

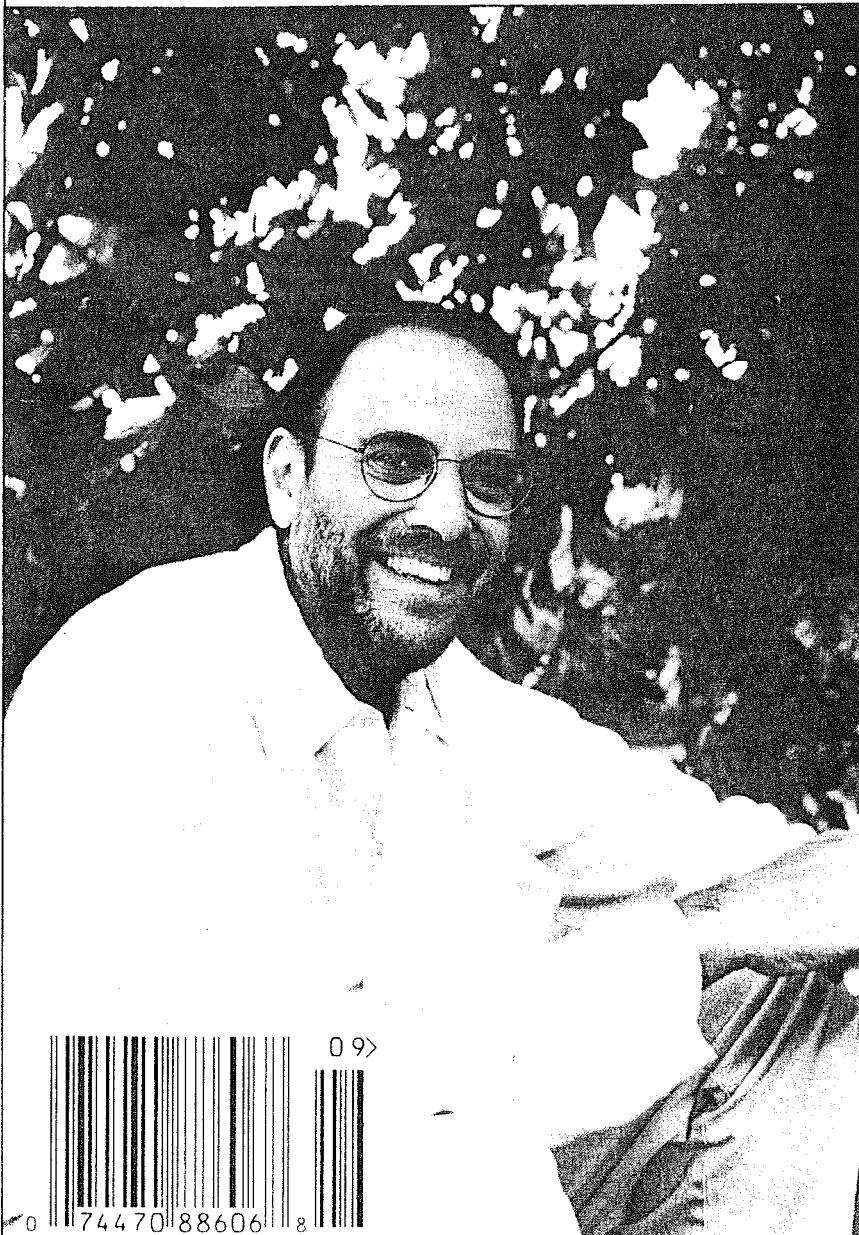
macrobiotics

TODAY

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1997

Vol. 37, No. 5 \$4.00

Printed in the U.S.A.



Death and Dying

A Gentle Passage

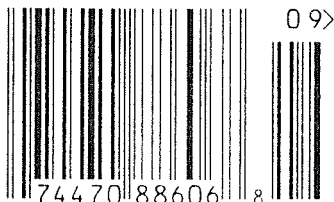
An interview with William Spear sharing his thoughts on the transcendent yet grounding process of dying.

And:

- Dying Naturally
- "Death, My Friend" – poem
- Buddhist Countdown

Plus:

- Fresh Changes in Food Choices
- Macrobiotics for Beginners III



A Gentle Passage: An Interview with William Spear

Ellen Goldsmith

William Spear is a long-time macrobiotic teacher recognized internationally as an educator, consultant, author and lecturer on health and environmental issues. He has conducted seminars worldwide on feng shui, the I Ching, macrobiotics, natural architecture and community planning. His five-day seminar, *The Passage: A Journey that Transforms Life* has been attended by hundreds of people from all walks of life in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Europe and Australia. His approach draws on years of work in Oriental philosophy and complementary medicine, in-depth training with the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Center, Tibetan lama Sogyal Rinpoche and others, and three decades of personal experience with people facing illness and death in a wide range of situations.

o o o

How did you start working in the field of death and dying?

When I was five, I lost my best friend to childhood leukemia. One day I was playing with him in the street; four or five days later he died in the hospital. There was no religious or psychological context, almost nothing was said by anyone in the neighborhood, and there was no opportunity to have closure with his mom or even my parents. I had no understanding of what it really

meant that he had died. So I carried an unresolved issue of what death was, and remained intrigued by the topic.

In college, I was very strongly attracted to do community service work. At that time, it was the height of the counterculture, and there were a lot of kids on the street with venereal disease, a lot of runaways, trip overdoses, teen suicides. I eventually dropped out of college and helped found one of the country's first suicide-prevention hot lines, which still exists today, as well as a free clinic for primary medical care staffed by volunteer physicians and nurses. It was then that I really started to see what health care was about, and the impact of Western medicine, and I became politically involved by working to make health care a right rather than a privilege. Death in the ghetto – like death on the battlefields in Vietnam – was very real to me.

In the early seventies I went to Europe. Living in Denmark, a socialized country, I saw a very different delivery of health care. It was there that I began to study macrobiotics with older students of Ohsawa. Unfortunately, in those days macrobiotics would soon be seen chiefly as a way to cure cancer, and in my early days of consulting I saw a lot of dying people who came to me as their last hope. Naturally many didn't make it, and I

was not at all equipped to deal with that. I just didn't know what to do when they actually died, especially since most of the deaths were tragic and disconnected, and the cases were considered "failures."

In the late seventies, I remember sitting in on a consultation with Michio Kushi during which he told an old man

*...in those days
macrobiotics would
soon be seen chiefly as
a way to cure cancer,
and in my early days of
consulting I saw a lot
of dying people...*

who had been carefully following his recommendations for a few months that essentially there was no hope. But the words he used were, "Kindly seek medical advice." These words were so absolute that they stuck with me for days, like a thorn in my side. It was as if the man had heard Michio say, "Go home and see your doctor, get pumped full of chemicals and die miserably in the hospital," because I later found out that's exactly what happened to him, and to many others who in their final

hours were trying to reconcile their macrobiotic practice with Western diagnoses of severe malnutrition and raging degeneration. Then came their heroic efforts: these people would be bombarded with chemicals and hyperalimentation, trying to save their lives while most often making the end of their lives quite miserable.

The experience deeply affected loved ones, too, of course. When G.R.I.D. appeared – later called AIDS – I saw so many men die horribly. So I became determined to try to work in the field of death and dying. I came upon Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work and began a series of her workshops over four years. I eventually completed her extensive training program for working with people who were dying. At the same time, in the early eighties, I was part of a group of students taught by Sogyal Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama who was writing *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. I also learned, from other spiritual teachers working in the field of death and dying, other traditional ways of being with dying people. I got a lot of practice working with people with HIV, cancers and other life-threatening illnesses, and I hope I was able to make some difference in the end of their lives having done this work.

What were you looking for in the training with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, and what did you find?

I went into the training with about as much arrogance as you could possibly fit into someone's body. I was determined to be the teacher, the healer with a great deal to offer. But it didn't take long – we're talking hours here, not days – before I realized that what I was really working with was my own unfinished business and internal clutter: all my concepts and philosophies and deeply repressed emotions:

my very real grief, anger, and all kinds of distorted garbage I carried around.

Those workshops were the beginning of what continues to be a perpetual space-clearing. The repressed energy inside us is a tape loop of material. It's not stuff you can access easily through normal cognition or analysis, but just for that reason it's powerfully transformative. It's not in our mind anymore, it's stored in our bodies – our throat, our belly, our knees. It's stuck, it's stagnated in ways we can't fully



William Spear

comprehend intellectually. When we come up against it, we want to turn the other way because it's too painful to relive those experiences.

So the earliest part of my training didn't teach me anything – it allowed me to get rid of a lot of junk I'd collected, under the guidance of qualified facilitators who knew how to move that energy out. The unusual space they created, and the kind of people they were, had no judgment when it came out. Everyone just let go of buckets of sobs and tears or screams and kicks. Had I done anything like that at a macrobiotic summer camp in the 1980s, I'd immediately have been labeled too yin, too yang, too much

salt, bad liver – whatever. We were great at judging in those days, pros at naming things and conceptualizing it all.

But Elisabeth and her staff had an extraordinary love and presence; they had no judgment and were just willing to listen unconditionally. In the presence of such space, which was also very apparent with Sogyal Rinpoche, I began to come in touch with the noise inside my head, the limitations inside my heart. After years of doing that, I

began to incorporate skills to guide people to do the same thing in my presence, the most important of which is really learning how to listen.

Usually we are hearing nothing more than our own din, our own internal racket; but when you've done some work to clear that out – and not just rearrange it, but really dump it all as egotistical nonsense and illusion about who you are, what the self is really about, what life is about – you let go of that and return to the breath, or to each moment unfolding in front of you, each beat of the heart. It's powerful. You begin to feel an aliveness, an

extraordinary awareness of what every breath is. You live much more in the moment, without conditions.

How can we work with those heavy emotions and unresolved issues?

There are many ways to work through them, but I think the most beneficial and transformative ones are less analytical, less psychological, and more physical. Diet can be one way, of course, but sensing what's happening in the body has more to do with locating a clamping down, a resistance, a pain somewhere, and not just analyzing it with the Five Transformations or some other concept. We have a