

offspring
of a
deathless
soul

A Timeless Journey to Spiritual Triumph

b e t h n o n t e r u s s e l l

BIG MIND
PUBLISHING INC.

M c L e a n , V A

In grateful acknowledgement of those who have been instrumental in bringing this book to life. Thank you especially to Antoinette Carr, Paige Ohliger and Paula Bansch for your friendship, encouragement and guidance, without which this book would never have been. Thank you Pat Keiffner and Brad Dixon and all those at IBJ Corp. Contract Publishing who have worked so hard on this project and made it your own. Thank you, Randy, for believing in this book and in me when no one else did; but mostly, thank you for saying “yes” and allowing this to be. And Lily...for being the inspiration.

Published & distributed by
Big Mind Publishing, Inc.
McLean, VA.
www.bigmindpublishing.com

in association with

IBJ Corp. Contract Publishing
Indianapolis, IN

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Library of Congress Catalog Number
ISBN 0-9745673-4-5
First Edition
Printed in the United States of America

You will be what you will to be
Let failure find its false content
In that poor word, "environment,"
But spirit scorns it, and is free.

It masters time, it conquers space;
It cows that boastful trickster, Chance,
And bids the tyrant Circumstance
Uncrown, and fill a servants place.

The human Will, that force unseen,
The offspring of a deathless Soul,
Can hew a way to any goal,
Though walls of granite intervene.

Be not impatient with delay,
But wait as one who understands;
When spirit rises and commands,
The gods are ready to obey.

The river seeking for the sea
Confronts the dam and precipice
Yet knows it cannot fail or miss;
You will be what you will to be!

-Ella Wheeler Wilcox

1896

死

prologue

How is it possible to be reborn if you do not die? It is my most urgent wish to be reborn. It is the only wish I have now, the only desire left to me. Everything else, all passion, all hope, slowly fades to the point that I cannot see it anymore. It is difficult for me to even imagine a time when passion moved me, or hope lifted me. I want nothing that I used to want, which makes me not the person that I used to be. We create ourselves through what we desire, and I don't know who I am anymore.

Dying is nothing like what we suppose. It is an unshackling, a freedom I never knew in life. Strangely, I am not less myself, but more. And those things I am losing as life ebbs from my body are the very things which kept me enslaved. The fears and desires, all the time mistaken for my real self, now recede into unreality. They are dying, not I, not I...

In this state between life and death I can see both where I am going and where I have been. It is the realization of continuity that allows me to release myself from this earth, from the loves I have known here. For when fear and desire die, only the unspeakable reality of love remains. My daughter, my Little Bird....my love will follow you through time until you too break free from this existence, triumphant. I see you laughing into the wind as you run, knowing that the sun which warms you is me, and the song of the birds is me, and the deep longing you have is me also. We are one, and in this oneness we will be together forever.

You will live, and as I spiral upward into the next phase of my existence I use all my strength to hold the thought of you, to pull the essence of this love into the center of my heart where it will remain a dormant seed of joy until we meet again. My wish now is to be reborn, a most urgent wish, and the only true longing I have ever known.



“Dying is nothing like what we suppose...” This, I know to be true. I put down my pen and stare at the words that have just been written. A part of me had just stepped aside, a space had been made, and something else...someone else...had come pouring through the opening, and out onto the page. A voice, familiar and yet unknown to me, had emerged full-blown into my consciousness, expressing a love and longing beyond my known experience. What does that mean about who I am?

“My daughter, my Little Bird...” The poignant words could not have come from me; I am childless, there is no daughter of my own to speak to or long for. The intensity of the longing expressed makes me ask myself for what, for whom, would I die in order to be reborn? Something has been winding down in me for a long time and that is why I came here, to this rented house near the sea, to decide about my life. Whirling inside myself here for a month with no resolutions. And now this....what was this?

I put the paper away; perhaps I’ll never look at it again. Where could this beauty, this terror fit into my life? It is time to go back, though I have no enthusiasm for the way I have been living. If I had the courage I would stay in this house alone forever, letting whatever voices needed to speak through me to come. But I cannot; I have to return for reasons I may never know.

I pack up my things and pull the door to the tiny white house closed behind me. The sea air whispers in the pines, it

speaks of who I will become and not who I have been. In a few hours I will arrive home and my husband will greet me, happy I have returned. I will hear myself speaking, saying things in the ways I have before, but now a part of me will be listening for the voice I have heard and cannot forget. I will be waiting for that golden moment it whispered of when fear and desire die in me, and only the unspeakable reality of love remains.



That night I had a dream that was so disturbing that I woke from it choking on my tears. I dreamed that I suddenly, inexplicably, remembered that I had a baby. Somewhere, there was a baby that I had given birth to and then placed aside, forgotten, neglected. It was not a deliberate neglect; my mind had suffered a complete erasure of memory. Until the moment in the dream when the knowing came with a shock, I had been living in complete ignorance of her existence. Now that I remembered, the utter horror and shame of forgetting made me question whether or not I deserved to live.

I thought, where is she? Where did I last put her down? All I knew was that it had been too long...too long for a baby to go without care, to be without love. I moved in the agonizing slow-motion way of dreams down a long hallway toward where I thought she might be, and in the weird perfect logic of the dream world, it happened to be the room in which my mother had died, in the house where I grew up.

I entered the room, which was darkened and had a closed-up feeling. There in the corner next to the window was a crib, and I knew that my baby was inside it. The cold dread of what I would find was almost too much to bear. If she were dead, if I had not found her in time, my life was over; I could not live with the knowledge that I had been responsible for my own baby's death. The crib loomed up before me; it was all I could see. I looked down and there she was, my child, and I knew instantly and with a wave of disbelief that she was still alive, that I had found her just in time.

She was barely breathing as I lifted her from the crib and looked into her face. Her eyes were huge and dark and luminous, and they held no recrimination for me. The eyes reflected that the soul behind them was at peace, and in that peace I saw my own salvation. I put my finger to her lips and she began sucking, hard, and with each pull she grew stronger and stronger until she was a robust glowing baby, alive in my arms.

I could not shake the dream for days. The feeling that I had been exiated from some guilt which I could not name permeated my waking life. It was as if a secret truth had been revealed to me, and that truth is that in remembering what we have denied, we save ourselves.

時間

time

When I wake I don't know where I am. It takes several minutes before I remember I am on my way to China, I am traveling with Alex, we are going to bring home a baby. The sun is still shining though according to my watch it is ten o'clock in the evening. We have been following the light since this morning as we have flown over the top of the world, and it has been eerie, a day with no night. We could be anywhere, it could be any time, in this moment, suspended between heaven and earth; I am flying into tomorrow, or is it yesterday?

There are still several hours before we are scheduled to land in Tokyo, and from there, we will take another three-hour flight to Beijing. I have an entire row to myself; this airplane is almost empty. Several books, all of which I am having trouble concentrating on, surround me on the seat and the remains of a half-eaten lunch still waiting to be taken away by the flight attendant. I look across the aisle and Alex is stretched out, sleeping. After more than a year of planning for this adoption, it must finally be starting to seem real for her; she seems distracted, withdrawn, and not in the mood to chat about the new baby or anything else.

I have spent the time trying to read, looking out at the clouds, thinking—the things I prefer to do anyway. At some point I had begun to meditate but I must have fallen asleep; there was a dream, something intense...what was it? I try hard to bring it back; I recall a structure, bathed in dream-light, and as I concentrate on this image more details begin to emerge from the shadows of sleep. I take out my notebook and pen to record what I remember:

I am standing in a pagoda, surrounded by water. I am looking at my reflection when suddenly, another reflection merges with mine. I look up to see a young Chinese man, in some type of military or royal dress, and he is coming toward me. My heart rises up in joy and yet I am also afraid. I can see that I am dressed in some type of elegant robe, with elaborate embroidery and color.

The dream is a shimmering little jewel, so vivid in color and feeling. I have had so many dreams about China since I agreed to come on this trip with Alex: dreams about babies, dreams that I am Chinese and that Alex is Chinese, and a dream in which Alex's husband is a Chinese soldier trying to warn me of some danger.

As I think back over this dream-trail, I make a note to myself that I must remember to tell Antoinette about this one. Though I have known her for only a short period of time, Antoinette has become the first person I think of when anything of interest occurs. I had spoken to her for the first time just two months ago, after my friend Paige had insisted that I call her, pressing her phone number into my hand.

Paige and I had been sitting in her garden on a warm sunlit morning in late summer. We had met in a yoga class a year before. When she walked into the room the first evening of class, I knew we would be friends. Within weeks we were as comfortable with each other as sisters, and part of each other's lives.

Many of my other friendships that were of much longer duration had never evolved to that state; like my friendship

with Alex, for instance. I had known Alex for over ten years, but there was something in me that remained wary of her, though I was not able to say why.

On the morning when she spoke to me of Antoinette, Paige and I had been talking about the practice of psychology. I was telling her that there seemed to be something missing in all the techniques and theories, and I didn't know how much it was really helping people. I had been working as a counselor for a couple of years and had become disillusioned with the promise of psychotherapy. Understand the mind and problems would be solved, went the theory; but somehow in practice it never seemed to work out that way.

Perhaps it was a dead end, I said to Paige, and there needed to be something more for people to truly heal. After sitting for hundreds of hours with clients suffering from every imaginable permutation of misery, I began to sense that the dysfunctional behaviors, the longings, the pain had some sort of underlying logic or meaning which was impossible to discover with the conventional tools of therapy.

"I think you should talk to Antoinette," she said, though when I pressed her she could not tell me why. Paige had known Antoinette for years, and had mentioned her many times to me. But she had never really offered details about her, and she didn't seem to want to now, either. It all seemed somewhat mysterious, and I was skeptical.

Paige said that Antoinette had an interesting way of looking at these issues, and had made them her life's work.

She seemed to feel so strongly that Antoinette and I should talk, so I did call, the next afternoon. When Antoinette answered, her charming English accent was the first surprise, the first of many. One of the first things she said to me was, “Things are not as they appear.”

Things are not as they appear. All of my searching over the years had led to dead ends. My study of psychology, science, religious thought, yoga and Buddhism had led me to a place where I had to accept that there was something more, something beyond my understanding, something not explained fully in any of the books I had read. What the ‘something more’ was, I had no idea. I thought of the experience I had had several months before, when I had written, spontaneously, words that belonged to someone else. I still had no explanation for it, and it haunted me.

“What do you want, what are you looking for?” Antoinette asked, questions no one had ever asked before, at least not so directly. She asked the only questions that matter. She told me that she worked as a spiritual guide and teacher. I told her that she was exactly what I was looking for, though until the moment those words came out of my mouth, I had not known it was true.

“Antoinette, I’m looking for the real thing,” I said, hesitating, not knowing if she would understand what I meant, not knowing for sure if I knew what I meant.

Antoinette laughed. And when she laughed, it sounded like the tinkling of bells I had heard in a dream—long, long ago.



A month later, Paige and I were standing in the airport in Charleston, South Carolina, waiting for Antoinette to appear. We had agreed to meet and spend a long weekend at the beach, and now I was nervous, not sure if I was ready for this. Antoinette and I had talked several times on the phone since our first conversation, and each time she had led me in prayers, or meditations, which opened up a new world that was intriguing but which made me uncomfortable.

I had resisted prayer for most of my life; I didn't understand how it was supposed to work. It seemed like wishful thinking, magical thinking; everyone prays, yet how many prayers are answered?

A weekend with Paige and Antoinette, talking about God, joining in prayers...I had always been suspicious of the overtly religious, those who talked about their faith. I had kept my spiritual longings to myself. I found it difficult to utter the word "God." If I had not been so desperately in need of answers, I would never have opened this Pandora's Box which Antoinette presented me. But on that bright weekend I did open it, and found within the promise of a power which I had denied myself: the power to live life itself as a prayer, to purposely join myself to what is beautiful and true.



The captain announces we are preparing to descend. Alex joins me in my row, and we begin to gather our

belongings. She is still quiet and withdrawn, her face white and tired-looking. A tiny twinge of homesickness rises in me, and there are butterflies in my stomach. It already feels as if we've been gone a lifetime.

This morning when we met at the airport, it was cold and dark, a crystal clear December morning; our husbands and Alex's son were there to see us off. Alex lingered with them while I stood off to the side with my luggage. This was a big moment for their family, a turning point, an ending and a beginning. No longer would it be just the three of them; a new baby would join them and change their lives. I could tell they were unsure about this, hesitant, not smiling, clinging to each other. I thought of the little face in the picture Alex had shown me a few days ago, a black-eyed girl with sparse hair and a determined look. The orphanage had sent the picture of the baby assigned to her, and when Alex showed it to me I asked for a copy of the photo, and then pasted it onto the front cover of the journal I would be keeping for this trip.

I liked to look at the picture. Last night, when I showed it to my husband, he said, "That's the cutest thing I've ever seen! Why don't you bring one back for us, too?" He was obviously joking, but for some reason, I got angry.

"You can't just DO that," I said; "you can't just bring back a baby." I wondered now if my anger was a tell-tale sign of a desire to do just that. I wondered if seeing these orphaned babies would make me want to have one, too; maybe it would awaken that maternal instinct that has seemed to be lacking in me all this time. Just yesterday, when

I was having breakfast with Paige, we were talking about the trip and I said, "I'm really glad it's not me bringing home a baby!" And I was glad, for now, that it was not me.

But I am excited for Alex, even though right now she doesn't seem very happy herself. The day before we left, she called and told me that she had "freaked out" the night before; she had been preparing the nursery and suddenly was overcome with the need to run from the room, from the house, from her life.

"I've never felt that way before," she said, "Never felt that desperate." She told me it had taken several hours to calm herself down, and that she was sure it was just exhaustion, concern over the details of the trip and the adoption, and last-minute jitters. But the effects seem to be lingering, she is definitely not herself. When I ask her if she is okay, she barely answers.

We exit the plane silently and move into the terminal. Almost at once I am hit with a strong wave of nausea; I feel as if I'm going to pass out. Somehow I make it through the corridor to our gate, and then I have to sit down against a pillar and put my head between my legs. My mouth is watering profusely, if I move I know I will vomit.

It happened as soon as we entered the terminal and were met with a sea of Asian faces. A virtual wave of humanity, all with Asian features, moved toward us in the corridor, and for some reason, that was a shock to my system. I had felt a surge of energy hit me in the gut, in the solar plexus, and I became disoriented and weak. I am feeling this strange sense of fear, not just discomfort, but anxiety, an anxiousness; it's as if I

were in danger. It is irrational, and I don't mention it to Alex. She has enough on her mind right now so I suffer in silence.

The dream I had on the plane...the Asian faces surging down the corridor toward me. They swirl together and I can feel the earth spinning wildly beneath me and for all I know it is wobbling off its axis. I hold my knees tightly and keep my eyes closed, praying for this to pass. I am in a dream, this is all a dream now and the way back home is closed to me until I wake up. But into what reality will I awake? In this moment nothing seems certain. I breathe, and breathe; it is all I can do. For more than an hour I sit like this, trying to hold it together, wondering if I'll be able to go on with the trip.

Finally, our flight is called. Alex has to help me onto the plane, which is packed with Japanese and Chinese businessmen. Except for the flight attendants, we are the only women on this flight, and that makes me very uncomfortable. The men don't acknowledge us at all; it is as if we are ghosts, we don't exist. I still feel so sick and I settle into my seat and fall asleep right away, a deep, dense sleep, my mind opaque, trying to escape. When I wake up we are landing in Beijing, and I wonder, what have I done?



How can we know where our journeys may ultimately take us? We think we know, and try to prepare. We make plans and itineraries, pack clothing for certain types of weather. We take our bodies to specific geographical locations, but how often do we think of the effect it may have upon our souls? How often do we wonder, why this

destination, and not some other? Why have I chosen it, or has it chosen me? What part of myself awaits me there, where I am going?

Traveling to China from the United States is a long journey, but I did not know how far inside myself I would travel by going there. A day's journey which took me to a forgotten lifetime; in the end, I did not know exactly where I was or how to return to the life I had left. The confusion of being on the other side of the world forced me to see things differently. China sleeps while we are awake, our biological clocks set at exactly opposite poles. Their night of remembering is our day of forgetting; we speak a different language of time. The American and Chinese collective minds swirl in opposite directions, ours toward the future, and theirs toward the past.

During this journey I lost a day, and gained it back upon my return. How does this happen, time getting lost? Think too deeply about the absurdities of this and it becomes apparent that the human invention of time, of days following days in a tidy linear progression, is an illusion, a trick we forget we have played upon ourselves. We are conditioned to accept time as an absolute, and yet, in one sense there is no time at all. It is always now, and everywhere that exists, exists now, though in one place the sun is shining and it is called "Tuesday morning," at the very same moment in some other geographical location it is dark and we say "Wednesday." A day ahead? No; the same moment, exactly. Tuesday and Wednesday, happening at the same time. Past and future, dark and light, today and tomorrow, always inseparable.



For the past year and a half Alex has been going through the arduous process of international adoption, a marathon of paperwork, red tape and delays. She called six months ago to tell me that she had been matched with a child. The trip was set but she needed a companion as her husband could not make the trip; they had decided he would stay home to care for their 8 year old son. When she asked would I come with her, to China, I heard myself saying “yes” before even thinking. It would be an exciting adventure, another country to add to my list of places in the world that I had seen with my own eyes, and a chance to see how this business of international adoption actually works.

I was surprised when Alex asked me to come. We had known each other for years, and yet, I would not consider us close. We had met as neighbors, and ours was a social friendship; we saw each other a few times a year, at dinner with our husbands or in groups with other friends. Our families had celebrated birthdays and holidays together on occasion; but there was something about Alex, a reserve or detachment, which I never felt I could breach. In some sense she remained aloof and unknowable, an enigma, a mystery.

And then to ask me this, to come to China....after my initial positive reaction, I began to have reservations. This trip was so important; I asked Alex if there was a family member or a very close friend who could provide the kind of support necessary. What I meant, but didn't say, was “why me?” Would our friendship withstand the intimacies of