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# Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber, by Ken Wilber

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The opening chapter of Ken Wilber's book, *Grace and Grit*, could have been a real-life enactment of the American Dream—love at first meeting between the beautiful, intelligent, idealistic daughter of a wealthy Texan cattleman, and a pioneering author who'd kept himself by washing dishes in a cafe while writing six major books in as many years before the age of thirty. By the time Wilber met Terry Killam, as she was then called, in 1983, he'd already been recognized worldwide as perhaps the most significant spiritual prophet of our time—significant because he speaks as a true native of late Twentieth Century secular culture at its most sophisticated. He rediscovers humanity's perennial spiritual philosophy from *within* this modern culture, not as an outsider criticizing it with ideas from the past. For example, his initial training in biochemical research gives him an *insider's* knowledge of the scientific discoveries and ways of thinking that drive Western culture (whether we like it or not). And he takes completely for granted that spirituality must draw on *all* humanity's religious traditions, as witness the fact that his books confront readers with cover-photos in which he, a typical American in features, has the shaven head of a Buddhist monk.

But the cover of this new book carries a sharp ironic reminder of another significant feature of modern life: his shaven head appears in a photo with his equally bald wife—bald following the chemotherapy she underwent for breast cancer, discovered when the two of them took what they thought was a routine medical checkup before going on their honeymoon. And the irony is double-sided. On the one hand, her cancer put under test all the spiritual ideas that had attracted her to his earlier books—but the even more ironical outcome was that she, in the process of dying, was the one who actually came to experience the transcendence to which his shaven-headed monastic *persona* was dedicated. *His* role remained that of a caring witness and interpreter of a mystical marvel.

For those who've never read him, *Grace and Grit* provides the best possible introduction to this remarkable man's work, precisely because it shows how his theories pan out in the practicalities of human life, under severe conditions. And for the same reason, I believe even long-term Wilber fans will find this book adds a new dimension to their appreciation of him. It also has the merit of including substantial contributions from his wife's writing, in extracts from letters, diary-entries and articles produced during her illness. These bring a kind of stereoscopic depth both to the story *and* to the spiritual philosophy, adding the all-important feminine perspective, which in her case was also that of a practicing psychological counselor with wide-ranging environmental and educational interests. In the years before they met she had, amongst other achievements, helped found the famous Windstar Environmental Institute in Colorado, and been a facilitator for the US/USSR Youth Exchange Program.

Before going any further, I should explain that although she's referred to in the book's subtitle and most of the text as Treya, she didn't actually adopt that name until her fortieth birthday (in 1986), when she'd already been through the horror of discovering that breast-removal hadn't stopped the cancer, and thereafter endured savage chemotherapy, which so ravaged her body that she succumbed to diabetes—by no means an uncommon occurrence. And parenthetically, I must mention that the Wilbers' ruthlessly honest, blow-by-blow commentary on the whole business of contemporary cancer treatment would itself be worth the price of the book, purely as a social document. It should provoke some hard thinking about the way our culture gives almost religious authority to the medical profession, despite the proven limitations of its reductionist, materialistic approach to health and disease—yet at the same time, the Wilbers have nothing but praise for the care and dedication of individual doctors, and are highly critical of many New Age authorities who compound the horrors of cancer by claiming it's in some way the sufferer's own fault because of psychological repression or "bad karma." In this last respect, Ken justifies the title of "New Age Aquinas" which some have

bestowed on him: he's every bit as caustic in criticizing bogus spirituality as was St. Thomas himself.

All of this, however, is only incidental to the book's main theme, whereas for me, Terry's decision to take a new name is central to it. At that stage they were still hoping for her recovery, but she felt she'd already been through something like death and rebirth, a radical change of identity, and she decided to express this with a new name, as is often done by people following spiritual paths. The boyish name Terry expressed the no-nonsense, masculine approach she'd hitherto taken to life, an attitude which had led her, many years before, to scorn a dream in which she was told her name should be Estrella, the Spanish word for star. Now, after all she'd been through, she felt a new, softer, more feminine identity was emerging, and wrote to all her friends asking them to call her Treya.

But that ordinary feminist way of understanding her new identity was just the start of something much, much more radical, which began to show itself a year later when waviness in her vision sent her for more tests, revealing new tumors, this time on the brain itself. Her first reaction was sheer rage and bitter crying, followed by the decision to go to a German clinic for a kill-or-cure treatment banned as too dangerous in America. But a mysterious process that had nothing to do with survival was afoot in her. This is the "grace" of the book's title, and from my own experience I can't help likening it to the radical change of conscious identity that overtakes some of us when snatched back from the brink in so-called near-death experiences. I'd characterize it as the discovery that *all* personal identities are merely focusing of that Universal Aliveness which religions call God. On the practical plane it's the discovery of a joy in living that has nothing whatever to do with *personal survival*, in this world or any other. G.K. Chesterton called it "joy without a cause," because joy is the very being of God, and Treya gave it classic expression in her diary. "I feel so incredibly blessed," she wrote while in the German clinic. "I don't understand it! I know I may not live out the year, but listen to those *birds* sing!"

The waviness in her vision now became something to *watch and investigate*—the kind of mystical consciousness which I believe gave rise, for the original author of the *Book of Genesis*, to the conviction that God looks on *all* creation and find it "very good." The core of mysticism is the discovery that human beings can participate in that way of experiencing creation when our identification with personal selfhood gives way. At the end, back in America months later, Treya refused medication in spite of considerable pain, precisely in order to experience bodily disintegration in this fashion. And she seemed able to *choose* when to die, which is for me another incredibly important message from this book. It's yet another testimony that seemingly miraculous changes can take place in the relationship between personality and body when people discover their true spiritual identity in Universal Aliveness.

Overall, I believe this book is a true spiritual classic for our times, worthy to be ranked with St. Augustine's *Confessions* for its combination of unflinching personal honesty with high scholarship and profound mystical insight—yet its also very much a tract for *our* times, perhaps even for the next millennium.

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