

# Rain, Moonlight, and a Secret Password

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD

**A PRIMARY CARE PRACTICE,** such as mine, is full of close encounters with death and dying. In short order, the clinical conversation can transform from “Hello, how are you?” to “I’m afraid the tests show you’re dying.” Some sobering recent examples [rendered anonymous by altering identifying information] include: a vital and engaging elderly lawyer who presented to me with an extreme kind of arm pain that I suspected (and soon validated by X-ray) meant a pathologic fracture from newly diagnosed aggressive metastatic cancer; a loving, middle-aged nurse whom I cleared for elective gynecologic surgery developed a post-op aspiration pneumonia that soon became complicated by adult respiratory distress syndrome; a non-urgent work-up for fatigue in a senior advertising executive and long-distance swimmer led to a diagnosis of advanced congestive heart failure with an ejection fraction of 15%, likely from viral myocarditis. **These cases remind me that part of being a physician is the responsibility of shunning wishful thinking.** Yes, we can hope for the best, but we must also prepare for, rule out, and treat the worst, including such deadly diseases.

This past March, during a strong early-evening rainstorm, I remember lying on my bed listening to some seeming pattern as the whipped, wet wind pounded the roof. Later that evening, when the storm let up, I took my dog for a moonlit walk in our Mission Hills

neighborhood. The lunar light seemed to want to give me a message, and yet I couldn’t quite grasp it. The message was subliminal, non-linguistic. It was “merely” an intimation.

“Philosophy is the practice of dying.” I first heard this phrase in a college philosophy class. Socrates, facing his own death, says it in Plato’s play *Phaedo*. Although I never grasped its meaning, it stayed with me over the next four decades. Over the years I would occasionally recall it and try to extract a convincing interpretation, always to no avail. Sometimes it would arise during my reflections on the dying process or death of one of my patients or someone else in my inner circle of concern. It also arose on that moonlit March walk with my perennially philosophic pooch, Izzy.

I came home that night and scribbled some lines that eventually became this poem, “Intimations.” In it, I try to find what the wind on the roof, the moonlight through the clouds, and this old Platonic proverb were telling me.

By way of clarification, the word shibboleth comes to English from the Hebrew Bible (Judges xii:4-6) where it is used by the Gileadites in their battle with the Ephraimites as a linguistic tool to distinguish friend from foe. It means “secret password.” **SDP**

-----  
Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is chair of the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and longtime contributing writer to San Diego Physician.



## Intimations

*This wind is the sighing of angels  
This moonlight the dazzle of saints  
This sea that we hear in a seashell  
Is the ocean regathering rains.*

*This prayer is a search for that number  
That clues us to laugh in our tomb  
A sound we can almost remember  
A shibboleth learned in the womb.*

*This chant is the practice of dying  
This breath is eternity’s friend  
This kite of infinity’s flying  
Pulling the string in our hand.*

*We sense it through loss and through trances  
We feel it through grief and through song  
We see it in glimpses and glances  
It’s that taste on the tip our tongue*

*It’s a hunch, a hope, and a vision  
A hint, a scent, and a theme  
It’s the golden key out of this prison  
It’s the voice rising out of a dream.*