

Eulogy for Rick Plunkett

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These are a few heartfelt words in memory of my friend, Rick.

It's been hard to walk with Rick and to see Rick suffer these past three years from the time his skin suddenly changed color with jaundice; to his cancer diagnosis; to his liver transplant; to these last two years of managing decline; and finally to his death.

But at the same time these have been months and years of increasing intimacy, deep conversation, growing through challenge, and expanding love.

I am so grateful for having experienced every moment of it. I never knew I could love someone in the way I love Rick, whose friendship taught me ever-expanding love.

Rick did so much in his life. He had so many passions and projects and so many spheres of friends. What was his essence? Who was Rick, really?

I'd like to ask the question in this way: Who is Rick? Who is he right now?

I knew Rick since the 7th grade but in the past 11 years our friendship deepened in a very specific and spiritual way. In 2004 we started the Rochester Meditation Center together and from that day to last Wednesday we saw each other two or three times a week, almost always sharing our ideas and experiences with spirituality and meditation.

We spoke often on the telephone and even more we texted each other, sometimes many times a day, all through those years. We travelled to spiritual retreats together. In this way we got to know each other and grow together – “alone together” Rick sometimes said – in a spiritually profound way.

Through this experience, we came to understand our true selves not as our bodies, not as our thoughts and not as our feelings but as ... something else.

We want to be humble before naming this. We want to wait a while and just experience. It's something that lives right now and that lives eternally. It was never born and it never dies. It's something unnamable but real – more real than anything.

If you had to give it a name, you would have to call it love.

In our last conversations, Rick told me he wanted to be remembered by looking around, especially at nature. He wanted people to remember him by looking at the brilliant red and yellow autumn leaves falling, at the fish pond and the tall pines trees swaying in his back yard, and up in the deep blue sky.

I met Rick when we were both 13 years old.

Three years later, in the 10th grade, my friendship with Rick deepened when, at Mayo High School, he and I met Chris Gomez and the three of us became fast friends. We became the "three amigos," a trio of best buddies who from those days – until this very day – could never think of any activity happier, more fun and more soul-expanding than spending time together. It started in the Mayo cafeteria at lunch hour. There among all the hot dish smells and the teenage hormones swirling, we three amigos created a completely safe and self-enclosed bubble of friendship.

Within that bubble we found we could create and ride a vibe of conversation that was more about love and unity than about any particular thing we were talking about. I think many of you have experienced this kind of conversation with Rick. He was always trying to create this particular vibe. The means was conversation and the end was friendship, closeness, safety and joy.

Rick wanted, in these conversations he started and carefully nurtured, to rise up above the gravity of the earth's tragic topics, into the high air where thermals of love carry us effortlessly to perfect understanding and a floating ease with each other.

After high school, Chris and Rick and I all went off to different colleges. Then for a couple of years after college I met up with Rick in Minneapolis where he was chairman of the Minneapolis Public Interest Research Group. He was fired up by progressive politics in those years, flexing his fine skills at organizing people and strategically designing good citizen projects and public policy initiatives of many types. One thing he did was hire me as the editor of a bi-weekly newspaper published by MPIRG, which turned out to be my first real job and also launched my journalism career.

Our passion for political engagement and journalism in these earlier years transformed over time into the spiritual journey that we shared since the early 2000s.

I remember exactly where that transformation started. I'd just returned to Rochester after having lived in New York City, Tokyo, London and Hong Kong as a journalist for 25 years. Rick was raising a family with three young children, and he'd just sold the cable company he'd built and run for more than 20 years. We took a weeklong canoe trip to Quetico and after a few days of hard paddling, we took a "duff day." We camped on an island that was just one big flat beautiful rock, soft and warm in the sun, with a few scraggly pine trees and a magnificent view of the lake and sky. All we did that day was look at the lake and the sky and talk.

By the end of the day, we realized we were different kinds of human beings than we were before.

We can't possibly remember Rick fully without remembering his unique and distinctive, explosive, mirthful laugh. He loved to laugh. It was a physical, emotional and spiritual release and a generous, joyful sharing of pure delight, almost a shout.

The soaring, weightless, ecstatic conversation that Rick loved and nurtured so much was often punctuated by his joyful laugh.

Rick could be spontaneous and whimsical in a way I dearly loved. One time, I shared with him the recent discovery of string theory physics, that reality consists of 11-dimensions, each of which very likely contains an entire universe with its own galaxies, stars, planets and beings. This kind of stray fact just lights up my awestruck curiosity about life so bright I can hardly tell you. And Rick was the kind of friend I knew would completely humor and indulge and join me there. So one day, pointing to my palm, I said: "There might be whole planetary systems living in my skin cells here." At which point Rick cupped his hands in front of his mouth and said "Hello, in there!"

The last few years and months were hard. And I feel like now I want to say something directly to Carol, Pat, Katie, Alex, Luke, Maureen and Pam, who lived with Rick, cared for Rick and loved Rick through this period with such commitment and devotion.

The first noble truth of Buddhism is called the truth of suffering. It can sound like a paradox because isn't the point of spiritual practice to bring us joy, lightness of heart, happiness and freedom of suffering?

Yes, absolutely it is. And it's the point of the First Noble Truth to declare that the path to real happiness, real joy, real peace, begins strangely enough, first of all, with recognizing and feeling that very suffering. Absorbing it, allowing it, seeing it clearly and letting it in. Not because we love suffering. But because we realize that it's actually possible – and not only possible but a law of reality – that suffering is transformed by love, into love. And more love. And more love. And more love.

Until in the end that's all there is, and we realize it's all we ever know, and are, is love.

Over the course of Rick's last illness I saw the Plunkett and Christensen family practice this first noble truth and it was so inspiring, courageous and soul-expanding. Thank you.

We can hold and transform a lot of suffering within ourselves, known as the sky of love, the sky of clarity and peace. The sky of light. We can do this for ourselves, for our families, our friends and also for our nation and our world.

Our world needs us to know ourselves and to offer ourselves so much in this way. It needs us to be big in this way so we can do the holy work of transformation, of suffering into love.

By allowing himself to be completely himself, with all of his fears and his failings, in these past hard months, Rick gave us all the chance to know ourselves more and more in this healing and transforming way.

He gave himself completely and fully so we could know for ourselves, by being with him and helping him, this way of infinitely expanding and transforming love. That is, to love more and more, and more, and more.

And finally not just to love more, but to be love, and to know ourselves as love.

Because the name of this expansion is love.

Rick was pure love that for 61 years took the form of Rick.

Thank you Rick for giving us the chance for all of us to know ourselves in this beautiful, gentle, redemptive, healing and infinitely expanding way.