



Editor's Note: Welcome to the Department of Meditation, where you are treated to the ageless wisdom and inimitable wit of our very own meditation guru, Constance Wilkinson, psychotherapist and card-carrying Buddhist.

Constance welcomes your feedback and questions about meditation at triptych2@gmail.com

Department of Meditation

by Constance Wilkinson, LMHC, MFA

Comes Without Warning

In the [Spring 2012 Department of Meditation](#) column, I wrote about the recent deaths of three people: my very dear very Greek ex-mother-in-law, Anne; a revered Tibetan lama, Thinley Norbu; and Cassia Berman, the poet. In my summer column, I didn't write about the death of anyone.

But that was not because no one I loved had died. It was because I could not bear to write it. My dear friend Bill Finley died on April 14, 2012. Like Cassia Berman, his death was unexpected; like Cassia, we'd met at Sarah Lawrence, where he taught acting. I'd known him since I was 20.

His wife Susan, who I've known almost as long and equally well, had tried to call me to tell me Bill was ill and in the hospital, but the message never reached me. The day after she'd tried to call, perhaps the day of his death, I was just noodling around the house, tidying up, shuffling papers; as I came near the kitchen window by the phone, a thought came into my head--out of nowhere, out of the blue. A few words, very clear: "Is Bill Finley still alive?"

This was bizarre on a number of levels, and my other internal voices at once began to object strongly to the content of that thought. First came a scolding, "How can you be so morbid? What a horrible morbid thought! What is wrong with you?"

And it was a horrible thought. There was no reason I should have thought the thought I thought. I thought he was fine. I had no evidence to the contrary; no one I knew was worried about him, as far as I knew everything was just as it had always been since, oh, 1970-ish. Bill was there in New York with Susan. Bill and Susan were both fine because, well, why should they not be?

Duh.

Shut up, inner voice.

The next day or the next, I got a message from a dear friend from Sarah Lawrence theater days, Susan H. She and I knew Bill as an actor in experimental theater and then as a teacher. He'd worked with Richard Schechner creating the wonderful Grotowski-inspired work, *Dionysus* in '69. I'd seen him at La MaMa ETC in Wilford Leach's gorgeous productions of *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *Renard the Fox*.

Later, I co-founded an experimental theater company, Kuku Ryku Theater Lab in New York City; we started out rehearsing in the dance studio at SLC, and later on in Soho, then Chelsea. The third person who joined the company was the actress and writer, now filmmaker, Susan Weiser. She [married Bill](#) in 1974 (wedding filmed by Bill's friend from Columbia U., director Brian dePalma). Bill worked with KRTL when we toured Europe (he and I had our notes and artwork stolen by the East German border police on our way from West Germany to Poland!) Bill directed my play, *Sacco and Vanzetti Meet Julius and Ethel Rosenberg!!!* (or, *Patrick Henry in Hell*), in 1978, to rave reviews.

From SLC on forever, I loved working with Bill, and I trusted him completely, and naturally. I don't recall ever having a disagreement with him.

I credit him with ruining my life on two counts: I will never be able to run for President. I was in the company he directed at La MaMa ETC for Nancy Fales' play, *Predicates*; I appeared in Shiva-like dancing posture, with my only adornment Shiva-blue body paint. Hard to get off, so I stayed blue-ish the whole subway ride home. Somebody has those pictures.

The second way Bill ruined my life was when I attended a workshop given by an Internationally-Acclaimed Experimental Theatre Director: he saw my work, liked it, and offered me *The Lead* in his upcoming it-will-make-him-even-more-famous production. But working with Billo had spoiled me. I thought that the IAETD was too easily tricked, and I turned him down, without a second thought. I blame Billo's truthful brilliance for ruining my chance at experimental theater stardom. *Mais, je ne regrette rien!*

Constance Wilkinson, LMHC, MFA is a licensed psychotherapist who uses a mindfulness-based, solution-focused approach to help reduce symptoms of dysregulation, as well as to develop clients' personal goals and strategies to achieve them. She is

trained in EMDR, clinical hypnosis, EFT, and expressive arts.

She has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College in creative writing and an MA in clinical mental health counseling psychology from Lesley University. Since 1978, Ms Wilkinson has been practicing meditation and studying with distinguished Tibetan Buddhist refugee teachers in the United States, India, Nepal, and Tibet.

Constance Wilkinson can be reached at 508-648-8105 Or by email: triptych2@gmail.com



Constance Wilkinson, LMHC, MFA
The Center for Change

mindfulness-based, solution-focused psychotherapy
expressive arts--EMDR--clinical hypnosis

Brewster, MA
508-648-8105
triptych2@gmail.com

Monday April 15th, dear friend Susan H.: "There's a rumor going around town (New York) that Bill Finley died. Do you know anything?" I didn't know anything, and I was horrified. Surely this wasn't so. I couldn't pick up the phone, and call Susan, and ask.

So, I Googled "William Finley, death."

There it was, crazily enough.

On the site British filmmaker [Edgar Wright](#).

Wright, out of the blue, in the middle of his night, had had a sudden impulse to email Bill—he had never done so before. Wright was sending Bill a fan email, stranger to stranger, to tell Bill how much he liked Bill's work in film. (Bill had appeared in a number of films, mostly by Brian DePalma). Wright's site quoted a reply email from Susan, saying, "I guess you must have had a strong connection to William. He was ill and just died today at 11:00 a.m. . . Wish I could have read him your email."

It was true.

[Insert my inconsolable grief here.]

This is a column about the death of Bill, a person I absolutely loved and absolutely trusted, from the beginning to the end, over 42 years. I can't remember him saying an unkind word, ever. A great actor, great director, great visual artist, great person, great friend, great colleague, great being; brilliant, wonderful, and sweet.

The only time I recall seeing him even mildly annoyed, was when he burst out in sudden, wailing complaint: "I'm a man; I don't eat vegetables!" Others remember this, too, and recalled it at his wake.

This is about someone I loved who died, and about his wife, Susan, who I also loved and do love, and who is enduring a grief infinitely more inconsolable and excruciatingly poignant than my own.

As is said: "death is real, comes without warning, this body will be a corpse." We know this, but we forget this, in the fog of the day to day. We know about death, but we don't remember it much, except from time to time like this, when it strikes someone down.

What does Bill's death have to do with life? And meditation?

Meditation is a practice that asks us to work with our minds, and by working with mind, our coming to appreciate the difference between discursive mind and unborn awareness, finding the presence of the present, just as it is.

There is no past, there is no future, there is a moment, only this, only this; nothing more, nothing less.

*I have heard that voice many a time when asleep
and, what is strange, I understood more or less
an order or an appeal in an unearthly tongue:*

*day draws near.
another one.
do what you can.*

(Czeslaw Milosz, Collected Poems)

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