

**To Bob O'Brien  
at his wedding with Gail O'Brien**

Once we were one with life. But knowledge has changed that innocence and made us alien to life. To make our isolation and loneliness a bit more tolerable we seek friendship, for in friendship we have seen a way to just be, to commune, and at least for a moment to forget the self that we are – a place where our struggles cease.

On friends we make demands; yet for friends we sacrifice. We go to friends seeking their acceptance of what we are. A friend can listen to you, speak forthrightly, yet embrace you in affection. In doing things for our friends we step out of ourselves for a moment, stretching our arms, as it were, to reach back to life.

In this short life of ours, which for all we know, may only be a passage from nothing into nothing, friendship is a welcome oasis.

Robert and Gail, rejoice in your friendship!

**June 12, 1983**

**Narayana Moorty**

## ROBERT O'BRIEN

### A Remembrance and a Good-Bye

I first met Bob when he, with others, interviewed me for a philosophy instructor's job in 1974. I was heartened to learn that his interests lay in Sartre in whom I was also interested. This paved the way for a later friendship between us. When I met him a second time at a Philosophical conference in San Francisco, he was helpful in my getting the teaching job here by suggesting that the interview committee were looking for further documentation regarding my ability to teach logic, which I subsequently furnished.

He provided hospitality when I came here looking for a house and helped me in looking for one to rent, the same house which I currently live in, and which I subsequently bought. It was clear from the beginning of my career here at M.P.C., that although Bob was the Chairman of the Department, he had no interest in exercising any authority over me, his subordinate. Seeking power over other people was never his way of finding meaning in life. Our relationship in the department therefore went smoothly without conflict, and pretty soon led to a personal friendship.

Bob cherished friendships, and I am sure he particularly valued our friendship till the last day of his life. He wanted me to write an ode for friendship for the day of his wedding with Gail. Speaking of weddings, although he was no longer in the practice of performing weddings, he was gracious enough, out of sheer friendship, to make an exception and perform my and Wendy's wedding here in the Unitarian church. To have friendships in which he can commune with men or women of a similar persuasion, and to do things together with them was part of his romantic view and way of life. He regarded his wife, Gail, as much a friend as a wife.

I remember a time when he arranged a surprise dinner in honor of my birthday. He tried to have a party for my birthday the next year too, but upon hearing of my reluctance to celebrate birthdays, he respected my wishes and desisted from his attempts. The occasional dinners he held at his house, and his yearly

birthday parties were all mostly intended by him to get together with his friends and his extended family. The hilarity, the companionship, and the conviviality of these gatherings remain fresh in my memory.

Just as valuable as friendship was family in Bob's life. He was devoted not only to his wife, but his mother, his brother, his sons and their families. I am sure he was particularly gratified to see his sons while he was on his deathbed in the hospital. He was proud of being a grandfather of nine children.

Bob was seriously interested in problems of society and humanity at large. He was actively involved in the labor movement, in civil liberties and later in the Nuclear freeze movement. He was appalled by the present-day political and economic condition of the American society in its profit motive, exploitation of other nations, pollution, and wastage of resources, and was concerned about the future of humanity. He planned and made some moves toward living a life away from the main humdrum of society, while remaining in close touch with the mainstream of culture, his personal friend and family. His service to the Monterey Peninsula College and to the community of the Peninsula in terms of his arranging several series of seminars and popular lectures by prominent speakers is to be commended.

Bob was an inveterate optimist. The one thing that always kept him going was a hope for a better future, whether it be for the society, or for himself. His energies were always kindled when he had to plan and organize for the future. Even when things didn't work out as well as he expected, as long as there was a ray of hope for a better future, he would buckle up and move forward with renewed energy.

I admire Bob for his courage and brave fighting of his fate till the end. I admire even more his readiness to learn from life, his knowledge of himself and of the sources of his problems, and his ability to change himself in view of that knowledge. I remember with admiration his candor concerning himself, and how he saw himself as clearly as any one could. I have witnessed in the last three years of his life, when he had to face this adversity, how much he changed his attitudes toward life, people, toward himself and his problems. He became more yielding and forgiving. He changed to some degree even the most

central nerve of his being and learned to enjoy life as it comes, from day to day, without living as much in and for the future. All these are marks of a true philosopher.

Bob always tried to live as simply and honestly as he could. He loved to go outdoors on trips, bicycle riding, and traveling abroad with Gail. I particularly cherish the regular walks we have had together after his retirement.

Most of all Bob was innocent, straightforward, outspoken and yet congenial. I cannot think of a single occasion where he let any philosophical disagreements we might have had in discussions among friends come in the way of the friendships. The memory of his face often chuckling, or getting red when he was upset or angry, and his occasional wink are still fresh in my memory. Three days before he died, he was looking at me straight into my eyes and winking occasionally, as if he were telling me that he knew he was dying and wasn't that a joke! Good Bye, Bob!

**A Reconciliation:** Bob's premature death is a shock to all of us. I got depressed and I was outraged. Just before he died I kept asking myself, against my sense of reality and better judgment, why they didn't do something while he was lying there helplessly, and why they didn't remove the accumulating fluids out of his body--after all he was still breathing, and his heart was beating soundly!

I was angry at Death. When once a very bright and dear friend of mine in India practically committed suicide by refusing to take the medication (out of anger) for his diabetes and died, I was angry at him for being so stupid. But Bob's death was not his fault. He lived all his life as healthily as could, both physically and mentally. And he fought his cancer as best as he could till his last breath. This time I was angry at Death. If there was a god of Death, wearing the mask of Cancer, I told myself, if I ran into him, I would give him a dose of his own medicine--a serum of cancer, as a measure of fairness and justice. That would teach him!

But in a heartless existence there is no answer to our angry calls. Relentless death must strike us all, some time or other. Reconciling, making peace with it, coming to terms with it, is the most one can do. Protest is of no avail. As a philosopher once said, heavens don't care a twopence one way or the other

whether you and I are happy or miserable, or even alive or dead.

Yet, life has meaning; not a metaphysical meaning which is given to us, and which we will somehow carry with us forever, but a personal meaning which you and I give to it. Bob was aware of this. He gave meaning to his life and by living among us shared that meaning with us. His meaning became part of our meaning of life.

Now Bob is gone. I too will go one of these times. Metaphysically speaking perhaps Bob's individual form will not be retained except in our memories. But he is, like all of us, part of the Universal Energy. When I die, my individual form will be gone too. I too will become part of that Universal Energy. Then perhaps Energy will greet Energy, and nothing is lost after all—only our forms, our particular memories, and longings. From our limited point of view, it may look like we will be totally annihilated. But life, energy, or what you call it will never die. It is immortal.

As my Indian teacher-friend puts it, when the body dies, and is cremated, its ashes will perhaps become nutrient for a plant, and a flower will blossom on the plant. If we are not so personal about it, even biologically, Bob O'Brien is still alive with all the little O'Briens of his family. Life sees to it that life is conserved and preserved. And when I touch Bob as a friend, I too am an O'Brien, as when any two people touch each other in love or friendship even for a moment. They lose their individual identities, and experience a new identity which is larger than either of these persons. The love or friendship gives meaning to their lives, however short-lived the meaning might be.

Time—the only way I can conquer time or death is by relinquishing my craving for permanence. I may have some meaning at the moment, but I am aware that it may not be there the next moment. Thus I embrace an eternity which is not of time. Then death may sneak up on me from any corner. But I do not fear it. I am ready!

**An Appreciation:** Finally, a word of appreciation to Gail and the rest of Bob's family and friends: You have all been very supportive to Bob in his efforts to live through his years of illness. Particularly Gail, I know how much torment and agony

you had to go through, and yet be of service and support to Bob,  
especially in the years of his illness. Thank you!

**Monterey, California**  
**12/4/1988**

**Narayana Moorthy**