

[Frank], Christine had made beauty her central choice, her profession" (138). Betts has successfully met a daunting challenge – to draw a convincing portrait of a woman who would begrudge her daughter's life to spare herself a painful operation. When Christine's boyfriend, Nolo, blames her for refusing her kidney, she comforts herself by asking, "[A]nd what was he? Some steady Red Cross blood donor? No, he was not. Would he even read that magazine article on vasectomy? No, he would not" (296). Christine is a humorous menace, a feisty, tragic, wicked woman, a character any writer would be proud to have created.

Style and psychology also combine winningly in passages devoted to Mary Grace and to her father, Frank. Mary Grace sails well above contrivance. Having studied photos of Ted Bundy, Sirhan Sirhan, John Gacy, and other famous murderers, Mary Grace asks the big question: "madness must feel perfectly normal?" (184). She remembers a happy day with her mother and father when, sunburned, she "drowns in the back seat, pulsating from radiant heat like a giant firefly," and on that lovely long-gone day

she would wake up and be nine again to find that Christine had become her Girl Scout-troop leader and her fourth-grade helper mother, and her Damascus Sunday-school teacher and a P.T.A. refreshment mother as well as the pretty front-seat mother who periodically would lean back to touch the slumberer and whisper, "Isn't Mary wonderful? Frank? Isn't she?" (188)

Frank too, is worth a novel. His proposal to Jillian is a genuinely awkward parade of male/female psychological dichotomies, and he's capable of unnerving little meditations peculiar to those in the life-saving trades:

[A]t every moment troopers were carrying corneas in boxes, while machines were keeping livers alive long enough to be moved and reset, and blood was running out of Mr. Bolton's arm and in a long river overhead for miles and then into Wilson Clegg's; and that like an invisible cyclone these constant transfers of body parts and liquids were whirling in circulation at every moment but went unnoticed until something awful opened your eyes. (222)

Throughout the book, Betts confronts Mary Grace's illness and transplant surgery straight on, never once wincing or blaring out the gore.

Souls Raised from the Dead is one long cry for the good home, the good mother, the one gentle combination of people and place in which a beloved child might thrive. While the novel is certainly more tearjerking than *The Value of Kindness*, both books take such an incisive look at characters who have been uprooted from their homes, or just from their own peace of mind, that after experiencing them, most readers will be left with a sharper sense of the preciousness and vulnerability of life, left to treasure and fret like a new parent holding a mirror to the face of a sleeping baby.

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The Tao of Disability

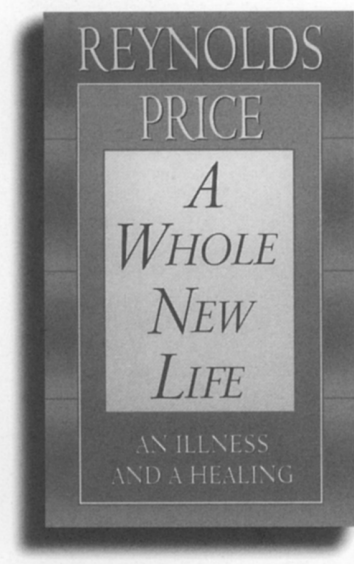
by Mike Hamer

Disability, whenever it comes, is always a mystery. It is often a tragic surprise, too, that comes as swiftly as a summer squall on eastern North Carolina waters. When it comes, it challenges the disabled individual to get beyond the who, what, when, where, and, especially, the why – to the *now what?* Reynolds Price's *A Whole New Life* (Atheneum, 1994, \$20, 213 pp.) makes a valuable contribution toward unraveling the mystery of the *now what?* of disability.

My own came as a complete surprise. I broke my neck at age 37, the day before I was to begin teaching as a lecturer in the English Department at East Carolina University. The accident seemed ironic because, among other things, it happened only two weeks after I had returned to North Carolina from having spent six months in the midst of the war zones in Nicaragua. This was August 1985. I was an active, thin man who usually wore baggy pants or shorts, a button-down short-sleeved shirt, and always a hat – my favorite at the time being a beige golfer's cap that had a rhinestone guitar pinned to the front. My work as a long term volunteer with Witness for Peace in Nicaragua consisted of setting up and coordinating delegations of North Americans who would come to Nicaragua for two weeks to see what was going on there – the killing and terrorizing of innocent Nicaraguan civilians by the U.S.-supported contras. I was also generally an active person, and much of my self-identity had come from a variety of other projects, including my still-developing career as a musician.

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I broke my neck from an error of judgment. Assuming that the water off that Pamlico River pier was four feet deep, the depth it had been when I had previously dived there, I hadn't reckoned on the tide being out. The water ended up being only a foot and a half deep. When I dived, I hit my forehead on the river bottom, not even badly enough to break the skin on my forehead, but at just the right angle to completely pulverize a vertebra in my spinal cord. I was instantly paralyzed. Luckily, my cousin Bob had jumped in, rather than dive, and saw my predicament right away. He was able to get my face out of the water before I could panic. As Bob and I waited for the ambulance on the shore of that beautiful river, I wanted to be left alone at the base of a tree. I thought I might heal there. As a child on my father's dairy farm, I had watched cats heal themselves by fasting and absorbing the sun's heat through a barn window. But I had a feeling that this accident was going to be big, although I had no idea how big.

Two days later in intensive care, still coming out of the anesthesia, I got an idea of how big this might be when the neurologist's wife, a nurse practitioner,

came to the bedside and said that my C-6 vertebra had been crushed and there was a good chance I'd be paralyzed from the chest down for the rest of my life. One of my first thoughts upon hearing that was, "And so, what instrument does a person who is paralyzed play?" Otherwise, I did my best to cope, and I put up a pretty good front.

After being in rehab a while, the front soon turned to fear. I was scared. The more I learned about being a quadriplegic, the more difficult it seemed. At first I thought that I'd just have to get used to the idea of using a wheelchair and not being able to go some places where I'd like to go. But quadriplegia is more complicated than that. I learned about the dreaded pressure sores that can keep a person in bed for months and are sometimes the cause for amputations. The urinary tract infections where you get so cold that your teeth chatter and you can't stop shaking, and then you spike a high fever that leaves you totally drained of energy. These infections killed many quads before the days of high-powered antibiotics. I discovered that my body's thermostat was broken, and I now had little tolerance for cold and none for heat. The only attractive option seemed to be sleep. But sleep offered only a temporary escape. Where would I find the strength to keep on?

My self-concept had been built on the basis of working hard and doing many things. I was also a musician, a singer and songwriter, and guitar and bass player: I played music regularly with friends as well as with two bands I had organized. I had felt productive as I had taken graduate courses while holding three or four part-time jobs and staying busy as a political activist, working to change American foreign policy toward Central America. How could I feel good about myself if I couldn't be doing many things at one time?

One day, I think it was a Friday

because I'd had fish for lunch, I got a letter from Annie Dillard, the author I'd written about in my master's thesis. Having heard about my accident, she sent a get-well card. Suddenly, I remembered the approach to life that I'd written about in that thesis – the mysticism in two of Dillard's books, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Harper, 1974) and *Holy the Firm* (Harper, 1977) – and I remembered that the basic principles of mysticism had inspired people for millennia; could they work for me in this situation?

The basic concepts of mysticism, as I understand it, are the *via positiva*, *via negativa*, *via creativa*, and *via transformativa*. These concepts go something like this: *Via positiva* means that life is good, so celebrate it. *Via negativa* means that life has pain, so accept that. *Via creativa* means that we should express our joy and pain in creative ways, and the *via transformativa* is the state of being at one with life in *all* its aspects, the good and bad, joy and pain. Most of this theory comes from an exciting Matthew Fox book called *Original Blessing* (Bear, 1983), which has reintroduced traditional Western mysticism accessibly and attractively to the contemporary reader.

I decided to try to live with these mystical principles in mind. Slowly but surely I began to relax and take each day as it came, rather than freak out about how bad life may be in the future. I noticed that along with all the tough adjustments and leaky condom catheters, there were some fun things happening. I could still appreciate a beautiful woman; there were many around that rehab center, and they gave me plenty of attention. I could still enjoy the zest of a good conversation or joke; I could enjoy the brightness of sunshine and the quiet in the dark. I could still enjoy good music and a good book. I found that I could even enjoy the challenge of trying to figure out how to do things I'd so easily taken for

granted, such as type or shave. There were many folks who were glad to help figure things out with me. In short, I discovered that I could still have fun!

Nine-and-a-half years later, I'm still using the same approach toward life because it *usually* works for me. I call it the "Tao of Disability." The Tao is an ancient Chinese mystical approach toward life, also known as the water-course way, which encourages yielding as water yields. Water is one of the elements essential to life, yet it will flow around and over the rock in the stream rather than demand on going through the rock, as a superhighway does. I still have my bad days when I get depressed because I can't go hiking like I used to, but then I have my lucky days when a new song comes to me. Sure, I was down for eight weeks last summer with a pressure sore; but I had wonderful visits from friends, I read some great books, I saw good films, and I got to know a woman who is now my girlfriend and who makes me feel quite fortunate. So life goes; it ebbs and flows like the tides in the Pamlico Sound.

Most of the time I do pretty well with my Taoist approach, my old-time mystical *positiva-negativa* stance. But then there are times when I let the negative side of the equation get to me. At such times, I only seem to feel the spasms worse; they kick me harder and send me scurrying to the Valium well, leading me to believe that the right chemical dosage will set me straight and I'll be a modestly adjusted, though non-overachieving, individual in just a few days. The first bouts with pressure sores had cured me of the overachiever syndrome pretty quickly. Although you can read, watch films, and visit when you're down, you can get pretty restless when you're stuck in bed for 24 hours a day, for several weeks on end, and you can't get much work done.

I was in one of these negative states of mind early last summer when a friend

sent me a copy of Reynolds Price's *A Whole New Life*. I knew Price had been disabled longer than I, so I was curious to see what he had to offer in the realm of "tricks for coping." I soon learned that he dealt with his disability as most do: as best he could. I also learned that I was in the presence of a master storyteller.

In his account, Price tells of being diagnosed with a spinal cancer, of being treated with radiation therapy, of becoming a paraplegic, and of dealing with chronic pain as a result of the surgeries on his spinal column. Price's first paragraph of his introduction states his purpose lucidly:

"This is a book about a mid-life collision with cancer and paralysis, a collision I've survived for ten years and counting. It means to be an accurate and readable account of a frightening painful time that ended; but while I know that any account of human realities will travel best in the form of a story, a compelling story is not my first aim. That aim is to give, in the midst of an honest narrative, a true record of the visible and invisible ways in which one fairly normal creature entered a trial, not of his choosing, and emerged after a long four years on a new life – a life that's almost wholly changed from the old. The record is offered first to others in physical or psychic trials of their own, to their families and other helpers and then to the curious reader who waits for his or her own devastation." (vii)

Price recounts the story of his past 10 years with quiet dignity throughout. He probes the mystery. Along the way he offers some candid observations. For example, he points out that the medical profession has done a masterful job in turning out brilliant technicians, and he doesn't hesitate to praise his own neurosurgeon; but he makes plainly evident his belief that contemporary physicians have lost the ability to communicate clearly and empathetically with their patients. He also thinks that physicians

don't know much about pain. As a result of his spinal surgery, Price has had to deal with chronic pain, and he still has to deal with it to this day. Price was prescribed a number of medications that did not help, and his relief came only when he discovered the technique of using biofeedback and mind control to manage his chronic pain.

What impressed me most about Price's account was something he didn't talk about much. Through all his trauma and pain, the body of work he has produced has been nothing short of phenomenal: in the 10 years since the discovery of his spinal cancer, he has published 13 works including novels, short stories, plays, poems, and nonfiction – and he won the National Book Critic's Circle Award for *Kate Vaiden* (Atheneum, 1986). I recently read *The Tongues of Angels*, (Atheneum, 1990), and it is a sweet, first-rate novel. One would guess that Price's work, the writing, has been the sustaining force through his ordeal. (The evidence is there, although he avoids any detailed discussions of his writer's life.) That is his advice to his reader: stay busy with your work, and if you're lucky, you will forget the pain, at least for a while. In a 1986 interview with Wendy Smith (reprinted in *Conversations with Reynolds Price* (UP of Mississippi, 1991) Price talks about writing *Kate Vaiden*: "It was great fun; I was going through a lot of trouble with this spinal tumor, and it made it much easier for me each day to just go into a room and become somebody else for a good part of the day" (268).

In *A Whole New Life*, Price observes that there are few books to guide the newly disabled person through an experience such as his, beyond the new age balderdash that throws guilt in your face and would have you sleep on crystals and sprinkle moondust on your spine, so he sets out to help fill the gap. He does so effectively. Price has a basic message for his reader: mourn the person you

were before your illness or accident, mourn the energy that passed through those wonderful legs, then get on with and create a new life for yourself. No one else can do that for you. He writes:

"And keep control of the air around you. Many well-meaning mates, lovers and friends will stand by, observing that you're in the throes of blind denial – *Give up. Let go.* Get them out of your sight and your hearing with red-hot haste; use whatever force or fury it takes. Then try to choose life. Then see who you can live with now." (186)

Should forging a new life seem too formidable a task, he also reassures the reader that the new life can be great – better even than the old one.

A Whole New Life, of course, is not the only story of a journey through the mysterious territory of disability. There is the genre of "faith brought me through the fire" books that I won't mention because I haven't bothered to read them – I had enough of oldtime religion and new age faith healing stories when I was hospitalized. I have, however, thoroughly enjoyed the cartoonist John Callahan's irreverent account of his struggle with alcoholism and quadriplegia in *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far On Foot* (Random House, 1990). In fact, I'd rate *Don't Worry* as one of my favorite autobiographies. Another well-written account, written largely out of rage, is Lorenzo Milam's *The Crippled Liberation Front Marching Band Blues* (Mho and Mho, 1984), which tells the author's story of contracting polio in the early 1950s.

I heartily recommend *A Whole New Life*, too, to the newly disabled, to the folks who have been braving the wilds of disability for years, and to the not-yet-disabled. We are all fortunate to have a writer of Price's caliber who is willing to plunge humbly into the depths of the mystery of disability. His work delves into that *via positiva* / *via negativa* place that Dillard and all the

mystical writers of the West and the East explore. In an interview with Jefferson Humphries, reprinted in *Conversations with Reynolds Price*, Price says, "I think that my own brush with mortality has led me more than ever to feast my heart . . . feasting the heart would certainly be advice that I would give to any talented and intelligent and disciplined young person. Feasting doesn't mean gorging; it doesn't mean destroying through excess, but it does mean seizing what in life and art is intense and excellent" (264).

As soon as I finished my copy of *A Whole New Life*, I passed it on to my friend Marty, who has been a high-level quad for 16 years now, and he enjoyed the book as much as I did. At an October 1994 public reading in Rocky Mount, Marty asked Price if he had received much feedback from the disabled community since the publication of his book. Price responded that the feedback was staggering, and if he wanted to make an industry out of this need, he could. However, Price has decided to continue doing what he does best, which is write. He has a new novel out soon. So it remains the job of the rest of us disabled persons to tell our stories, in whatever way we can, so that we can transform the *via positiva* and *via negativa* parts of our lives and flow with that river that winds through these flatlands of the east. And we can reveal a part of that mystery of disability to each other and to the many more not-yet-disabled.

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One More Ride

Chorus

*What would I give for one more ride
through flue-cured nights to the cool sunrise
with dew-kissed mornin' glories on the peanut
vine*

What would I give for one more ride . . .

I was reborn in August
a man turned lame as a fish
flounderin' in the shallows of the Pamlico
created by God with one wish

I wanted to be close to a woman
deep within hospital sheets
loving her beyond my broken-ness
like a man with good hands and good feet

Chorus

I remember her heat between my thighs
the pitch of her wild Harley roar
honeysuckle seducing my nights
as her pistons stroked for more

August is an irreverent month
it'll rearrange all that you own
suddenly surrounded by stillness
trading hot for cold chrome

Chorus

The dog days of August
will come and go as they may
and all the young school girls
will go along their way

I lost all my fast-lane wisdom
on a night that had barely begun
rattle my wheels in summer sun,
yes, I'll keep rollin' on . . .

words and music by Mike Hamer and Marty
Silverthorne c. 1994