

A Gift in Passing

*“The wise person who seeks truth is fortunate.
Once he has found it, he is at peace
and nothing can disturb him.”*
- The Book of Thomas

“Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.”
- Buddhist wisdom

Phillip Segal was a wealthy man with a wife and two young children and a second home at the beach. He was highly intelligent, successful in business, good-looking by any standard, and well liked by his peers. He also had a considerable inheritance, which left him in what most people considered the fortunate position of being able to afford virtually anything he wanted. He was even in pretty good shape. But despite all this, something was missing. It seemed embarrassingly trite, especially for someone who on the surface had so much, and for this reason Phillip never confided this to anyone, not even his wife, but for as long as he could remember he had been burdened by a lingering sense that he just wasn't as happy as he felt he should be. It wasn't that he was depressed, per se. It was just that every now and then he would look around and see people – many of them with far less money and far greater troubles than his own – laughing and smiling and experiencing a level of joy that was simply foreign to him, and for the life of him he couldn't understand why this was, which of course bothered him even more because he was used to being able to identify problems and solve them quickly. When he was in his early 30's the situation began to cause him a mild anxiety, which over the next several years grew worse and worse until finally, at the insistence of his wife, he agreed to see a therapist, who prescribed him an anti-anxiety med. This bothered Phillip a great deal. He did not like to think of himself as someone who needed to be medicated, but at the same time there was no denying the pills helped take the edge off his anxiety. If only, Phillip thought, he could just figure out what his problem was, then he could get over it and everything would be fine.

And so it was with his usual sense of ennui coupled with a low-grade irritation toward life in general that Phillip set out one sunny summer afternoon for a walk on the beach with his wife and two children. Also accompanying them was their German au pair, Christiane, who was in many ways a part of the family herself. She had been with

them almost four years, since Emily, the youngest, was still a baby, and Trevor, her brother, was barely three. Both kids loved her, as did Phillip and his wife, and with good reason – she was smart, hard working and honest. She also knew how to be sweet without being a pushover and strict without being mean. Most impressive, however, was the fact that she had come from Germany with nothing and put herself through school and was soon to receive her Masters in Child Psychology. Phillip never let on that he was anything but impressed by this, but privately it caused him a certain discomfort because it often made him wonder how he would have fared had he been born into different circumstances. Much as there was a part of him that believed he would have been just as successful as he currently was, another part of him doubted, and it only contributed to his anxiety to think that he was living such a comfortable life while deep down inside he honestly didn't know if he had the same resolve as his children's nanny.

In any case, it was a beautiful day for a stroll, but while the other beaches nearby were probably teeming with people, Phillip's house was situated along a private stretch of coast, which meant that he and his family had the beach almost entirely to themselves. The only other people in sight were a couple of neighbors out walking their dog, and they were a good hundred yards away. This pleased Phillip enormously. He practically shuddered at the thought of having to wade through a sea of strange people with all their bizarre hairdos and multiple piercings and tattooed skin. Who knew what diseases they might be carrying? Here he and his family could walk in peace and not be bothered by all of that. It was one of the few things in life that made Phillip truly happy. At least that's what he told himself.

About twenty minutes into the walk, Trevor, who was wandering a few yards ahead, as he often did, discovered something lying in the sand just in front of the jetty where they usually turned around to head home.

"Look," he shouted back to the others. "There's a dead bird!"

Immediately Emily ran to catch up. "Let me see!" she said, and Christiane hurried after her.

Without even seeing the bird, Phillip called to his children. "Get away from there," he said. But Trevor and Emily, who were normally good listeners (at least when they wanted to be), didn't seem to hear. They were too busy examining and fussing over the bird's carcass to pay attention to anything else, and for some reason Christiane, who was usually on top of things, was *letting* them.

"What is she doing?" said Phillip under his breath to his wife.

Phillip's wife just shrugged. She had grown up in a rural area near some woods and had seen her share of dead animals and didn't think it was anything to worry about. In fact she thought it was healthy for their kids to be curious. "It's fine," she said.

"How is it fine?" said Phillip, irritated, and walking over to Trevor and Emily he said to them, "Let's go, c'mon."

"But dad, look," said Trevor.

"I see," said Phillip, glancing quickly at the dead bird. It was small and brownish and its neck was bent back at a weird angle. Several flies were buzzing around it. It gave Phillip the creeps. "Let's go," he said, looking away.

"Why is it dead?" said Emily, her five year-old mind trying to wrap itself around the situation.

"I don't know," said Phillip. "Things die. Now c'mon."

“Maybe it ate a piece of plastic or something that made it sick, yah?” said Christiane in her German accent. “It doesn’t look like anything attacked it.”

Phillip shot Christiane a look. He couldn’t believe she wasn’t being more helpful in getting the kids away from the carcass. But Christiane merely shrugged and looked at Phillip as if inviting his opinion in the matter.

“Why would it eat plastic?” said Emily.

This time it was Phillip’s wife who responded. “Well, sweetie, sometimes animals get confused. They see little colorful things and they think it’s food. They don’t know it’s not good for them.”

“C’mon,” Phillip said again, getting impatient, but no one else wanted go.

Trevor bent down for a closer look.

“Don’t touch it!” said Phillip.

“I wasn’t going to, dad. I just want to see.”

“You’ve seen enough. Now let’s go! Everyone!”

“What is the big deal?” Phillip’s wife finally said.

“It’s disgusting! And I don’t want our kids getting some disease from it. That’s the big deal. Now let’s go!” Phillip took Trevor and Emily by their hands and started to lead them away, ignoring their moans of protest.

Phillip’s wife looked at Christiane and rolled her eyes. Over the years she’d grown comfortable enough with the au pair to share some of her frustrations whenever Phillip’s idiosyncrasies became overbearing. Usually Christiane would offer an empathetic shrug and they would laugh it off, but something was different now. Christiane seemed bothered, if not a little concerned. Instead of laughing she hurried to catch up to Phillip and tapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Phillip, but if I could just have a quick word with you,” she said.

Phillip turned, looking very confused. Never had Christiane approached him in this way, and he couldn’t imagine what she wanted to say to him that was so important it couldn’t wait until they got back to the house. Or at least a little further down the beach. “What is it?” he said.

Christiane saw Trevor and Emily looking up at her curiously. She made a gesture to Phillip that indicated it would be better if they spoke alone. “It will only take a minute,” she said.

For a moment Phillip just looked at Christiane. He didn’t like what was happening, didn’t like being told what to do, and even though Christiane wasn’t exactly *telling* him what to do, it sort of felt that way. But at the same time he realized she wouldn’t have approached him unless she had a good reason, so he finally snapped out of the private fit he was throwing and sent the kids back over to their mother. When they were out of earshot he turned to Christiane, “What’s the matter?” he said.

Christiane chose her words carefully. “I don’t want to overstep my bounds here, but this is my job and it’s also my field and I have to say I think you’re not handling this properly.”

Phillip was taken aback. It was not often that someone questioned his authority. “What do you mean?” he said, feeling defensive.

“By trying to keep your children away from the bird, you are essentially telling them that death is bad, that it’s something to be feared. If they go on thinking this way,

they will have problems later on when they realize that they, too, will die someday. It will cause them a lot of anxiety.”

There was that word. But Christiane didn't know anything about Phillip's anxiety. Or at least he'd never told her about it. He wondered if she'd chosen it on purpose, and he studied her, as if trying to figure it out, but she gave no indication that there was any hidden agenda in her word choice.

Phillip turned to look at the dead bird lying in the sand. Is that what was causing his own anxiety, he wondered? Was he afraid of death? Of dying? The idea certainly didn't appeal to him. But that was fairly normal, wasn't it? Nobody wants to die, after all. But then why doesn't everyone have anxiety?

Phillip's mind started racing. He tried to focus on the issue at hand. The last thing he wanted was to cause his own children the same problem he had, and here was a professional, for all intents and purposes, telling him he was about to do exactly that. He decided to humble himself and hear her out. “How should I handle it then?” he finally said.

Christiane thought for a moment. She looked over at Trevor and Emily, who along with their mother were looking at the dead bird again. Finally she turned back to Phillip. “We should give it a funeral,” she said.

“What?!” The idea seemed absurd to Phillip.

“Yah,” said Christiane. “By doing this we will teach them that we understand death as a part of life, that we accept it and that it's nothing to be afraid of.”

“Please tell me you're kidding,” said Phillip.

But Christiane wasn't kidding, and a few moments later she and Phillip and his family all gathered around the dead bird as Christiane gave the eulogy. “Well, bird,” she began. “We didn't know you, and we're not even really sure what kind of a bird you were.”

The children giggled. Christiane's tone was light without being insincere. To his surprise, Phillip found that it actually put him at ease, too, to the point where he was able to look at the bird without turning away.

“It looks like you were a very handsome bird, though,” said Christiane. “With beautiful brown and white feathers and your little orange beak and red feet.”

As Christiane spoke, Phillip observed the features she was pointing out. He realized that in his disgust he hadn't noticed them before, and the more he looked at the bird the more he began to notice other things – its speckled coloring and the way the quills of its feathers curved outward from its breast area. At first glance he had thought they were bones, which is part of what gave him the creeps. But on closer examination he realized that was simply the way the bird was put together, and while he wasn't ready to go as far as Christiane and call it beautiful, he did find it sort of fascinating now that his initial revulsion had passed.

“I'm not really sure what happened to your eye,” said Christiane. “It looks like maybe the flies ate it—“

“Yuck,” said Emily.

“Ew,” said Trevor.

Phillip winced. Did she really have to go there?

“It seems a little gross to us,” said Christiane, still talking to the bird. “But who knows, maybe if we were flies we'd like to eat bird's eyes, too, yah?” She looked at

Trevor and Emily, who both sort of shrugged and nodded. “In any case,” she went on, “it doesn’t look like you died in too much pain or like you suffered very much, so we’re glad about that.”

Again Phillip looked at the bird, this time at its head. In the place of its missing eye was a small black hole that one of the flies kept buzzing in and out of. There was definitely something a little macabre about the sight, but at the same time – Phillip could hardly believe he was saying this to himself – what *was* the big deal? It was just a body, after all, some feathers and bones, the whole thing no more than eight or ten inches long. It was basically harmless, so long as you didn’t pick it up and get a bunch of germs all over you. And despite the fact that its eye was missing and its head was bent back, Christiane was right – it did look sort of peaceful. It was dead, after all. The flies weren’t bothering it.

“So anyway,” said Christiane, wrapping it up. “We’re sorry you died, but we hope you had a good life, that you had lots of friends and a nice family and all of that, that you got to eat some good food, some good worms and the like. And we hope that wherever your spirit is right now that it’s flying around happily with the spirits of other birds who died and maybe, who knows, someday it will get to come back in another bird or as something else.” Christiane looked at Trevor and Emily, then at Phillip and his wife. “Anyone want to say anything else?”

“I hope it comes back as a penguin!” said Trevor.

“Maybe so,” said Christiane.

“Could it come back as a horsey?” said Emily.

Christiane shrugged. “Who knows? Why not?” She turned to Phillip and his wife and made a face as if to say, ‘That seemed to go alright, no?’ Phillip and his wife looked at each other, then shrugged and nodded.

“Okay,” said Christiane to the children. “Time to say goodbye to the bird and go home.”

“Bye, bye bird,” said Emily.

“Bye little birdie,” said Trevor. They both waved their little hands at the bird’s dead body as Christiane covered it with a couple strands of seaweed. And that was that.

•••

Phillip was quiet on the walk home. His wife could tell he was working something out in his head, but curious as she was to know what he was thinking she also recognized when he needed his space, so she gave it to him and instead focused her enjoyment on watching her children and the feeling of the cool, wet sand between her toes along the shore. This was something Phillip admired deeply about his wife – her ability to be content in almost any situation. She always seemed to have an ease with life that was frankly a mystery to Phillip, who was rarely content even in the best of situations. When they first started dating he once asked her what her secret was. Her response: “Well, we have a choice, don’t we?”

That was another thing Phillip loved about his wife. Her unwavering pragmatism. You could count on it like the sunrise, even if you couldn’t always comprehend it.

But these were not the things on Phillip's mind as they walked back along the beach. At least not at first. He was thinking mostly about the bird and why he had been so repulsed by it initially. Even before he saw it, he realized, he'd already decided that he didn't *want* to see it. Why? What was that about, he wondered? Because then of course Christiane had stepped in and basically made him look at it, albeit in a tactful way, and he was able to see not only that it wasn't as repulsive as he had made it out to be in his mind, but that it was actually kind of interesting. So what was this aversion he had to the idea of seeing something dead? Where did it come from?

For a moment he thought of his father, who had died when Phillip was still in his teens, and he wondered if it had something to do with that. Certainly the topic had come up in his therapy sessions, but Phillip always got the sense he wasn't really as bothered by it as his therapist seemed to want him to be. He certainly wasn't *happy* about it, but for the most part he had made his peace with it. He also thought of his grandfather, who died when Phillip was just a boy, but he remembered clearly how it had been a closed casket funeral, and he wondered if maybe *that* had something to do with it, if he had been conditioned from early on to believe that death was, as Christiane said, something bad, something you weren't supposed to look at. Or maybe he had learned it from watching movies or reading books. Who knew? Phillip was skeptical of any theory that tried to trace the roots of a human behavior back to any one single event. People were just more complex than that. All he knew was that he didn't like looking at dead things and for as long as he could remember it had always been that way. Until now. Sort of. He wasn't exactly looking forward to seeing another carcass on the beach, but at the same time he realized that if he did he might actually look at it a little differently the next time. And that's when his wife's words came back to him: "Well, we have a choice, don't we?"

It was like a light coming on. Phillip suddenly realized that without even knowing it he'd been making a choice, pretty much his entire life, to not want to look at death, and now that he'd had the experience with the bird he began to wonder if there were other choices he'd been making without even realizing it that were causing him pain or discomfort or – could it be? – anxiety.

He began to rack his brain, trying to think of other circumstances where he had a tendency to make up his mind about things before actually experiencing whatever it was he had already made up his mind to dislike or discourage or otherwise not want anything to do with. At first it was hard to think of specific instances, but the more he thought the more things came to mind, like when he had to go to a business dinner or a party for someone he didn't even know when he'd much rather stay at home. He definitely didn't like that and usually ended up not having a very good time. Or even worse, when he had to go to a function for one of the many charities his wife volunteered for and he was forced to make small talk with people he had no interest in talking to. It seemed like there was one every other week and he dreaded them. The very mention of them gave him anxiety. But worst of all were family gatherings. Talk about anxiety. As bad as it was being around his mother-in-law, his own mother was worse. And his wife's sister's kids were weird and the whole idea of spending an entire afternoon with all of them at Christmas or Easter or someone's birthday made his skin crawl. And then there was traveling. Good God. Either for business or with the family, it didn't matter. He hated it. Even though he always flew first class, the airports were such a hassle and the whole idea

of flying just seemed unnatural and somehow unsafe to Phillip, not to mention having to sit in a confined space for hours on end...

The more he thought about it the more Phillip began to realize he made up his mind about situations before actually experiencing them *all the time!* It wasn't just an occasional thing he did, it was how he operated. And this realization, the understanding that without even knowing it he had essentially been choosing his unhappiness his entire life, was almost so overwhelming as to be a cause for anxiety in and of itself, so that a moment later, when they began to climb the dune back up to the house, Phillip's wife saw the look of anguish on his face and asked with a note of concern, "Are you alright?"

"Huh?" said Phillip, looking up. He'd gotten so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even realize they were home.

"Are you okay?" his wife said. "You look upset."

Phillip opened his mouth to respond, but suddenly he stopped. He was about to say "I'm fine" in hopes of glossing over the situation and not having to rehash everything with his wife that he'd just gone through in his mind, but something – he wasn't sure what – made him pause. He realized he *was* upset. But not only that, he was upset because he was *making* himself upset. He was choosing it, and if he really wanted to he could just as easily choose something else.

It was an astonishing revelation. So much so that Phillip actually found himself unable to speak for a moment.

"Honey?" said his wife.

Phillip looked at her. He felt himself take a breath as he heard the waves breaking on the shore behind him. His whole being suddenly felt somehow lighter. He smiled. "I'm fine," he said. "I'm good."

His wife looked at him suspiciously.

"Really, I'm okay," he said. "I just had a... strange thought. C'mon, let's go see what the kids want for dinner." Phillip tried to continue walking up the dune, but his wife stood there eyeing him, so he goosed her playfully and she shrieked and laughed and they both continued back up toward the house. At the top of the dune Phillip turned for a moment to look back at the beach. He saw the spot near the jetty where the dead bird lay somewhere in the sand, and down along the shore he saw his and his family's footprints beginning to get washed away by the waves. He began to wonder about his realization and whether there was really anything to it, or whether he'd just gotten carried away. It certainly felt like some kind of breakthrough, but it was hard to know. Too soon to tell, in any case. Phillip decided not to worry about it and instead took one last deep breath of the salty air, then turned and went inside.

...

A few minutes later, when Phillip's wife asked Trevor and Emily where they wanted to go for dinner, they both said, "Joey's!"

Joey's was a burger joint in town. It was one of Phillip's least favorite places on Earth. The food was greasy, the tables small and uncomfortable and it was always packed to the gills with all the same people Phillip went to great efforts to avoid. His wife had

taken the kids there once when he was out of town and ever since it was all they ever wanted to eat. It drove him crazy.

“You guys always want to go to Joey’s,” he said. “Let’s go somewhere else.”

“Jo-ey’s! Jo-ey’s!” the kids chanted.

Phillip rolled his eyes. As much as he hated going to Joey’s, he knew there would be tears and complaining if he made them go somewhere else, and he almost conceded out of resignation. But then he caught himself. He was doing it again. He was choosing to not enjoy something before he even had the experience. And even though he knew what lay in store at Joey’s and was pretty sure he wasn’t going to like it, he decided to try a different approach. Just to see.

“Alright,” said Phillip, mustering his enthusiasm. “Let’s go to Joey’s!”

“Yayyyy!” shouted the kids.

Phillip’s wife looked at him strangely. “What’s gotten into you?” she said.

Phillip just shrugged and smiled. “You guys get your shoes and jackets on,” he said to the kids. “Daddy’s going to go to the bathroom, then we’ll go.”

Instead of using the downstairs bathroom, Phillip went up to the one in his and his wife’s bedroom. The reason for this was because he didn’t really have to go to the bathroom. He just wanted to take his medication in preparation for the usual wave of anxiety that came over him whenever they went to Joey’s. But as he opened the bottle and shook one of the pills into his hand, he stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. Did he really need to take it? Something inside him seemed vehemently opposed to it, as it always had. Over the years he’d learned to suppress this voice, but for whatever reason he decided to listen to it now. He put the pill back in the bottle and snapped it shut and put it back in the medicine cabinet.

When they got to Joey’s it was filled with its usual spectrum of humanity – overweight blue collar types, baggy-pantsed teenagers, people with tattoos all the way up their necks, people speaking foreign languages and all sorts of other characters who looked as greasy as the burgers and fries they were munching on.

Phillip could feel his pulse quicken and the muscles in his neck get tense. He wondered if he’d made a mistake in not taking the medication. “Why do our kids like this place so much?” he whispered to his wife.

She just shrugged and with her usual pragmatism said, “Because they’re normal.”

The comment caught Phillip off guard. Much as he wanted it to be otherwise, he realized she was right. Like it or not, these people *were* normal. Phillip was the one who was different, and for whatever reason he’d never seen it that way. He just always assumed *he* was normal and they were all strange. But now he realized that wasn’t actually the case, and it caused him a momentary confusion. Not only had he been making choices all his life without realizing it, now he realized he’d also been making *assumptions*. This was getting to be too much. He even started to wonder if maybe he wasn’t really as smart as he thought he was. But that seemed to be taking it a little far.

After placing their order at the counter they all piled into a booth in the corner that looked out on the whole restaurant. Christiane helped Emily draw in her coloring book while Trevor explained to his mother about a shell he’d found on the beach and the magical powers it had. She played along like a champ. Phillip sat back and looked around at the other patrons. At first he saw what he usually saw – the sloppy hairdos and ripped jeans and t-shirts. The crooked teeth and pimply skin. The general lack of decorum.

Phillip could feel his anxiety starting to creep in, his palms getting sweaty and his throat getting dry—

But then he caught himself. *I'm choosing this*, he realized. *And it's not what I want. I want to be happy right now. I don't want to have sweaty palms and feel anxious. I want to feel the way these people all around me are feeling.*

It seemed crazy, but for all his wondering about why he was never happy, Phillip realized he had never actually thought to try to identify with people who were happy. But that's exactly what he was doing now, and as soon as he did... something strange began to happen. The more Phillip looked at the other people in the restaurant the more he began to notice other things about them, just like when he looked at the dead bird. Instead of their sloppy appearance and pimply skin he saw the way they were all laughing and smiling and having a good time, genuinely enjoying not only their greasy burgers and fries, but also the company of the people they were with. He realized it didn't matter to them that their jeans were dirty or that their teeth were crooked. They were happy. Plain and simple. There was nowhere else they wanted to be.

And suddenly Phillip got it. He didn't even know how, exactly, but he got it. He was seeing through new eyes, eyes that somehow understood where the joy in all this was. It seemed ridiculous, but it was true – for the first time in his life Phillip was experiencing the happiness he had always felt was missing. At first he smiled. He could hardly believe it. The more he took in the happier he got, to the point where he was practically giddy. He let out a laugh. He couldn't help it.

“What's so funny?” said his wife.

Phillip just shook his head. “Nothing. Everything. I don't even know.”

Phillip's wife looked at him strangely. She was beginning to get concerned.

A moment later the food came, and as everyone dug into their burgers Christiane asked the kids what their favorite part of the day was. It was a game she sometimes played with them to encourage positive thinking.

“My favorite part was when we went swimming!” said Emily.

“My favorite part was eating chocolate donuts for breakfast!” said Trevor.

Phillip looked at his two children and saw the huge smiles on their faces and the joy in their eyes as they plowed into their burgers. Then he looked at his wife and saw the woman he loved with his whole heart.

“You wanna know what my favorite part of the day was?” said Phillip.

Everyone perked up. Christiane had tried to include Phillip in the game many times, but he never wanted to participate and eventually she stopped asking, so this was a first.

All eyes were on Phillip. He smiled, and feeling completely content for the first time in his life, he said: “Right now.”

THE END