. We have managed the HIV so successfully, believing we would have many more years together. Then this cancer. It doesn’t seem fair.”

John only nodded. Phil felt a bit uncomfortable, privy to such an intimate moment. John retrieved three chairs from a dinette set at the other side of the room and set them near the bedside. The three of them sat down, John holding James’s hand.

“Did John tell you how we met?” asked James.

“Not yet,” said Phil.

“Carlos and I were walking downtown on our way to a hole-in-the-wall Thai restaurant we’ve always loved. As we passed the Buddhist Temple, we saw a banner that read ‘Community meal today! Everyone is welcome! Please join us!’ We looked at each other and Carlos said, ‘Now that’s different. Why not?’ So we went in and sat at one of the tables.”

“I remember that day well,” said John.

James smiled. “The food was great, but it was the company that really nourished us. We felt honored and loved from the moment we stepped foot inside that building. No judgment, no second looks, nothing but open hearts and minds. For two men whose own families are estranged from them, it was refreshing.

“Even greater than the acceptance was the teaching that John brought into our lives. When he spoke about a pathway to peace, we realized that we were without any spiritual rudder in our lives. We had both been raised in a

Christian tradition that seemed to betray us because of our sexuality. When we left that faith, we found nothing to replace it. That is, until we entered the Temple that day.”

“That was five years ago,” said John. “The love that James and Carlos have for each other *and* the love they have shown to other members of our Temple has been a blessing. They have given far more back to all of us than they will ever know.”

James squeezed John’s hand. Then the four of them sat in silence. It could have been just a few moments, or maybe an hour; Phil lost track. They simply listened to Carlos’s slow, deep breathing. The length after each exhalation seemed to grow longer, as if it would be his last. The sounds of the city were a distant backdrop of white noise.

Having encountered much pain in his life, some of it stark and incomprehensible, Phil believed in the ministry of presence. There are times when words are inadequate and unnecessary. To simply be with each other, to offer the gift of silent and loving companionship is enough. Even though he had known these three men for only a few moments, Phil felt a quiet and healing peace in their communion.

Sometime later, John leaned over the bed.

“Carlos, can you hear me?” he asked

Carlos slowly opened his eyes.

“May we pray with you?”

Carlos smiled and nodded almost imperceptibly. The four of them joined hands in a circle of love and John began.

“Dear Carlos, may you remember the pure clear light from which everything in the universe comes, to which

everything in the universe returns. No matter where or how far you wander, this light is only a split second, a half breath away. It's OK to let go into that light, dear friend. Trust it. Merge with it. It is your own true nature. It is home. We will always love you."

John squeezed Phil's hand, inviting him to add a prayer. Phil didn't hesitate.

"Loving Creator, before you the generations rise and pass away. A thousand days in your sight are like a moment that has quickly passed. We praise you this moment for Carlos, and for the love he and James have shared with each other and with others. Be with them and all of us, God. You are the Great Physician. You can heal the deepest wounds of our lives. I pray that your gracious mercy will surround us this moment. Bless Carlos and let the light of your face shine on him so he may know your peace that lasts forever. Amen."

When the words were over, they sat in silence for a moment, then gently let go of each other's hands. Phil reached across and tenderly made the sign of the cross on Carlos's head.

"You have my number," whispered John to James. "Please call me with an update, anytime, day or night. When will the Hospice staff return?"

"Later this evening."

"Good," said John. "Phil, I know you need to go. I'm going to stay a few more minutes. Here's my card. Please stay in touch. I really hope our chance encounter is the beginning of some new adventures."

“I do, too,” said Phil, taking the card and tucking it into his shirt pocket.

“Thank you so much for your kindness,” said James. “I’m glad our paths have crossed. I hope they will again.”

He moved closer and gave Phil a spontaneous hug, one that Phil returned with warmth.

“Namaste,” said James.

“The Lord be with you,” said Phil.

Then he turned, entered the hallway, made his way down the stairs, and passed through the foyer.

When he opened the door to the street, there it was again - that heavy mixture of inner city smells, sights, and sounds, a tsunami of human presence washing over him. He took a deep breath, centering himself, and felt a peaceful smile spread across his face, a buoyant warmth throughout his body.

Something prompted him to look above him at the building. On the fourth floor, John was standing in a window looking down and waving. His orange robe was like a warm flame against the gray apartment walls. Phil waved back.

As he turned his face to the street, a wind gust came out of nowhere and tousled his hair. Another crosstown bus lumbered by, its windows filled with the faces of passengers.

Only God knew where they were headed.