

Humanities: Art, Language, and Spirituality in Health Care

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Bruno's Score

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*Surgical Palliative Care, Departments of General Surgery and Internal Medicine, Wake Forest Baptist Health, Winston Salem, North Carolina, USA***Abstract**

Many of our experiences in hospice and palliative care medicine are challenging. We support dying patients and their families as they struggle with the transition from life to death and continue to support those in mourning. Many times, in America, it is difficult to even appreciate a glimmer of spiritual grace as our patients die. We easily remain stuck in the material and distance ourselves from the spiritual. Some exits are quite graceful, however. I present the case of an exceptional person, who enjoyed an exceptional life and had an exceptionally graceful dying process and death, in hopes that his story may encourage other healers as much as he inspired me. Bruno was a composer and cognitive musicologist, whose art forms of light and music simultaneously move and challenge virtually all the people and other artists he interfaced with and taught, including his talented wife and family, his friends, his acquaintances, his students, his colleagues, and his deans. He embodied theories as diverse as mathematical strange loops, continually paradoxical/recursive illusory art, contrapuntal fugues, and artificial intelligence. Bruno's spirituality was uncommonly profound. It spanned and interconnected many eclectic faith traditions, theologies, and philosophies, including Taoism, Greek mythology, distributed cognition, mathematics, and Tibetan Buddhism. It resonated strongly with Zen and Christian mysticism. Some of Bruno's being and transformation to nonbeing was obvious; some of it was inscrutable. J Pain Symptom Manage 2019;58:543–547. © 2018 American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts.¹

I was first introduced to Bruno by our doctor. It was a year before he died. She explained that Bruno and his wife Corey were disillusioned with religion, and she wasn't quite sure how spiritual they were, but she was hoping that I might get to know them, so that I might help them somehow. What my wife and I discovered is that Corey and Bruno both could visualize deep synchronicities and complex contacts between the material and something much more profound. Bruno, as I learned, was forever laughing at the absurdity of the material. And yet he knew how important the physical is to life and reality. As an artist, Bruno

saw a powerful—if enigmatic—interconnectivity between light and sound, the natural and preternatural, darkness and silence, the metaphysical and the physical. And Taoist practice was strangely bringing both Bruno and Corey peace in the midst of their struggle with Bruno's disease. Corey and Bruno's deep faith instantly appealed to both the mystic/contemplative in my wife, and the existentialist/scientist within me.

Tao is the mysterious, eternal, ineffable, spontaneous in/activity at the center of all actions. Tao is the energetic void at the wheel of life's hub (*Tao Te Ching* 11). Music, too, originates out of emptiness, and co-becomes—in the present/eternal moment—and “exists” only mysteriously: in the liminal, infinitesimally thin space between the minds of performers and listeners. Music is not material. The notes on a score only connote momentary sounds and silences,

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which are perceived—fluidly—by the audience (and performers) as they are produced by the playing of the composition. Where does music reside: temporally? In the present moment, which is ever slipping away ... And yet music carries profound meaning. Music, like Tao, and a mystical notion of the Divine, transcends both binary concepts of past ~ future; as well as dualistic ideas of subject ~ object. Its meaning mutually arises, somewhere between subject and object. Music is composed of ever-changing mental forces/energies, and Bruno, as a genius cognitive musicologist who resonated deeply with the brilliant, if eclectic, notions in *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*² knew this well. He did more than compose. Bruno experienced and enacted the “braided” interconnectivities of subject-object, past-future, performer-listener, sound-silence—on a moment-by-moment basis. He lived it.

The Taoist sage knows how to paradoxically keep connected these seemingly polarized entities in balanced equilibrium and live in harmony with the changing circumstances of life. A Taoist master develops attention and sensitivity to two cosmic forces that appear on one level to be intrinsically in intense conflict with one another, and yet return together under the even greater force of reconciliation. War is transmuted into love.³ This is the Tao that Bruno and Corey had discovered through their deep artistic endeavors and complementary love. It is the Spirit that continues to support and sustain Corey as she grieves her husband’s loss with exceeding grace. The ever-permeating Tao is self-generating; it is ultimate reality. Tao is many times portrayed symbolically by water: as super-strong in its apparent fluid weakness and flexibility (*Tao Te Ching* 8, 34, 78). And Te (of *Tao Te Ching*) describes the virtuous power of acting with the void in *wu wei*. *Wu wei* is paradoxical effortless action; again, like going with the flow of water in a powerful river (*Tao Te Ching* 2, 48).⁴

After his death, I learned from his brother, that although most of his adult friends saw him as a talented musician and composer, his family had always thought of Bruno as an accomplished athlete. And Bruno’s favorite sport was swimming. A Taoist master swims, then, as if the water is swimming them.⁴ Bruno was such a master. He was more than a talented existential musician and genius interdisciplinary composer. He was a mystic.

Bruno’s musical interests and prowess spanned from classical to old time, from the ridiculous to the sublime. He lived the reality that no human reality exists outside of the present moment. He was fascinated by—and lived into—distributed cognition, and how minds interconnect and collaborate across/within inexplicable fields of information sharing.⁵ It was perfectly natural and necessary for Bruno to distribute

his vision/music and ultimately become nothing. And as his life came to a close, Bruno and Corey gained a greater admiration for Tibetan Buddhism, particularly how Tibetans prepare for dying and death throughout their entire lives (whereas American simultaneously deny and sensationalize death, rarely considering personal finitude, and utterly shunning the power of embracing it).⁶ Bruno and Corey hugged the Tibetan notion that the recently deceased’s Spirit hovers close to the body for a number of days—in a very fragile and disoriented *bardo* state—and how overt and dramatic expressions of grief (such as inconsolable wailing) by the deceased’s surviving loved ones can negatively affect the Spirit’s karmic tendencies as much as—or even greater than—all the actions that they may have undertaken and/or the thoughts they may have entertained while living.⁷

In the wee hours of the morning when Bruno died, neither my wife nor I slept well. I got up, and, not wishing to wake my wife, kept the lights off. I extended my hand into the darkness in order to gently touch our bedroom door, as I could barely perceive the outline of the doorframe, as I walked toward it. To my surprise, I discovered that the door was open. What I had thought I’d seen was not the door at all; it was the doorway into the hall. I walked through this threshold in the dark effortlessly.^{8,9} I have often wondered, since that experience, if the journey that Bruno’s deep awareness/mind/Spirit took before the dawn of that day wasn’t somehow similar. After I came back to bed, I had a lucid dream. It was framed by an elusive rhythm of midnight blue to black waves. Within my dreamy frame, I could appreciate a great cloud of witnesses, like the one described in Hebrews 12:1-4, which surrounded the center of the fuzzy border. (The cloud in this scripture is composed of the deceased faithful Jewish spiritual ancestors of the earliest followers of Christ.) During my dream I knew, instinctively, that Bruno had taken his place among this great cloud of witnesses. I saw it.

After my wife and I rose that morning, my wife said—much to my surprise—that when she had gotten up in the middle of the night, that she was reading about death (she rarely talks about, much less reads about death). Indeed, she was reading about the fragile Tibetan *bardo*/Spirit states, which can be so easily influenced by their loved ones’ dramatic demonstrations of loss shortly after dying! To this I exclaimed: “Honey ... you’re supposed to be the mystic and I’m supposed to be the existentialist.” To which she replied: “And we both know what a fine line that is.”

When my wife and I visited Bruno in hospice the first time, he was excited to tell us that he believed in God. Before that time, I suspect, he would not have put it this way. He wouldn’t have called “it” God. Bruno, though, certainly appreciated the

interconnectivity of all things from within a strange, enigmatic, providential context, and artistically delved into mystery upon mystery; darkness within darkness (*Tao Te Ching* 1). And so, Bruno's image of God, I believe, was akin to that of the 18th century Christian poet William Blake. Blake's illustrated poetry intimately unites the apparent binaries of heaven ~ hell, angels ~ demons¹⁰; even as he validates the tense union of two seemingly opposite natures of the human soul—innocence and experience—through love.¹¹ Bruno, too, was a romantic. Bruno's art enjoins *coincidentia oppositorum* and transcends dualistic concepts of good ~ evil, joy ~ sorrow, light ~ dark, past ~ future, subject ~ object, *anima* ~ *animus*; like the 15th century Christian polymath and mystic Nicholas of Cusa's theology does.¹² His art represents and portrays Tao: "Being and non-being produce each other. ... The sage lives openly with apparent duality and paradoxical unity" (*Tao Te Ching* 2). And it does so exquisitely and powerfully. I valued Bruno's notions of "God" as distinctly Zen.^{13,14} Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hahn once wrote: "The Buddha was not against God. He was only against notions of God that are mere mental constructions that do not correspond to reality, notions that prevent us from developing ourselves."¹⁵ Bruno's creativity using mathematical concepts, light and darkness, sound and silence; and his inclination toward forming deep, meaningful bonds with others was not only the manifestation of his spiritual development; it was also his preferred form of religious expression. Bruno's prayer was akin to Meister Eckhart's, the 14th century Christian mystic who said "I pray God to rid me of God." As Father Richard Rohr says, our logical mind would see Eckhart's prayer as nonsense. "It takes unitive consciousness to discover what Eckhart means. There is no concept of God that can contain God. Your present notion of God is never it."¹⁶ This was Bruno's theology. His notion of God embodied mystery and energy, interconnectivity of apparent opposites, the unknowable. And his music and art and life reflected that.

Bruno obtained a B.S. in Computer Science and M.S. and a Diplôme d'études approfondies in Artificial Intelligence from *Université Pierre et Marie Curie* in Paris, where he was born. During one visit, Bruno shared his UCLA doctoral thesis in Music with me. It is entitled, "Moment to Moment: An Interdisciplinary Meditation on the Emergence of the Musical Experience;" and it is combined with "Time Pieces for Orchestra." I read it. Or should I say, I allowed it to carry me into another dimension. It speaks, perhaps subconsciously—with musical metaphors—to the discontinuity of this life's realm of time and the timelessness of death. In his thesis, Bruno writes about rhythm, as it is intuitively understood; and form; and

the nature of "discontinuities," boundaries, and transitions; and how some musical discontinuities open into a radically new field.

One day when my wife and I visited Bruno in hospice, he was excited to share a short musical composition/dance video entitled "ReTouR"¹⁷ with us. We were moved. ... No.

Blown away.

"ReTouR" is a musical articulation of filmed dance as a quasi-palindrome, Bruno explained. It is the story of love, loss, and return (through the nostalgia of the love). It portrays a "return," but also a "reversal" (of fortune)—as a loose adaptation of the myth of Orpheus. Orpheus also has a symmetrical structure: His growing love is interrupted by the death of his beautiful Eurydice; followed by Orpheus's descent to Hades, his stay there and intense negotiation with the powers that be; his ascent back toward light with his love regained; only to lose her again forever. ReTouR's shape and structure explore the abstract narrative of loss in the liminal and negotiated "space" between the metaphors of dream and reality, and the stark contrast between light and darkness, world and netherworld. The middle section is a filmed dance improvisation of denial and shock, while the pianist states the struggle of the tangible world. The dancer's tear at the end reflects the liminality of grief/loss, expressed through fond memories of love (nostalgia). "ReTour," I think, also reflects the mysterious, harmonious, and balanced power of conjoined opposing/reconciling forces across an illusory divide. It reflects Tao.

I'm not sure exactly at which instant I realized it as I got to know this man better, but eventually it dawned on me. I was not ministering to Bruno as much as Bruno was ministering to me. And he knew this the whole time, but remained silent! This expert swimmer was dying and keeping me afloat throughout the whole process. The presage of the coming discontinuity between his life and death was gentle and peaceful. Like the illusory and dark threshold that I would cross as his death would dawn in the near future, I could—at this point in time—barely discern the near-chaos of the dissonant boundary-shift that approached. We talked about William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.¹⁸ We chuckled a lot. As a natural Taoist, Bruno knew well how not to take himself too seriously, and humor was integral to his being, just like it had been to Chuang Tzu.¹⁹ And strangely, I can't help but laugh when I reminisce about Bruno and when I hear from him from the "other side," even today. Bruno's "return" to life is quite humorous, if nothing else.

Bruno and I talked about math, particularly infinity and zero—representing eternity and the present moment—and how they are mysteriously related. (Neither ∞ nor 0 are numbers, because they don't behave like numbers; and yet $1/\infty = 0$; $1/0 = \infty$; in

Zen $0 = \infty$.) We marveled at how asymptotic lines never touch the axis, and yet continue approaching the axis ad infinitum. The emptiness, the nothingness—where the effortless power is—remains between the asymptote and axis. Bruno then used this discussion as a springboard and returned to the concept of nostalgia, as a quasi-symmetrical “ReTouR” of lost love.

Bruno once spoke of a green-golden light shaft that had come through his bedroom window earlier that morning and how it hovered on his knee for a long time. (This impacted Corey too, as she also mentioned it to me, a little later.) Bruno spoke of the light in North Carolina, marveling at its awesome green quality, and expressed his regret that most of us who live here take that greenish light quality for granted. Bruno himself was beaming at this point. Utterly at peace. Radiant.

My analytic mind deduced that he must have been seeing reflections from the greenery in summertime. But my meta-analytic mind told me otherwise. This knowledge conundrum was a struggle of my personal epistemology.^{20,21} Which lens of knowing should I apply to this green-tinted glow phenomenon that Bruno could see? An empirical lens or a romantic one?²² Or perhaps my mind should reside somewhere in between the two as I tried to imagine and explain it? Try as I might (and I have tried mightily), I cannot appreciate any greenish hue to the light in North Carolina. I am, however, occasionally amazed at a pinkish-orange quality to the light. The scientist in me tells my brain that this is due to the prismatic effect of the atmosphere near dawn or dusk, as the sun’s or moon’s light comes through our infinitesimally thin heavenly veil at a very sharp angle. But, ... my romantic mind questions if Bruno was already emerging past the highly energetic and empty center of some enigmatic color wheel—into another dimension—and visualizing green-tinted reality from the other side of the hole in that mysterious wheel’s hub; somehow reflecting against my red-shift-influenced perspective, and/or was Bruno progressively moving toward practicing the recognition of the utterly empty clear light that one’s *bardo* Spirit state tries so hard to fathom in the boundary transition between being and nonbeing?⁷ Was Bruno his own Tibetan lama? Was he practicing his quickly approaching rhythmical discontinuity? I do not know. But I can wonder ...

As we were discussing his death again, he said, with long pauses: “It’s like when a computer freezes. ... So much freedom” Bruno then took my fist and pressed it to his forehead in what I can only label a prayer. We were silent with our eyes closed for a long time in that position. I would like to say that it was a comfortable silence—and it was—but it was simultaneously very uncomfortable. When the prayer was over—and we both knew, instantaneously, that it was—he tried to explain something about the

intensity of our energy/intellect/information transfer; which I’m guessing was generated at some fiery node of spiritual intimacy, which we shared. I still do not get it. He was already on another plane.

In response to my incredulity and amazement at this marvel that he was trying to explain, Bruno said, “I’m not drunk ... or wacky!” I affirmed that I knew he wasn’t. I told him that I was reminded of how the early followers of Christ were accused of being drunk with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, when “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and ... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them” (Acts 2:2–3, NRSV). Bruno really appreciated that visual. After chuckling as we imagined that ancient scene together, we again sat in very tranquil, serene silence for quite some time: this time without touching. As the silence came to a close, Bruno said that we had been in an Italian café. I recalled that in Italy, the restaurants do not rush the clients, like they do in America. Rather, every guest enjoys the entire evening with friends and loved ones and good food: beginning with a digestive drink or aperitif; moving leisurely through the many courses that compose the rest of the meal; all with a good *vino rosso*. Then, the dinner party takes a relaxed stroll.

Bruno said that our last prayer of silence was a philosophical aperitif. I wondered about the rest of the meal. And the leisurely journey afterward. We both knew that at some point soon, Bruno’s path would take him out of the world before me. His musical score would reach the ultimate boundary of dissonance. His computer screen would freeze before mine. He would reach the “so much freedom” of a strange mathematical loop; I would remain asynchronously stuck in the physical. But, after a few more finite moments. ... After a few more blinks of my own eyes ... my score would freeze too.

Then Bruno traced a mysterious hill and valley with his outstretched hand, caressing an illusory wave as he extended his arm out from his chest. Was he composing? Conducting? Was he demonstrating the ebb and flow of allegro and adagio? Was he expressing a gentle crescendo, from piano to pianoforte; or a decrescendo, from mezzo forte to pianissimo? Or was he swimming—effortlessly—into the infinite? At the thin line between natural and preternatural? Or all of the above? No.

And yes.

Bruno was the music, and the music was swimming him.

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