

Falling into Grace:

Dying Into the Life Waiting to be Lived (Working Title)

Gary Malkin

“Nothing remains the same for two consecutive moments. Confucius, while looking at a stream, said, “It is always flowing, day and night.” We may be tempted to say that because things are impermanent, there is suffering. However, if you suffer, it is not because things are impermanent. It is because you believe things are permanent.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

Have you ever seen the Dalai Lama? In fact, have you ever had contact with any Tibetan Buddhists? Throughout my life, I've rarely seen people more joyful or content. A refreshingly playful, almost childlike quality exudes from most of the Tibetans I've met. And what's strange is that when I'm around them, I feel like I'm more *in the moment*, more connected to what's important, and more open to both the meaning and the joy of life.

A few years ago, I fulfilled a life-long dream by going on a Himalayan trek. I embarked on what felt like a pilgrimage of sorts with close friends to a place called *Ladakh*, (also known as *Little Tibet*), a remote part of northwestern India adjacent to the original Tibetan border, not far from Kashmir. This breathtakingly beautiful region has been primarily populated by Tibetan Buddhists for over 2000 years, uninterrupted by Chinese invasions and until just a few years ago, untouched by the influences of modern life. When I first arrived and started to explore this remarkable Himalayan community, just exchanging greetings with the locals was an ecstatic, life-embracing experience.

“Julay!” they would shriek in delight, as they greeted me along the road. Whenever the Ladakhis encountered us, no matter who, where or when, they would burst into this big, generous smile, their arms would fly out into the air towards their foreheads in what looked like a kind of salute to their *third eye*, while their voices joyously exclaimed this infectious greeting, as if simply encountering one another along the path was a precious miracle. *God, they seem happy*, I thought to myself.

Over the course of a few days and hundreds of these greetings later, I noticed that something indescribable had started to shift within me. The protective armor I'd grown accustomed to wearing all my life - the layers that I had on so long I didn't even notice were there - started to meld into a kind of joy that I hadn't felt for many years. It reminded me of those lazy Sunday afternoons when I was nine years old, all the way back to the early sixties, when I would meander on my trusty bicycle through the streets of my sleepy home town, safe and sound, without a care in the world. It felt *wonderful*.

After a few days of being in Ladakh, most of us foreigners started to imitate the locals – (after all, *when in Rome!*) - and pretty soon we were *all* unselfconsciously exclaiming this joyous greeting as we would pass one another, foreigners and Ladakhis alike, without concern for what anyone would think. With each greeting, I started to feel inexplicably happier and more grateful, just to be alive. I was suddenly in awe of this miracle we call life, and it's preciousness was undeniable and palpable.

While at Ladakh, we had the great honor of being given permission to observe an ancient Tibetan Buddhist *sand painting ritual*, performed by the monks of the local monastery over a number of days. Endless hours were meticulously spent creating an intricate mandala of multi-colored sand, only to be ceremoniously destroyed on the last day of the ritual as a living metaphor of life's fragility. Joyfully, they created the sand painting. Joyfully, they destroyed it. How can there be all this joy knowing that everything that is here now will most assuredly be gone one day?

Impermanence

I share some of these memories from Ladakh because they were a significant part of my *initiation* into the direct understanding of the laws of *impermanence*, laws which I believe has something to do with the characteristic *jois de vivre* of the Tibetan Buddhists.

If one lives long enough, it's impossible to avoid the inevitability of loss. Little did I realize, however, that hidden within these painful losses are the strengthening life lessons that carve us into who we truly came here to be. Becoming familiar with the transitory nature of life has not only helped me cope with life's unexpected twists and turns; it has also helped me cultivate a greater capacity for *gratitude* than I've ever dreamed of experiencing. (Gratitude, as Brother David Stendl-Rast says, would suffice for all the prayers that could be said in a lifetime.)

Coming to a place of acceptance of the laws of impermanence is a key component to what can be called *spiritual intelligence*, a term I've borrowed from Daniel Goleman's bestselling book on emotional intelligence, called *Emotional IQ*. I use the term *spiritual intelligence* to describe a way of living life with both/and awareness, living life fully while simultaneously accepting that it will *all* end one day.

One prayer that describes a spiritually intelligent approach to life in Western culture is quintessentially expressed in the well-known Serenity Prayer, by Reinhold Neibhur, famous for its use in the 12-step Recovery Movement. In this simple prayer lies hidden within it perhaps one of the most powerful keys to a peaceful, grateful life. It reads:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

Integrating Impermanence into Everyday Life

Buddhism's teachings are infused with spiritually intelligent wisdom that reflect a deep understanding of life's fragility. This tradition teaches the certainty of change and the inevitability of death with such consistency, it normalizes that which Western culture outright avoids and denies. By practicing letting go, surrendering to what arises, and reminding ourselves that *everything*, including ourselves, will pass away one day, Buddhist teachings teach us that one can learn to accept the inevitability of loss and therefore enjoy each precious moment as it passes. For many of us, this is easier said than done.

Most of us in Western cultures don't willingly engage in these practices unless something unanticipated and unwanted occurs that forces us to; a loved one passing away unexpectedly, being fired from our jobs, or perhaps an accident of some kind. Generally, it is during these painful and sobering *initiations* that we start to pay attention to the essential laws of impermanence, often leading to greater wisdom, acceptance and a deeper relationship to life's mysteries.

The Greatest Wonder in the World

In the ancient Hindu text, the Mahabharata, written almost 7000 years ago, a universal phenomenon was written about that continues to have relevance to the human experience today. To paraphrase, it asks:

“What is the greatest wonder in all the world?”

And then it answers:

“The greatest wonder in all the world is that everyone dies, but no one believes that it will happen to them.”

What can we learn from this millennial, universal blind spot in human beings?

For as long as we have been in existence, human beings have been fearful of death and the unknown, afraid of no longer existing, and terrified of leaving familiar surroundings and loved ones behind. We all know why. It's understandable to want things to go as planned, to want to control life, and to hope that the things and people you love in your life will never leave or change.

Sooner or later, however, we all must acknowledge that these hopes are futile attempts to go against the grain of existence, similar to swimming against the very current of Life itself.

My initiation into the full understanding of the inevitability of loss had a particularly *relentless* quality, which apparently is quite common to those of us who are a bit stubborn

and unwilling to accept life on its own terms, as I was. Since I've always been a person who has, for better or worse, been attracted to living *larger than life*, my initiation provided more than enough drama to satisfy a lifetime, leaving an indelible impression on me. Like most people who experience a life passage of severe loss, out of these ashes arose the *phoenix* of change that ultimately delivered me to the life that was waiting for me to live.

My Former Life

Up until about eight years ago, I was living another life. I was known in the music industry as a *studio rat*, a term fondly used when describing the overworking recording industry professional. As a result of many years of ambition, hard work, and some luck, I had accomplished the near impossible: a successful, award-winning career, composing and producing music for media production on a national scale without having to live in Los Angeles, the center of the known media universe. The cost of admission: an unsustainable lifestyle, spending endless hours in the studio while attempting to find balance with some semblance of a family life.

Up until this time, I was earning more money than I had ever dreamed of earning, composing and producing music for top-rated television shows, award-winning national ad campaigns, and feature films, one of which even played at the Cannes Film Festival. As if it weren't hard *enough* to become successful in this competitive field, I made it even more challenging by wanting to maintain a lifestyle in the more beautiful and considerably mellower San Francisco Bay area, away from the hectic freeways and the smog-filled air of Los Angeles. While common wisdom dictated that LA was *the* required habitat for media composers, I was one of the rare few that actually had a national clientele without having to live in Southern California. I knew I had beaten the odds, and I was grateful for it.

By staying in the Bay Area, I was a *big fish in a small pond*. I was happily married, (so I thought), with a beautiful six year-old daughter that I adored. I enjoyed a respectable reputation in the community. True to the role I was playing, I had the *required* enormous house with swimming pool and the mandatory luxury car. I was proudly bringing home substantial royalty checks every month, which made me feel like I had most assuredly *made it*. But even though I knew better, I was living with the erroneous belief that it was all going to last *forever*. I couldn't imagine it ending. *I thought I was set for life*.

But deep inside, I had a feeling that something wasn't quite right. While I had received many accolades for my work, I wasn't feeling artistically fulfilled. Since I was five years old, I had big dreams of making some kind of significant contribution to the world of music somehow.

But given how well I was doing financially, I didn't dare 'rock the boat' by indulging in such extravagant thoughts. After all, I was a husband and a father. As the son of a Russian Jewish immigrant who had been weathered by the harsh times of the depression, I was programmed to be a *breadwinner*. I knew my job was to take care of my family,

and show that I could make a living in this incredibly competitive career. Artistic fulfillment would have to come later. It was a time in which I felt compelled to prove myself to the world, but to myself most of all.

Creating Media that Matters

Still, I knew what I *truly* loved to do. I was passionate about working on media projects for beneficial causes. I had never been so fulfilled as when I was writing music for projects whose purpose was to raise awareness about important issues, procure money for people in crisis, or to help catalyze positive change in the world. I wanted my music to make a difference in measurable, practical ways. The idea that one's art could actually be useful, the way a healer could be, or the way an investigative reporter could be, for example. Now *this* was thrilling.

After a number of years in which I consistently offered my talents and services, I became known in the local media community as the guy who was willing to do *pro bono* work for socially responsible causes at the drop of a hat. It was while working on these kinds of projects that I felt significantly more fulfilled, more alive, and more connected to what I came here to do. After each of these projects, I would go to bed at night feeling that I had finally figured it out. *This is what I wanted to do when I grew up!*

This proved to be a great challenge however, due to the fact that no one I had ever known had been able to support themselves strictly from pro bono work. Most people come to realize that one can't be financially successful doing what you most love to do *while* also making a significant contribution to the world. (Could you imagine Bono beginning his career by attempting to influence movers and shakers of world politics to reduce the African debt, before he had his first hit? I don't think so!)

Well, who was *I* to think that I could have my cake and eat it too? *I was lucky to have a career in music at all*, my inner voice would say. Best to proceed with financial security as the highest priority first. Then all would be well, my marriage would last till we were old and grey, and I would have plenty of time to follow other yearnings, such as satisfying the *artist within* when I had the time on my hands to be concerned with such luxuries. I had a plan, and I expected life and God to 'step in line' with my plan.

The Fall

However, life had other plans for me, and within a short period of time after I decided that I had to express myself as an artist and release a debut album, literally everything started to unravel. Professional assignments started falling apart in front of my eyes. Technological breakdowns in my studio suspiciously became the norm. Clients became more unmanageable and difficult than ever. But no matter how loud the warnings got, I held stubbornly to my Personal American Dream, the life that would guarantee success, consumption, and security forever. The more I resisted the pure (and inconvenient)

creative expression that was waiting to emerge from within me, the more uphill life became.

And then, in the summer of 1998, when my daughter was six years old, my life as I knew it came to horrific, painful, and unexpected *crash*.

It was my time for the *Fall*. As described in most spiritual traditions, it was time for my initiation into the Great Mystery through the power of suffering, the suffering that is a requisite for every hero's journey, It finally happened to me.

During a bicycle ride with my daughter in the neighborhood, I sustained a truly horrific *face-plant* into concrete that severely cut into my face, a number of body parts, and most notably, *my wrist*, where I sustained 16 fractures, possibly jeopardizing the use of my left hand, a part of me which was rather essential for playing piano, for composing, and for continuing a musical career as I knew it.

To add insult to injury, one month, many stitches, a horrific oral surgery and an excruciating three-hour hand reconstruction surgery later, - while I was recovering from this horrific trauma - my wife then informed me that she wanted to leave the marriage. To my horror, she said that she would like to leave California, take our six year old daughter away from me, (the treasure of my life), and start a new life in Europe, hopefully with the man she had reconnected with, (after not being with him for more than fifteen years).

At this point, I must point out that I was a typical California guy. This means that for twenty-five years, I had done everything that was *au courante* to explore. Gestalt Therapy, Reichian Work, Co-Counseling, Shamanism, Peyote Ceremonies, Emotional Releasing, Rolfing, Alchemical Hypnotherapy, Meditation, Tai Chi, Yoga, and, for good measure, extensive couples therapy as a preventative insurance strategy. To say that I was sure that this stupefying reversal of my wife's feelings would NEVER happen to me is a complete understatement. I was devastated, humiliated, infuriated, and emasculated. I knew that I would never be the same again, and wondered how I couldn't see it coming. When I started looking at it in hindsight, I had to admit that there *were* a number of omens that things were amiss between us - but at the time, I was completely blind.

Just as the Mahabharata talked about the greatest wonder in all the world, I was completely taken by surprise that my life (as I knew it) had to suddenly face its *death cry*, and no advanced psycho-spiritual tool could ever adequately prepare me for this unexpected turn of events. As the Texans might say, I was *road kill*.

This was, without question, the death of everything I cherished, everything I invested my life in, and everything I was personally committed to, including my own supposedly *airtight* strategy for success. After a lifetime of believing in the possibility of true love and happy endings, a part of me died that day. Perhaps the magical thinking of youth should be allowed to die through painful initiations such as this, opening to a more sober

way of living that can allow everything in its own season, in its own way, with a healthy respect for the inevitable, and at times ruthless law of impermanence.

In hindsight, I must reiterate that there were plenty of signs that this ‘fall’ was headed in my direction. Because my sense of self-worth was inextricably linked to how much money, praise, attention, and status I was getting from the world, I just wasn’t willing to see it. Like it or not, it was time for me to be initiated into a way of having a more meaningful relationship to life’s Mysteries. It was my time to become aware of how fragile and precious life is by having things that I loved taken away from me for a while. While I’m not saying that this is the way everyone has to come by this knowledge, I do know that loss allowed me to appreciate life as an priceless gift, worthy of being treasured. Over time, I came to see life as a priceless opportunity to serve others, and to be of value to those in need.

The Creation of Graceful Passages

During this time of physically rehabilitating my wrist, learning and asserting my rights and responsibilities as a new single father, (so that she couldn’t be taken away), and attempting to sort through the separation and divorce that followed, I was physically, emotionally and spiritually *drained*.

In the midst of this challenging time, Grace knocked at my door. A dear friend of mine, pioneer Chant master Michael Stillwater had approached me with desire to create something that could support his work with people at the end of life. After having experienced the death of his father recently, he started to offer extemporaneous songs at the bedside of those who were going through the dying process. As he sang about love, forgiveness, and gratitude, somehow all the things that were not being said amongst family members, (as well as the ever present fear and denial) miraculously dissipated into tears of joy and sadness, expressions of love and appreciation, and a more fearless embrace of the journey that lay ahead for all involved.

He approached me because he had thought to himself that if he *were* dying, the music he would want to hear would be mine - which was deeply gratifying – and thought that we might be able to join together to create a recorded resource that could support people in being less afraid, more willing to accept the realities of the transition at the end of life, and more open to experiencing the gratitude, connectedness, and love that seemed to be universally needed at such times.

I myself had experienced the death of my father six years prior to this, and I had been forever changed from the experience. Remembering how hard it was to be at the bedside, with that *elephant under the rug* feeling in the air, I was intrigued with the idea of creating a resource that could possibly help people during this time of intense fear and challenging emotions. Given that I was traversing my way through a ‘death’ of my own at the time, I welcomed the opportunity to explore what might be supportive to those experiencing the heart of Loss.

We began experimenting with the power of intention and prayer, (now documented as being capable of offering a great many benefits to people dealing with all sorts of challenges). We recorded Michael as he extemporaneously spoke in an intimate, loving manner to an imaginary person who had just received a terminal diagnosis. While he spoke from the heart, I improvised at my keyboard underneath him, scoring every emotional nuance as if I were scoring a motion picture film.

When we finished the prayerful message in support of presence, acceptance, and a space to feel, we both were awestruck. We wondered to ourselves if anyone had ever musically *scored* the universal messages from the world's spiritual and humanitarian leaders – the world's *wisdom keepers* - using the same aesthetic and musical standards as are used in the scoring of films? Could we obtain intimate, vulnerable, and meaningful messages from respected authors, speakers and leaders of our time, and *deepen the impact* of these healing messages by creating an emotionally resonant musical atmosphere around them, making them impossible to be listened to without an open heart? Could we create an audio resource that was as compelling to listen to as the viewing of a film? Could we imbue it with an inherent quality that would create *sacred space* for a wide, spiritually diverse audience? Could we intentionally design it so that it would help to inspire greater compassion, empathy, intimacy, and presence for people dealing with the passages of life that more often frighten, perplex, and disturb us?

Over the next three years, with the help of our credit cards, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, my retirement fund, and a number of generous individuals and organizations, we recorded wisdom keepers from all over the world speaking messages dedicated to those facing loss and death. We recorded the messages from people such as Elisabeth Kubler Ross, the pioneer of the death and dying movement. We also recorded Dean Alan Jones, Episcopalian minister from Grace Cathedral, along with Rabbi Zalman Shacter-Shalomi, founder of the national Jewish Renewal Movement. We recorded the well-known American Spiritual teacher, Ram Das for the first recording after his well-publicized stroke. We also worked with the voices of Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Arun Gandhi, (the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi who is carrying on the peaceful work of his Grandfather), and others. We spent over 1200 hours in the studio editing interviews, composing music, and designing a groundbreaking audio resource that has since set a new benchmark in what is sometimes called a new kind of 'audio medicine for the soul.'

Featuring a rich aural tapestry that features full orchestra and choir, *Graceful Passages: A Companion for Living and Dying*, has received international acclaim from leaders in hospice and palliative care, the chaplaincy and pastoral care worlds, as well as key figures in the entertainment and self-help fields. The book and CD is now regarded as '*one the most powerful non-pharmacological audio interventions for the alleviation of anxieties associated with the end of life process*' and as a result, has been embraced as an essential tool for all care providers assisting those facing loss of any kind.

All of this came into being because we followed a natural curiosity to explore what resources we might be able to create so that we all can become more familiar with the

nuances of the death and dying process for human beings, both metaphoric and literal, something the Buddhists have been doing for thousands of years. And none of this would have ever transpired if I hadn't been asked to endure a death, the kind of death that sooner or later, one way or another, none of us can evade.

Dying Every Day to Feel Fully Alive

I've heard that the Dalai Lama, along with most practicing Tibetan Buddhists, includes a death and dying meditation as a vital part of his *daily* spiritual practice. Since impermanence is one of their core principles, they believe that starting at birth, we can normalize death, even make friends with it, by beginning a life-long process that might prepare us for the little and big deaths of our lives, those moments when we experience loss of any kind. Given that, it should come as no surprise to learn that the core values of Buddhism are based on kindness and compassion. When we remember how precious this life truly is, how else could we treat one another than with kindness?

The Buddhists, along with most of the world's indigenous cultures, see everything as interconnected – a cycle of life that *includes* death, knowing that it doesn't make sense to shove any part of life “under the rug”, away from our awareness. When we can accept the reality of our mortality and face it *head on*, it just might turn out to be the best-kept secret to living a satisfying life. One can experience profound gratitude and fulfillment in this life, especially when you live it *out loud* and *all out*, with full awareness of life's preciousness. That is why, one breath at a time, I try to come to peace with dying every moment of every day so I can feel fully alive. After subscribing to this practice, I started to realize an ironic truth: most of us are not as afraid of dying, as we are of *fully living*.

In our industrialized, so-called “civilized” societies, the predominant worldview couldn't be more different than those who live in the timeless village of Ladakh. Everything in our fast-paced, high-tech, youth-obsessed culture revolves around an institutionalized obsession with keeping the awareness of our mortality off of the mainstream's radar. Our media, our advertising, our careers, and our lifestyles are all infused with a mass-condoned form of unconscious propaganda, dedicated to ensure that our experiences, thoughts and reminders of death pertain to *others*, to all those unfortunate people we read about in the news, in Iraq, or next door, but most assuredly not *us*. We are relied upon to deny the truth of our fragility, so that we can keep this ironically life-giving awareness (of our mortality) down below our conscious thoughts, fueled by a collective, primordial fear.

What I know now is that when I finally accept that death will surely happen to me, (and could happen, therefore, at any moment) then more joy, life, and gratitude is available to be experienced than ever before. I'm convinced that there is a correlation between this essential practice of facing the inevitability of our dying with this refreshing temperament that looks at the world with an almost childlike wonder, that shrieks with delight at the greeting of a stranger, as the Ladakhis do.

I still find it remarkable, that with all the suffering the Tibetans have seen since their country was taken away from them, they are still known for their inexhaustible joy, laughter, and gratitude for the preciousness of life itself. I believe this experience of joy and innocent love of life is available to all of us, if we were only willing to have the courage to accept the responsibilities of what it means to be mortal – namely - to fully accept the inevitability and the reality of our mortality.

The Life That Was Waiting for Me To Live

Since the release of *Graceful Passages* five years ago, I am now living a completely different life, with different values and different priorities. I might not be “making it” in the entertainment business as much as I was before, but now I’m much more connected to what really matters in my life. My daughter is now fourteen years old, and I travel around the world speaking and performing as an advocate for the integrative power of music, for healing, for inspiration, and for spiritual awakening. I believe in the vital role music and media must play to catalyze change and make a difference in people’s lives, and I’m constantly seeking projects I can work on that fit this description. I occasionally serve as an artistic director for global peace conferences where participants are hungry for more impactful, musical experiences beyond merely intellectual discourse, where the art and music of the world’s cultures can provide direct infusions of the remarkable diversity that is available to all of us on this complex, fragile planet we call home.

It all can be summed up very simply. *I’m grateful and happy to be alive.* I am deeply grateful for this precious gift called life and I embrace each moment with a deep sense of humility and awe. We never know in advance the future lives that are waiting to be lived. I had to die into the unknown so that the life that was waiting for me could finally be revealed.

Now I understand what that song, *Amazing Grace*, is really about.

“I once was lost, but now, I’m found. Was blind, but now I see.”

Gary Malkin
March 26th, 2006