



This and several other reviews were contained in the celebrations of Ken's work that we recently posted to KenWilber.com. The editors of the site went through the archives and pulled out dozens of old reviews, containing mostly positive criticism, and put them together as a type of celebration of Ken's work over the past 25 years. For the full collections, please see: **Meta-genius: A Celebration of Ken's Writings**—[Part 1](#), [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#)

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**A MIRACLE OF CONSCIOUS DYING**  
**A Woman's Terminal Illness becomes a Spiritual Classic for Today:**  
**"After this book, spiritual writing can never be the same again....."**

**Professor John Wren-Lewis's choice for Book of the Decade**

*"Thou mettest with things dying, I with things new born."*  
-Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale

Ken Wilber's book *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber* (Shambhala, 1993: \$29.95) is required reading for anyone remotely associated with care or counselling of the dying or bereaved--which means, in effect, for anybody who can read English and isn't into running away from the plain facts of life. It's certainly one of the most important books I've ever read, and probably the most important of the past decade. Its author's earlier work has earned him titles like "the Einstein of consciousness" and "the Aquinas of the New Age", but in this book he shoots

past all such heavy intellectual categorization by telling the compelling story of his newlywed wife's terminal illness, which turned into a triumphant voyage of spiritual discovery for them both. His astonishing scholarship comes to life as never before when he describes how his pioneer thinking about mind and body, about science and psychology with a "trans-personal" dimension, and numerous related themes was tested in the fire of direct confrontation with suffering and mortality.

For those unacquainted with his writings, this is the best possible introduction, since here for the first time he allows the human being behind the thinking to emerge, in a "warts and all" portrait which gains a kind of stereoscopic three-dimensionality by the inclusion of numerous extracts from his dying wife's diary, letters, and articles written for the San Francisco Cancer Support Community which she helped found during her illness. These add not only the all important feminine perspective, but also that of a practicing psychological counselor with wide-ranging environmental and educational interests, who in the years before they met had, amongst other achievements, helped found (with John Denver) the famous Windstar Institute in Colorado, had been a facilitator for the US/USSR Youth Exchange Program, and also a supporting founder of Rocky Mountain Institute with her good friends Amory and Hunter Lovins. For the very same reasons, I believe readers who already know Wilber's earlier books will find this the best yet, one which may well join the ranks of humanity's great spiritual classics.

Its combination of mystical insight with intellectual clarity and ruthless emotional honesty make it worthy of comparison, in my view, with St. Augustine's Confessions. Yet, it is also very much a product of our "post-Christian" late twentieth century. One of the main reasons why Wilber has been able to become a leading spokesman and

philosopher of spirituality for our time is precisely that he is a born-and-bred child of Western secularized scientific culture; he can, for example, take for granted a whole background of contemporary scientific and psychological discoveries that were quite unknown, or known only to a few specialists, before World War 2. And in keeping with the fact that most educated people today think of spirituality, if at all, in terms of oriental imports like meditation and yoga, Wilber's earlier books have confronted readers with cover-portraits of him in which he has the shaven head of a Buddhist monk. On the cover of *Grace and Grit*, however, he is joined by his wife, whose head is equally bald from the after-effects of chemotherapy--which epitomizes the human dimension which his whole presentation of mysticism's "perennial philosophy" acquires in this book, a dimension where the fact of cancer is very much part of common awareness.

In fact, the Wilbers might almost be seen as archetypes of late-twentieth century Western culture, which for good and ill alike is primarily American in flavour. Until tragedy struck, with the discovery of a malignant breast-tumour during what was thought to be a routine pre-honeymoon medical checkup, theirs was a real-life enactment of the American Dream--love at first meeting between the beautiful, intelligent, idealistic daughter of a wealthy Texas cattleman, and the pioneering author who'd kept himself by washing dishes in a café while writing six major books in as many years before the age of thirty. Amongst the cast of supporting characters are some of the most famous names on our time--singer John Denver, physicist Fritjof Capra, Dan Elsberg who blew the whistle on America's Vietnam involvement, Michael and Dulce Murphy of the Esalen Institute at Big Sur, thanatologist Steve Levine, and many others. At the beginning of the second

chapter we are given a sardonic glimpse of what married life might have been like for them had that checkup not cast the shadow of mortality:

“The wedding was set for November 26 (1983), a few months away. In the meantime we busied ourselves with all the necessary preparations. That is to say, Treya busied herself with all the necessary preparations. I wrote a book.”

This is just one early instance of the author’s willingness to expose the less admirable aspects of his own character (for he is of course well aware that almost all his female readers are likely to be feminists of one sort or another). He even drives home that his mind was more on his work than on the relationship, by entitling the chapter “Beyond Physics”, which was the theme of the book he wrote, though the main subject matter of the chapter is their friends’ enthusiastic response to their engagement announcement, the wedding itself, the cancer bombshell and their first stunned reaction to it. Yet there is a positive as well as a negative irony in that choice of chapter-title and in his insistence on summarizing the book he was writing, about the mystical beliefs held by the greatest modern physicists (published in 1984 by Shambhala under the title *Quantum Questions*). When we are faced so starkly with the mortality of the flesh, some kind of transcendence of the physical is the only alternative to despair, and the real subject of *Grace and Grit* is Treya’s experiential discovery of that transcendence before she died. Could it be that great physicists are sometimes driven to glimpse that transcendence by their confrontation with the fundamental contingency of all matter?

But transcending the physical doesn’t mean ignoring it, and Ken’s first response to the cancer diagnosis was to switch his formidable mind and energy to researching everything medical science knows and doesn’t know about the disease--a task for which

he was well equipped by his early training in biochemical research. His disturbing findings, which he reports in some detail (with admirable skill at translating technicalities into laypersons' language), would almost be worth the price of the whole book, though they are only incidental to its main theme. While never doing less than scrupulous justice to the skill and dedication of the medical profession, his account throws into high relief how the lack of any metaphysical or transpersonal paradigm in contemporary Western culture causes science in general and medical science in particular to assume, usually unconsciously and with the best intentions, an almost theological role as arbiter of what's best for humanity. Thus public health propaganda emphasizes the virtues of catching cancer at an early stage, when there is some hope of treating it, while drawing a discrete veil over the fact that most of the medical treatments currently available involve devastating the body's immune system in a way which could prove fatal even if the cancer is cured.

The Wilbers learned this lesson the hard way, when Treya's initial treatment seemed for a while to have eradicated the cancer successfully, only to have her succumb to diabetes, "the number three killer of adult Americans.....almost certainly triggered by chemotherapy, a not uncommon occurrence." Add to this the growing evidence that the immune system's power to cope with cancer itself may be far greater than is yet dreamt of in conventional oncologists' philosophy, and there would seem to be urgent need for some fundamental re-thinking in the whole area of public health policy on the subject. This should be a major objective for those who preach a more "holistic", "persons-centered" or "transpersonal" approach to medicine but they often do harm to their own case by lapsing into pseudo-logic, as the Wilbers also learned the hard way when various

New Age therapists dumped their own theories on Treya by diagnosing her cancer as the result of “negative thoughts” or some deep unacknowledged grief “eating her up inside”.

In one of the extracts from Treya’s diary, she records how Ken exploded into decidedly unparliamentary language at one of these New Age wiseacres. “The only thing eating her up inside at the moment,” he growled, “is assholes like you saying things like that.” A whole chapter of the book is devoted to a careful analysis of the false logic involved in this kind of pseudo-psychologising and, even more important, the hidden personal motives that often underlie it--in particular, a secret desire to assume a superior stance as “one who has insight you don’t have”. Having been called the Aquinas of the New Age, Ken here demonstrates the same keen nose for rooting out false spirituality that the Angelic Doctor himself showed in his own day. For counselors of all kinds, his warnings on this issue would again be worth the price of the whole book, which incidentally reprints the brochure “What kind of Helping really Helps?” which Treya wrote for the San Francisco Cancer Support Community.

Ken tells us at the book’s end that Treya saw this Community, which makes no charges, as her “child” when she knew she couldn’t live to have an ordinary one. The terrifying yet wonderful central point of his story, at any rate as I read it, is that a real mystical awakening went hand in hand with that acceptance of having no claim on a human future. In the early years of her illness--indeed, right up to and through the battle against malignancy-recurrence which led to the diabetes--the Buddhist spirituality which they both practiced to get beyond “self-contraction” had been something which she did in the hope of transcending separateness and the fear it generates. With the discovery of yet another lump, a shift seemed to occur, which Ken noticed as an astonishing “passionate

equanimity” and she herself marked by adopting a new name. Up to that point (in 1986), she’d been Terry, and when she’d dreamed at Findhorn many years before that her name was really Estrella, the Spanish word for star (pronounced Es-traiya), she’d dismissed it: As her then-boyish name (Terry) implied, she considered herself a no-nonsense type who wouldn’t stoop to such New Age silliness as taking a new, cosmic-sounding name from a dream! Now, facing mortality on her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1986, she found she was no longer identified with that stance and asked everyone to call her Treya--“a softer, more feminine, kinder, with a bit of mystery to it name. It was a first step in discovering a radically new kind of identity, or rather, of recognizing what had always really been her identity, as Infinite Spirit playing the game of “humaning” in her, in Ken and in everyone else. It is the discovery that lies at the core of all mysticism.

She in no way became superhuman: She still reacted with sheer rage and bitter, resigned crying a year later when waviness in her vision caused her to go for more tests, and revealed new tumours, this time on the brain itself. She was still prepared, in the interests of survival, to go to a German clinic for a kill-or-cure treatment that the American government had banned as too dangerous. But a mysterious process that had nothing to do with ordinary survival was afoot in her, and at the clinic the discovery of that new, transpersonal identity began to emerge. One small but not unimportant symptom of it was the discovery that her former prejudice against using Christian spiritual terms like “surrender to God” had gone--not because she’d undergone any kind of conversion from Buddhism, but because her personal beliefs and prejudices no longer seemed important enough to get in the way of any unexplored facet of spiritual experience. But more dramatic, indeed quite amazing, was the discovery of a joy in

living that didn't depend on continuing to live, or even on being healthy. "I feel so incredibly blessed," she wrote in her diary. "I don't understand it! I know I may not live out the year, but listen to those birds sing!"

"Letting go" is a term much used nowadays in discussions of dying; Treya, well before her death, had discovered how it can also be the secret of living. It had enabled her to experience something which for most of us most of the time is, alas, hidden by the hyperactive clamor of the survival-drive--that at the core of being is an ultimate wonder which G.K. Chesterton once called, "joy without a cause", a satisfaction in the mere fact of existence which outshines all the merely temporary and superficial satisfactions that come from getting our personal preferences met. I can speak with firsthand authority on this subject because a much less gruesome close encounter with death in 1983 gave me the inestimable privilege of making the same discovery that Treya made, like all her others, the hard way--that when the survival-drive lets go because death seems inevitable, the sun of "joy without a cause" comes out from behind the cloud of "anxious thought" which normally hide it. To my utter astonishment, this joy can even transform the pains that result from life going against personal preferences. I've experienced this only with relatively minor afflictions such as flu, tinnitus and gastric ulcers, but Treya found it was even the case for the Big One, disintegration of the brain. In that German clinic, she found that the waviness in her vision "became something to notice, to investigate", and, for me the most telling sign of all, she actually found herself experiencing her mind's automatic fear-reactions in the same way, as simply elements of "what is", all parts of the same marvel of universal aliveness as the birdsong.

At the very end in America, months later, she refused medication in spite of considerable pain, precisely in order to experience final body-disintegration in this way. Ken uses the Buddhist term “witnessing” to describe it, but to Western ears this has cold and remote sound, whereas from numerous little hints in his text I get the definite impression that it was something altogether more positive. In my own NDE, I experienced something which it’s taken me ten years of what T.S. Eliot called “intolerable wrestle with words and meanings” to articulate with even faint adequacy: I experienced the sixty-year-old bodymind called John Wren-Lewis being reconstructed from Nothingness, particle by particle, by Infinite Consciousness, and every tiny element in that reconstruction was an act of infinite love, a love that had always been there, maintaining my finite existence for sixty years without my noticing it. Jesus’ statement about the hairs of our head being all numbered is now for me just a plain statement of experienced fact, and the final message I get from Grace and Grit is that the process of bodymind disintegration can be experienced in the same loving way by anyone who has recognized her/his true identity as Infinite Spirit playing the game of humaning.

Because the bodymind is human, and transcending personality no more means abolishing it than transcending the physical means ignoring matter, the experience of disintegration still requires “grit”, as Treya leaves us in no doubt--and I wouldn’t consider anyone less enlightened for choosing to use painkillers, which are, after all, as much a part of “what is” as bodily dissolution or birdsong. But that wasn’t Treya’s choice, and the positive love-energy of her experience (as contrasted with the cold impersonality implied by terms like “witnessing”) comes through in the fact that those

final days were full of caring for others whenever she had the strength. When she finally chose to die, it was she who was sorry for Ken, not the other way around.

And she did choose to die, which is for me another incredibly important message from this book. The doctors were confident they could keep her alive for further days or even weeks, but she decided enough was enough, made sure Ken agreed, and just went, after saying some goodbyes. This suggests to me that when the false identity of separate selfhood is really seen through as illusion, bodily processes may co-operate with personal consciousness in ways that have nothing to do with will or control as we ordinarily understand those terms. This may be the secret of spiritual healing as practiced by mystics like Joel Goldsmith, who always insisted it was something radically different from “mind-power”. Perhaps if Treya had realized her true identity before the body’s self-maintenance processes had been ravaged by radiation and chemotherapy, she might have gone that way, to experience what the medical profession can at present only call “inexplicable remission”. But as this book makes clear, no spiritual discipline yet discovered, not even the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen which Ken and Treya practised, will bring about that identity-change without some other factor which, “by sad incompetence of human speech”, we can only call grace--a factor which seems to operate most often in close proximity to death itself.

My conviction, which I share with Jean Houston and many others, is that the human race is entering a new phase, a new dispensation if you will, wherein we can develop a more truly empirical mysticism than has ever existed in the dogma-dominated cultures of the past. If that is so, then a book like this, which allows us to observe the process of grace in action through a blow-by-blow account that is completely honest about the

human frailties involved, is the most important contribution anyone can make. I know of no other mystical document, for example, which is so open about the “aggression that only married couples can muster” towards each other even when one of them is in the grip of terminal illness--yet unless such facts of “what is” are recognized, spiritual writing risks trailing off into mists of fantasy where all is sweetness and light. Ken has “told it like it was”, even while not backward in giving his own views and theories, and after this gift, spiritual writing can never be the same again.

If I had to choose an epigraph for this book, it would be that strange statement of Nietzsche, “You must have chaos then within you, if you are to give birth to a dancing star”. I fantasize that it was the element of Infinity that once was Nietzsche who sent Terry Killam that dream of her new name at Findhorn, for she did indeed give birth to a dancing star, and there is a sub-narrative of inserts all through the book which suggest, without any attempt at explanation, that something of that change of identity may have rubbed off on Ken as he experienced the chaos of bereavement. I look forward to his next book--but in the meantime, this one is a must.

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