



## The Public Square

by J C Bowman

*Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?* (1 Corinthians 15:55)

I would like to tell you I am a private man who relishes time alone to contemplate the complexities of life. That would be untrue, although I do think about the great issues of the day with regularity. I like to surround myself with people and discuss issues. It is with intent and veracity that I ponder most of the issues raised in philosophy, theology and history that other more capable men also struggled to understand. I had a conversation with my close friend and spiritual brother Jeff Wagner in regards to life and death recently. I can honestly say I wish I had better answers for him on some issues. The conversation has dominated my thoughts in recent days, and reminded me of painful conversations with my own dad Francis Bowman and Uncle Bud Bowman years before their death.

Life and death to me is an interchangeable subject. I see death as part of life. I see eternal life extending beyond death. In the end we all come to realize that wisdom grows out of our own personal experience. We all know that the greatest victories in life happen when you least expect them. Death

should be expected so can it also be a victory? I believe death is the ultimate victory for the Christian. However, when you hear somebody say: "Life is hard." Ask them this question, "compared to what?"

I am unashamedly a Christian. My religion defines who I am, what I believe and what actions that I take. It does not make me perfect. I have sinned and fall short of glory on a regular basis. But I also enjoy reading views of other religions and from other religions. Having lived in Asia during my time in the military I believe understanding other cultures also means understanding other religions. The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* refers to "the knowers of the essence of things." The essential quality of a thing being what makes it different from everything else. The essence, the thing in itself, can be known only through the soul, and never through the senses. Think about that for just a minute. The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* is often being described as a concise guide to Hindu philosophy and also as a guide to life tells us something we intrinsically know: there are some things we simply cannot know in our physical realities of our earthly bodies. The atheist struggles his whole life to know the un-

knowable through his physical existence. The spiritual understand what Paul conveyed to us in Hebrews 11:1: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Unbelievers place their faith only in themselves. In doing so, I would argue they have not truly lived.

Hindu philosophy would remind us that while we live we approach nearest to the knowledge of that essence, which is the soul, when we hold no intercourse or communion at all with the body, except for what absolute necessity requires; that is, when we cease to be dependent upon the body, to be influenced by its appetites, urges and passions. In other words, the whole aim and study in philosophy in the old meaning of that word, is the deliverance and separation of the soul from the body and this can be attempted and achieved even while a person is living in this world. It is not something which has to take place by a process of nature, but can be brought about through one's own clear intelligence. I would argue that position becomes too dependent on self reliance. I believe the closer one gets to God the closer one comes to understanding their own self.

The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* also makes an interesting point that when there is freedom from dependence on the body, when this change

## With Eyes Wide Open

comes about in its completeness, then death and life are the same to the real man, the real man being the soul; whether he lives or dies makes no difference to him. I do not agree necessarily with that point entirely especially about whether life or death matters, but I do agree with the major crux of the argument: your soul is what is real. The *Bhagavad Gîtâ* also reminds us: "The wise grieve neither for the living, nor for the dead." That is to say in Hindu philosophy, there is the possibility of coming to an internal condition or state in which whether life is lived in the physical body, which has been called a prison, or outside that prison, it is all the same. The soul uses the body as an instrument, without attachment to it. I think that is the heart of Psalm 30, where two images are evident: 1) going down, death, silence; 2) coming up, life, praising. God has delivered believers from one state of being to another more permanent state of being.

Nobody likes to lose a family member or friend to death. It is a reminder of our own mortality, but more importantly it is the loss of a piece of our own essence. My friend Jeff Wagner has had a tough break he has battled through two rounds of leukemia and thus far he is cancer free. But in treating Jeff during the second go around, the treatment has paralyzed my friend from the waist down. Jeff was an

amazing athlete and this paralysis has devastated the once vibrant, energetic individual that many in this community know and love (CHS Class of 1981).

Standing in the shadow of Jeff, I admit he casts a pretty big shadow. Always the optimist, I just thought it gave me more room to spread myself. But we formed a friendship bond that will last forever, throughout eternity. Jeff's wife Kim Wagner and mother Vera Wagner have been towers of strength for Jeff. They have displayed remarkable courage throughout Jeff's illness. This is a courage which most people never know exists until they are pressed by the ugly issues in life caused by illness. Sadly, it is a challenge we all may face with a parent, spouse, child, brother, sister or friend. Jeff told me that doctors believe there are three possible causes for the sudden paralysis: 1) Something transferred during the bone marrow transfusion, 2) Places where he was stuck numerous times with needles, and 3) The medicine imported from China he was administered was contaminated. Despite being paralyzed, Jeff has much to live for: the most important reason is that Christ continues to work through him to reach others for the kingdom.

One of the greatest mysteries of faith is how we use our talents and abilities to serve God, using the spiritual gifts at our disposal. It is just ordinary people doing extra-

ordinary things. First Corinthians 12:7 says that gifts are given "for the common good." 1 Peter 4:10 says we ought to "employ our gifts for one another." We all have a unique role we play in God's Kingdom. Just knowing my friend Jeff Wagner has been a blessing in my life. Like I wrote to him quoting Robert Frost—"The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep."

You can spend the rest of your life dying well, or you can choose to spend the rest of your life living well. I know what I plan to choose. My favorite English Teacher Dianna Johnson would not forgive me, and I would be remiss if I failed to mention what the great Jacobean poet and preacher John Donne wrote: "Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; For those, whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, Much pleasure, then from thee much more, must flow, And soonest our best men with thee do go, Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell, And poppy, or charms, can make us sleep as well, And better than thy stroke. Why swell'st thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And Death shall be no more: Death, thou shalt die."

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