

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

An illuminating moment of peace

The following excerpt is from an essay by renowned physicist Freeman Dyson, who died recently in Princeton, where he lived and worked for 60 years at the Institute for Advanced Study. Written more than 30 years ago, this essay is eternally relevant.

BY FREEMAN DYSON

My story begins in the year 1978. I am lying on my back under some bushes on C Street, between the Department of the Interior and the statue of Simon Bolivar, in the city of Washington. It is two o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in June. All I can see is the brilliant green of sunlit leaves and the deep blue of the sky.

Two friendly bandits have fractured my skull and jaw and relieved me of my wallet. I am expecting that one of them may shortly put a bullet into me to make sure I will not talk. And now, at this unlikely moment, my spirit is filled with peace.

The green leaves and the blue sky are beautiful. Everything else fades into insignificance.

This life is good and this death is good also. I am a leaf like the others. I am ready to float away on the blue wave of eternity.

This experience, which came to me as I walked, briefcase in hand, to a committee meeting of the National Academy of Sciences, ended happily for all concerned. My assailants escaped unharmed with seventy-five dollars in cash and some photographs of my daughters. I made my entrance into the National Academy building, dramatically dripping blood upon the marble floor. Time healed my wounds, and the efficient Washington Police retrieved my bifocal glasses unbroken from the bushes.

Life returned quickly to its ordinary routines. But I have not forgotten that moment of illumination when the glory of earth and heaven was revealed to me.

What is one to make of such a revelation? It is not an uncommon experience among people who have come face-to-face



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

with death. Tolstoy in *War and Peace* describes how Prince Andrei lies wounded on the battlefield of Austerlitz, one among thousands of soldiers, mostly dead, left behind after the battle is over.

The prince, like me, gazes into the blue sky, unconcerned about his fate, conscious only of the beauty and greatness of that over arching sky. Tolstoy himself fought in the battles of the Crimean War. His description of Prince Andrei's state of mind was probably derived from experiences of men wounded beside him in the Crimea, if not from his own experience. The prince's peaceful contemplation of

the sky is interrupted by the arrival of Napoleon, strutting over the scene of his famous victory. Napoleon, until that day, had been the prince's hero. But now, seeing his idol face-to-face, the prince is unimpressed. The prince sees only the littleness of the emperor under the greatness of the sky.

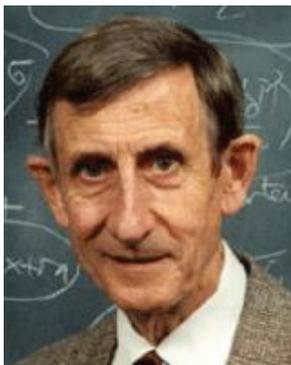
When Napoleon offers some friendly words to him, the prince wishes only that Napoleon would move out of the way so that his view of the sky will be unobstructed.

My view of the sky was blocked not by Napoleon but by a passing motorist on C Street who kindly stopped and pulled me out of the bushes. I gladly accepted his offer of a ride to the National Academy three blocks away. I came back fast from the empyrean to the world of people and committees.

Quite apart from their possible religious significance, about which I am as skeptical as Tolstoy's prince, these revelations tell us something important about human nature. ...

We are designed to function well in good times and in bad.

As Ecclesiastes said long ago, there is a time to be born and a time to die. When fear of death assails me, as it assails everyone from time to time, I take courage from that memory of green leaves and blue sky. Perhaps, when death comes, he will once again come as a friend.



**PHYSICIST FREEMAN
DYSON died last
month at age 96.**