

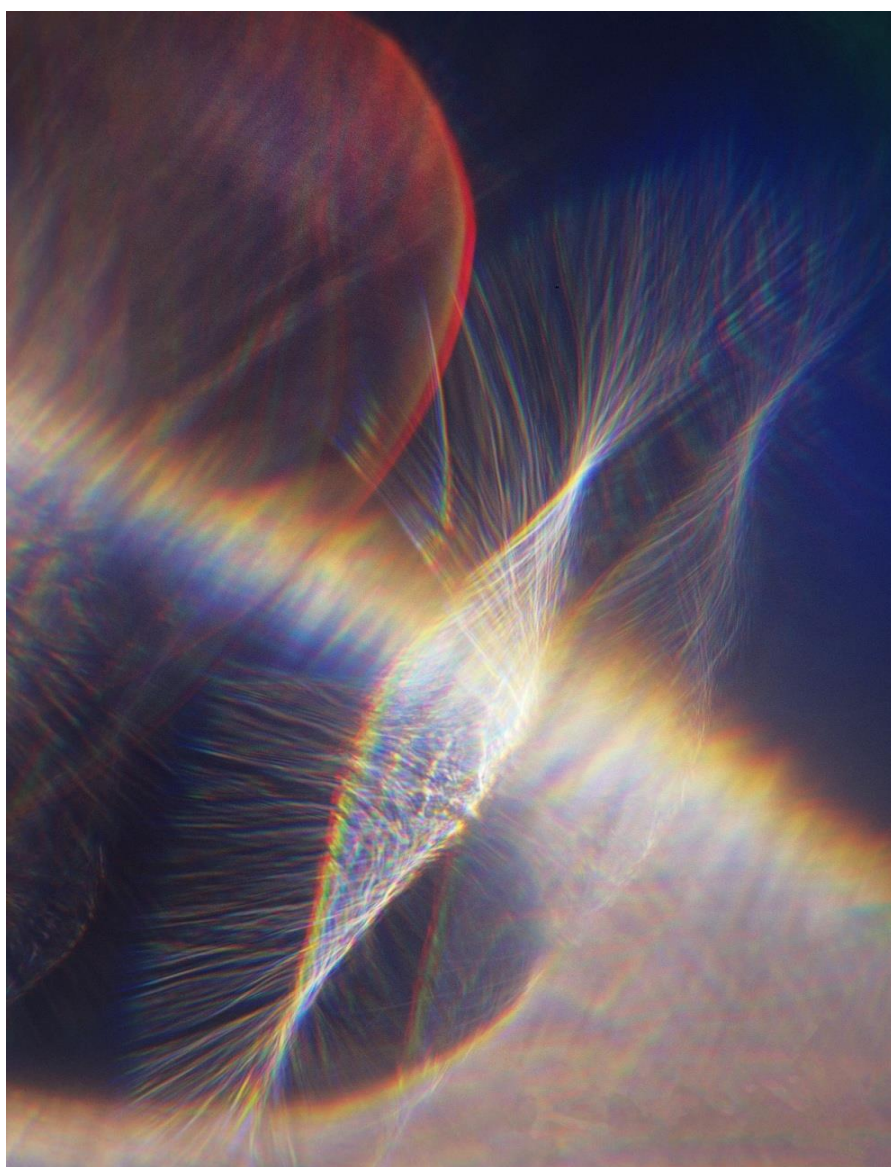
IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #41

February 2025

from

FREEMAN PATTERSON



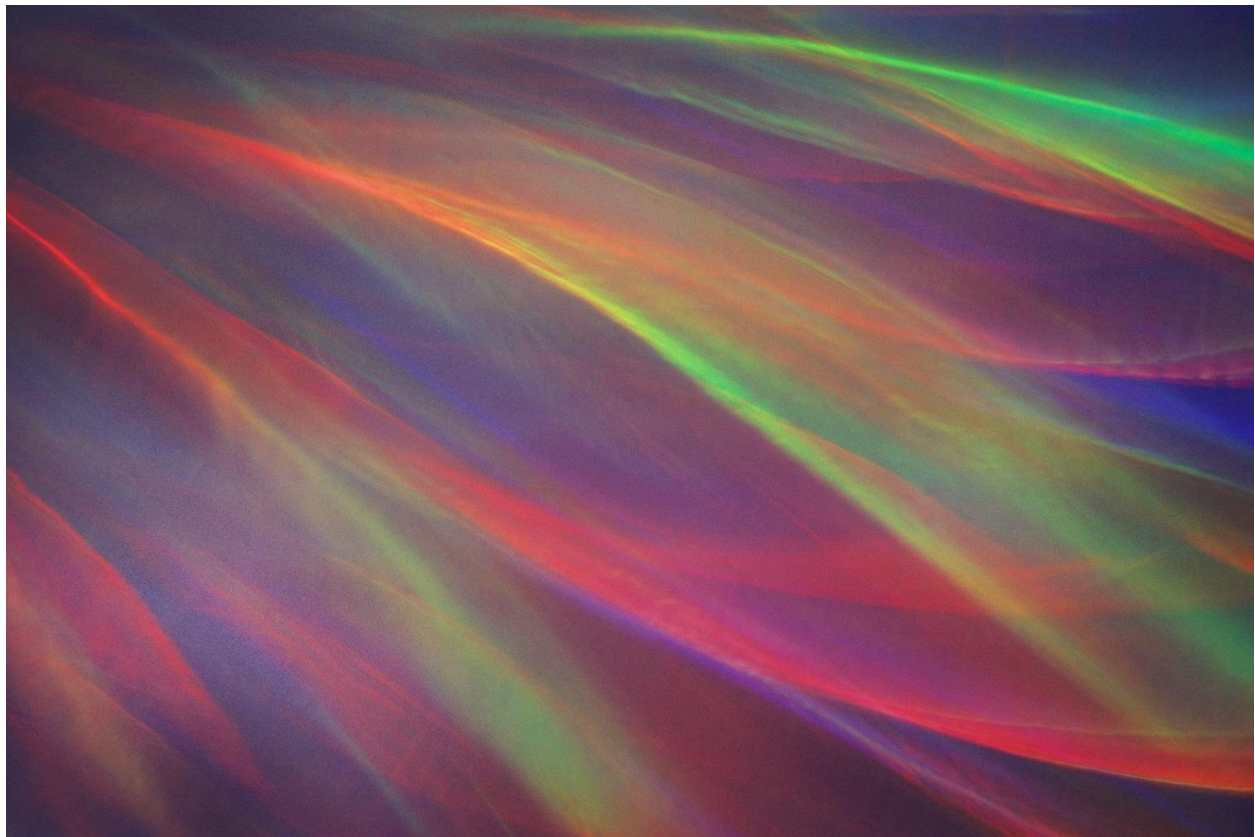
When you are reading this letter, you can safely assume that I've just celebrated an anniversary I never expected to celebrate – my 25th.

On the last day of January 2000 Dr. Vivian McAlister O.C., his team, and a donor somewhere in Canada gave me a new liver. It was my second new liver in five days, the first having been rejected by my body immediately. Of course, I knew nothing about the events at the time nor for a long while after, as I was kept in an induced coma until well into March. When I was finally permitted to emerge from my long sleep, Dr. McAlister dropped by my bedside to tell me what all my family and friends had known for weeks. "You've had two liver transplants," he told me, "not one," adding these arresting words, "You've won the 649 national lottery five weeks in a row, you had less than one percent chance of surviving, you shouldn't be here."

Sobering, incredibly challenging words to begin a new life, yet my odds of being born in the first place had been much greater. On the day I was conceived something approaching a trillion of my father's sperm rushed to meet my mother's egg. One sperm won the race; all its competitors died and were discarded by nature. That was the first lottery I won, the big lottery we all won – and the prize was the gift of life.

So, celebrate with me. Celebrate your big win!

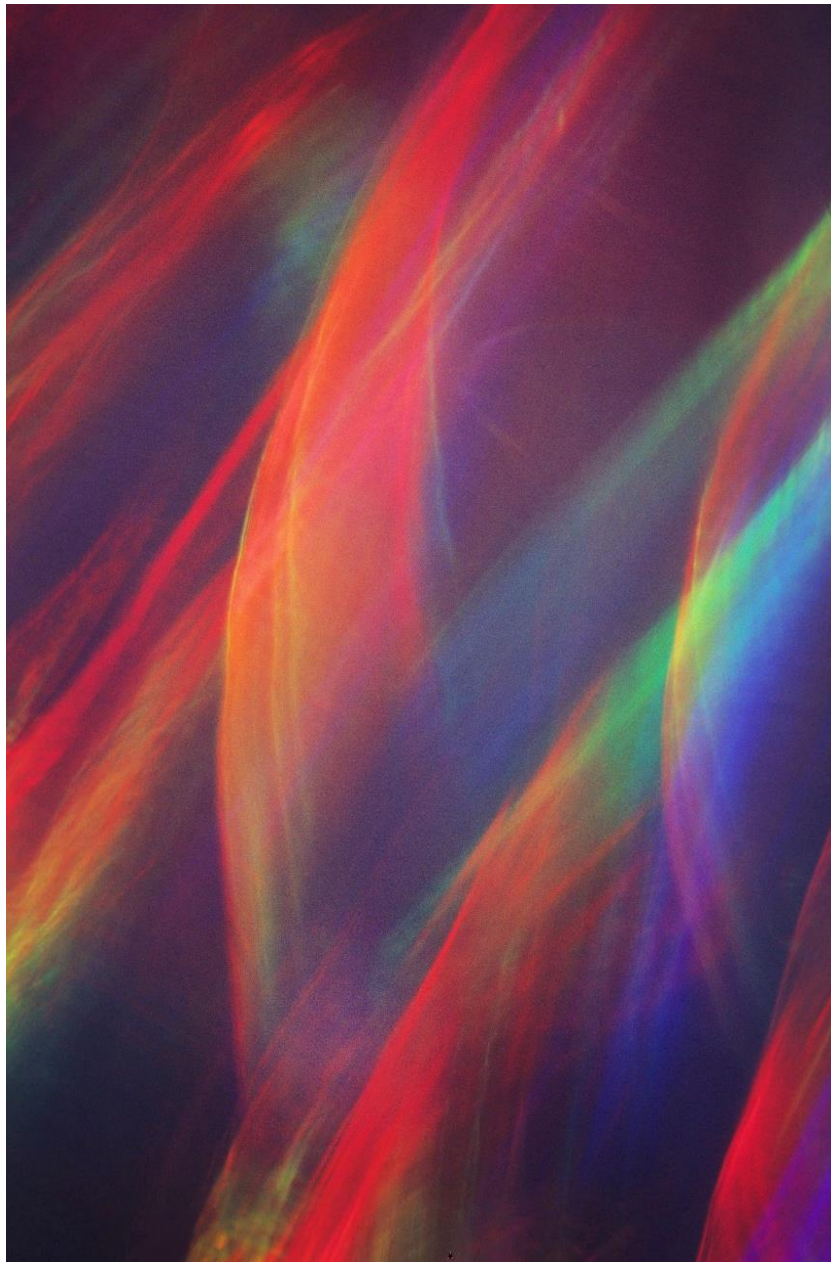
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“We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia.

Certainly, those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, who are here. We privileged few, who won the lottery of birth against all odds, how dare we whine at our Inevitable return to that prior state from which the vast majority have never stirred?” *Richard Dawkins*

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Books, Books, Books, BOOKS, BOOKS

About 40 years ago I dragged my kitchen stove out of my house and bought a microwave, instantly reducing my electricity consumption. I quickly became “fluent in microwave” and have never regretted my decision. About 10 years later my television met the same fate as my stove, as it was occupying too much of my time. I’ve never regretted that decision either. Today, I usually keep my mobile phone in my car where it can’t control my life, but will be useful when I really need it. Obviously, I don’t subscribe to any social media platforms.

I’m not suggesting that anybody should follow my lead, but all of these decisions, including replacing my stove with a microwave, have provided me with far more time to read – usually actual books, but occasionally digital books on my Kindle.

From time to time readers of this letter who have gained a sense of my “range” send me their recommendations or even an actual book, both of which I appreciate. Some of my following recommendations came originally from you. (See end of section.)

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First of all, however, I’ve finished reading Yuval Noah Harari’s [NEXUS: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI](#) about which I wrote at length in my previous letter. To add a brief phrase to my closing comment there, “I’ve never read a book of greater relevance for our time.”

NEXUS is easy to read, but it’s dense, tightly packed like a tin of sardines. Only once did I reach 10 pages before I put the book down in order to absorb and reflect on the content. For those of you who face the prospect of two or more months of winter weather, I can think of no more worthwhile project than reading NEXUS. This recommendation also applies to me; I’m going to read it through again – starting now.

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Just as I was finishing Harari’s book, I listened to an interview/conversation with Wade Davis on “Ideas,” an hour-long program that airs five nights a week on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Wade Davis is an anthropologist who teaches at the University of British Columbia, was Explorer-in Residence at the National Geographic from 2001 to 2013, and has written 24 books published in 23 languages. The CBC conversation was in large part about [Beneath the Surface of Things](#), Davis’ recent book of essays.

Two days later I was holding the book in my hands, staring at the cover image of an iceberg, nearly 90% of which is beneath the surface of the water. Davis’ introduction “hooked” me, so I continued straight on to “This is America,” the first essay. The next morning I kept on going. Beneath... is currently on loan to a friend, who has strict instructions to return it within two weeks.

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And then there’s [Early Exits: Spirituality, Mortality and Meaning in an Age of Medical Assistance in Dying](#) by David Maginley, who facilitates the annual INSCAPE workshop with Margery Nea and me. (The Amazon description, which follows, is a good one and was constructed in large part by David. Available as a paperback or digital book.)

“With 25 years in end-of-life care and first-hand experience with death, dying, and MAiD, David Maginley explores the unaddressed issues at the heart of our effort to control the final human experience.

What drives most requests for Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)? Surprisingly, it’s not physical pain but existential distress—the fear of suffering, the loss of dignity, and the struggle to find meaning and purpose as life draws to a close.

Yet these very struggles are functional in a process few recognize: the deconstruction of the personal self (the ego), which prepares us for our final and most significant state of being—transcendence. In Early Exits, David Maginley offers a radical reinterpretation of MAiD as an attempt to preserve the ego in the face of this transformation. This is a reflection of our culture’s spiritual poverty and reveals MAiD as a medical procedure being used to treat what is, fundamentally, a spiritual condition.

Early Exits goes beyond discussions of autonomy, ethics, and dignity to explore the fundamental human experience of dying. Each chapter begins with a real-world case example and ends with practical tools to help readers live—and die—more fully informed. Drawing on decades of research into end-of-life phenomena and over 25 years of experience providing spiritual care to cancer and palliative patients, Maginley illuminates the inner dimensions of dying and how to address the distress that drives MAiD requests. With compelling research, personal stories, and profound spiritual insights, Early Exits reframes dying as a transformative process that leads us beyond grief and despair to a state of grace and growth.

Central topics explored:

- Existential Distress and MAiD: Why existential suffering—not physical pain—is at the heart of requests for assisted death, and how to best address it.
- Spiritual Dimensions of Dying: How the deconstruction of identity accelerates spiritual growth and calibrates us for transcendence.
- The Role of Healthcare Providers: The importance of addressing both physical and psycho-spiritual needs in palliative care.
- Nearing-Death Awareness and Terminal Lucidity: The phenomena of expansive consciousness, mystical awareness, and soulful clarity experienced by most dying people, regardless of culture or belief.

Maginley’s insights are shaped not only by decades of experience supporting those facing mortality but also by his own journey as a four-time cancer survivor. Whether you are navigating a terminal diagnosis, supporting a loved one, or providing care as a professional, this book offers hope and clarity.”

(FREEMAN: David spent six years creating this book, but his work is not finished. Now, in addition to media interviews, come talks and presentations to diverse groups on several continents. David is exhausted, but he is also charged! I hope you hear him speak.)

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RECOMMENDATIONS (more next time)

Maginley, David. [Beyond Surviving: Cancer and Your Spiritual Journey](#). (David’s best-selling, award-winning first book)

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. [The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World](#)
Tree, Isabella. [Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm](#)

Koenig, John. [The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows](#). (Wordsmiths will love this book.)



Hand-held image in a blizzard at nightfall



Next morning

I was supposed to spend Christmas Eve at my sister's home. I didn't make it. On Christmas morning, I shovelled heaps of snow (with a couple of breaks) from the front steps and north deck of my house (location of generator.) My car was buried – two black eyes staring out of a vast ocean of white. I rescued it next. The neighbour who ploughs my long driveway arrived at 10 o'clock. At 11 a.m. I headed for my sister's. Enough with winter sports for one day!

The following morning I shovelled a path to the barn and the barn steps, then attacked the deck of my small guest house, eventually gaining entrance to the back door. Finally, I shovelled the snow remaining in front of my garage that the plough had been unable to clear. (The garage houses my truck and a small tractor.) Almost none of this could have been done with a hand-operated snow blower. Bing Crosby can have his "White Christmas." He never heaved a shovel of snow in his life.

A few days later it rained and the wind blew ferociously all night long. By morning, there wasn't a flake of snow to be seen.

My favourite Canadian winter was 2000. I spent most of it in a coma.

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"Winter is on my head, but eternal spring is in my heart."

Victor Hugo



December in Argentina



January in Australia



January in New Zealand



February in South Africa

Now that I've raised the ambient temperature with these images of summer in the southern hemisphere, I'd like to show you and write about a few winter images I made around home that matter to me.

Quite often when I'm going for a short walk, I'll hang my camera over my shoulder just in case something "grabs me" or, in other words, I have a visceral response. In our winters, this usually happens when there's just a dusting of snow or only a few centimetres, so grasses, leaves, twigs, gravel, etc. show through the white, everything together forming an intricate weave. (See next page.)

Looking back over the photographs I've made in these situations, I note that invariably I avoid any object that calls special attention to itself because of its size, hue, or tonality, thereby functioning as a centre of interest. Rather, it's as if the entire image is the centre of interest. I also discovered that there was a definite beginning to my making compositions like these, which raises the question of "why?" Why then? Why do I continue?

In my view images that a person makes entirely for herself/himself – not for a client, nor for a club competition, nor simply as a visual record – are usually highly symbolic. They portray something important about the creator, and only that person can determine what they portray. In this sense, art is very like dreams. Only you dream your dreams and only you create your art. Others may make helpful observations and associations for you, but only you can determine the motivation and the meaning.

By the way, whether or not anybody else likes the images you make for yourself is of no significance. Just "keep on keepin' on."



When the snow is deep, then I find myself looking for simple designs. Here's one of a snow fence made from a window of my house.



This is the not-so-nice aspect of winter (back door of my guest cottage, the day after Christmas.) Some years I have to do this many times.



I have such fond memories of the many years that I spent winters in Namaqualand, South Africa that I'd like to end this letter at the Kamieskroon Hotel in the village of Kamieskroon, Northern Cape province. (As most readers now know, Namaqualand is a general region in the northwest corner of South Africa, the larger part of which is in Northern Cape province, the smaller part in Western Cape.)

The hotel and my friends there are my second home and my 45 visits add up to about eight years of my life. (I have my ticket to return in August and early September for visit #46.) The glassed-in "stoep" of the hotel is a meeting place. If you sit there for an hour before dinner, you'll eventually get to know everybody who lives south of the Sahara and probably half the rest of the world.

In the many Canadian winters (South African summers) that I've been there, I've always risen by five o'clock (or four o'clock during the two weeks that the moon is bright) and started my five to eight kilometre walk by passing by this red bougainvillea and disappearing out the right side of the picture onto the old country road. By the time I return the sun is just clearing the low mountains to the east and I'm ready for a shower and breakfast.



My visit this year will be a little different. Helmut and Maryna Kohrs, who have operated the hotel for about 40 years and have always been too busy ever to see the annual floral displays themselves, have sold it to a much younger Namaqualand couple. They are moving into the village and I will be moving with them. However, with many of my South African (and other) friends booking into the hotel during the flower season, I'm sure I'll be

having many of my dinners there. I'm also looking forward to driving the Kohrs around to experience something of what they've had to miss for so many years. They've earned enough days off to last them several lifetimes.



Maryna and Helmut Kohrs

Goeie wense, almal!

Bons vœux, tout le monde

Good wishes, everybody!

FREEMAN

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