

## Remembering Wes Nisker

It was such a blessing to work with – and befriend – the extraordinary Wes Nisker during what turned out to be the last six months of his life. I was last with him on Saturday, just two days before he transitioned from this earthly realm. In the garden at Elder Ashram, he leaned back in a lawn chair, blissfully soaked up the sun, and commented, as he so often did to me, that birds played the most amazing jazz. He wondered at a hummingbird, quickly darting in and out of a dozen bee-filled blossoms. Scoop – as the radical and thigh-slappingly hilarious radio-host-turned-dharma-teacher was affectionately called, after “getting the scoop” on the 1969 Chicago Seven trial – said, “Let’s meditate”... and then drifted off into a nap in the sunshine and the cool breeze.

When he awoke, the dementia he had been wrestling with had thickened, and he thought he saw some ghosts. But he just expressed curiosity at them... the reaction I would aspire to have myself, if I ever happen to meet some. One of the most profound things I witnessed during my time with Wes was how his dharma practice seemed to have prepared him to sit with confusing and uncertain realities... and how his playful nature allowed him to, at times, even poke fun at this whole increasingly-questionable “reality” thing.

Just days before our last time in the garden together, Wes and I had eaten pizza and sipped lavender lattes on the bustling sidewalk outside Market Hall, on College Avenue. This was his old neighborhood: people recognized him, stopped to say hello, and joked about having become “old hippies”. Wes thrilled in the simple pleasure of people-watching, and especially at little kids being silly on the street and parents carrying new babies. In between our garden time and Market Hall, Wes had been on a trip to Muir Woods. It was a good last week for Wes Nisker.

When Wes passed, the small group of people that gathered with him taught me something about how to sit with Death. Death is a moment for Love. In that gathering, there was time for silence and reflection. For tears and sadness, joy and laughter, Jewish songs and Buddhist chants. We read Wes his own wise and hilarious meditations on death. And since the person who was going to visit him that day had planned on giving him a foot rub, some of us rubbed his feet. I kept watching for the rise and fall of his breath even though I knew his breath had left him, and once when the group was laughing I thought we were going to wake him up. It’s natural to keep looking for those signs you’ve always seen. Our body keeps looking for them: resting my hand on his cold cheek, and feeling through touch how life had left him, helped my body settle into the reality that my mind had understood since receiving the call. Touch continues to work its magic, even in death.

I resonated with Wes as a dharma teacher with a trickster spirit, as a writer with similar political commitments, and as an elder who had lived histories I had studied and sought to learn from. I cherished those moments when he would drift into a nap while watching basketball, and I would turn the TV off and read one of his books. He loved waking up and seeing me reading his work, and I loved being able to ask him more about his life, thoughts, and experiences. He had piles of folders of his old radio sketches we would sometimes read

to each other. I loved his irreverence: how he once described the just-published new edition of his book “The Big Bang, the Buddha, and the Baby Boom” as “a lot of words”. I loved his sweetness and silliness: how he once sat on his hands during meditation because they were cold, and when I asked him if he wanted a blanket he said, “No, this is more snuggly.” And I cherished how he so naturally expressed the dharma, in a multitude of simple moments... such as the time he told me, “I’m going to prepare for my talk now,” and then closed his eyes, and meditated.

Wes Nisker, you are a blessing in my life, and in this world. You live on in the hearts of thousands. Your memory will be cherished, forever.



