

Man on a Ledge: My Last Moments with Ron Scollon

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The tributes collected here make up a fairly comprehensive review of Ron's ideas, his intellectual development and the professional and personal influence he had on his many devoted students to which there is really little more I could add. So instead I'd like to use my few pages to reflect upon Ron's death. Not his life. His death, that part of life that too often goes uncommented on. I don't mean to be morbid, but our society is not particularly good at talking about death in any kind of direct way. We dress it up with all kinds of rites and ceremonies until it looks like something quite different from what it is.

As I write this I'm sitting in the apartment in Seattle where exactly a year ago I watched Ron die, and very little seems to have changed. Books and papers and Ron and Suzie's laptops still crowd the kitchen table. Brahms still plays from the tinny speakers of the CD player. It's raining. I can't help but think that watching somebody die is a kind of privilege. I don't mean knowing somebody who's died, or hearing of someone's death or attending somebody's funeral, but actually witnessing somebody die. It touches you in a fundamental way, particularly when it's someone who's touched you in so many other fundamental ways while they were alive.

But don't get your hopes up.

There were no famous last words. No final pearls of wisdom he imparted on me. In fact, he was unconscious most of the time, and when he wasn't he could hardly talk. But that doesn't mean there wasn't communication going on. Like all social actions, Ron's death was mediated through a host of cultural tools—an adjustable hospital bed which looked out of place in Ron and Suzie's small bedroom, an IV with a button Ron or one of those caring for him could push when he needed another dose of morphine, cups with straws, disposable diapers, and a book of poetry that Suzie handed to me on New Year's Eve, the night before he died: *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. It was Ron's favorite, and happened to be mine as well. And so to take Ron's mind off his pain or to take our minds off of ours, I opened the book and began reading.

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Ron was perhaps rare among academics in his ability to maintain his love of reading. He read for pleasure, and whether he was talking about poetry or a detective novel he was reading or a journal article he had come across, what came across in his voice was the pleasure that the act of reading afforded him. He once bemoaned the fact that people who work in linguistics or anthropology hardly ever find the time to read anything worth reading. It's all just 'keeping up' with the field. What he left out of that comment but communicated so strongly in his own approach to books was that what made something 'worth reading' had just as much to do with the reader as it did with the words on the page, had everything to do with one's capacity for pleasure, with one's capacity to learn how to read anew whenever one opened a book.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

There's a story about Theodore Roethke that another teacher of mine, the late Jim Whitehead, told me when I was studying in Arkansas. Roethke, it seems, had unusual ways of challenging his students, which one day involved climbing out of the window of his eighth storey classroom at Michigan State University and walking on the ledge along the perimeter of the building, pausing at each window to make funny faces at his confused students. It was no doubt this incident, along with a number of others, that resulted in Roethke not being offered tenure.

I have no idea whether this story is true or just an urban legend passed on by poetry teachers to their students. And I have no idea why this should have been the image that entered my head as I read poetry to my dying teacher. In what should have been a solemn moment, there I was, thinking about a fat man standing on a ledge.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Of course, the difference between Ron and Roethke was that Ron had a habit of taking you out on the ledge with him. Coaxing you to go dangerously out on a limb with your ideas and inviting you to marvel at the view. And then – and here's the scary part – reminding you that these ideas, these words, these theories we cook up are completely contingent, nothing but the narrowest of ledges. Not truth. Just vantage points from which, if we're lucky, something of the truth might be glimpsed. Where we get into trouble is when we mistake these ledges for solid ground. That's when we're apt to slip and fall.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Tibetan Buddhists have a word for these vantage points, these moments when we're neither here nor there, when we have the chance to comprehend in this 'in betweenness' something about our place in the whole scheme of things. They call them *bardos*. The most popular use of the term, of course, is to refer to the time we're caught between one life and the next, which, if we are to believe the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is full of the most awful visions imaginable as well as with the greatest potential for enlightenment, for freedom. But this isn't the only *bardo*. Anything that's somehow in between is *bardo*, including this life itself, in between our birth and our death. And so, as much as Ron was at that moment standing on a ledge, so was I.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

What happened next is the subject of some dispute. As I neared the end of the poem, Ron's eyes seemed to widen, his head nodded slightly and his face twisted ever so faintly into what might have been a smile or what might have been a grimace. Suzie reckoned he appreciated my reading. His daughter Rachel, on the other hand, put it down to the fact that

he had just wet his diaper. It didn't matter so much. Because by that time, I was reading to myself. Deep inside the process of learning how to read, a process with no end to it.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Ron died the next morning holding Suzie's hand, and almost immediately a hunger filled the apartment. Because the smell of cooking food made Ron nauseous, his family hadn't been able to cook a meal for weeks. And so we set about silently doing just that.

I fear I've done nothing more here than ramble, that I haven't even begun to approach my subject in anything remotely resembling the direct way I had promised. I'm not even sure myself of the point I want to make. But I know it has something to do with that meal. With the smell of food in those rooms that had so long been deprived of the aroma of cooking. With the tiny actions that went into making it. The chopping of vegetables. The heating of oil. With the presence of that dead body in the bedroom. How it seemed at once so important and so irrelevant. And so we cook. We eat. Perched precipitously on our little ledges we perform those tiny actions that lead us through our lives, some of us with our faces pointing to the ground, others with heads raised towards the sky.