



California Institute
of Integral Studies

International Journal of
Transpersonal Studies

Volume 20 | Issue 1

Article 13

1-1-2001

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Kuang-ming Wu

University of Missouri-Columbia

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Recommended Citation

Wu, K. (2001). Wu, K. (2001). Ageless nonsense of our life. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 20(1), 135–141..
International Journal of Transpersonal Studies, 20 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2001.20.1.135>



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Ageless Nonsense of Our Life

Kuang-ming Wu

University of Missouri-Columbia
Columbia, Missouri, USA

This essay meditates on childhood and old age and death, two extremes of life, to show how our life is so beyond us as to appear nonsensical. Strangely, the actual apprehension of life-nonsense calms, cleanses, and cheers us ahead. Life-nonsense heals.

A kid shouted at a giraffe, "Doggie!" Seeing geese walking by, a kid I baby-sat softly, slowly whispered, "How come they have no hands?" Standing in the field, my boy sighed, "It's quieter when birdies sing."

The Great One is one who loses none of one's baby-heart. (Mencius, 4B12)

Toward the end of his life, Black Elk, a shaman of the Oglala Sioux, often fell to all fours to play with toddlers. "We have much in common," he said, "They have just come from the Great Mysterious and I am about to return to it." (Smith, 1991, p. 374)

OUR VERY life itself is beyond our understanding. This mysterious self-transcendence of human life is manifested clearly, poignantly, in nonsense all over life. The following pages serve to underscore three points. One, we watch childhood—the life-beginning, and old age—its ending, to see how nonsensical both are. Two, such life-nonsense is, however, profoundly sensible. Three, this is because such life-nonsense, upon being realized, heals us. The healing itself is beyond understanding, nonsensical. Our life is sensible nonsense. The construction of this essay is simple. We ponder on childhood, then old age and death, both of our significant other and ourselves, and find ourselves strangely healed in the process.

Kids, Laughter, and Nonsense

"KIDS SAY the darnedest things," says Art Linkletter (1957, 1977; cf. Mackall, 1993). My four examples below support him.

One; a boy was drawing an airplane in Sunday school. Pointing at the pilot in the plane, he asked Father Rick if he knew the pilot's name. Father Rick said he did not know. "Don't you know him? He is Pontius Pilate!" insisted the boy. Wow!

Two; after taking the Eucharist elements the whole congregation turned hushed in meditation. Then, a boy exclaimed, "What is going on here?" The effect was immediate.

Three; we asked a boy what his name was. He calmly replied, "I'm Cute." (Everyone said he was cute, so he thought that was his name.) He laugh-exploded us.

Four; watching a little girl playing, one man said to another, "She is kawaii, isn't she?" ("Kawaii" is "cute" in Japanese.) Overhearing it, she demanded, "I'm not 'kawani!'" (She took it as an insult.) Both men burst into laughter. "Not funny!" she snapped back. Her proud tottering rejections of "cute" and laughs were so unbearably cuter, enough to make both men laugh-roll on the ground. They had to try their hardest to keep quiet.

Now, it is interesting to consider why we are so attracted to the above stories. Our attraction is significant. Childhood is our root, and

considering here why amounts to considering our root-why. The first two stories tell us four points, and the second pair perhaps an additional four. The stories' implications are inexhaustible, to be sure, but these eight points suffice for now to illustrate how excitingly complex and mysterious is the child's attraction.

a. *First*, let us consider the first two stories. Laughter is evoked when what we take for granted, our common sense, is (i) suddenly and unexpectedly (ii) challenged and broken down/through. Moreover, (iii) such challenge/breakdown, such nonsense, must be *pleasant* to evoke laughter. Stories One and Two precisely fulfill all three of these conditions to charm us into laughter.

Our pleasant task (iv) is to consider why such a child's breakdown of our common sense—their nonsense—is “pleasant” to us adults. The reason is quite instructive and wholesome. Kids shout at us adults because they don't understand why such *obvious* matters (Pilate as pilot, “funny” sudden silence at the church) are not obvious to adults.¹ And we should have been ashamed of ourselves instead of laughing at kids, for we have lost their sense of “obviousness” that links us straight—bypassing *silly* adult “common sense,” *our* nonsense—to matters of fact at hand, *as they appear* to kids' straight/unsophisticated eyes. “What's going on here?” is the kid's shout at the naked Emperor's hypocrisy, adults' nonsense of common sense/convention. The shout *creates* and opens out beyond our routine “secure” common sense. The beyond-sense, the new creation of kid-sense, is significant nonsense. Kids indeed say the darnedest things.

Their nonsense is significant because it jolts us into realizing this fact of the kids' world, which is to come back home to our pristine-selves, our own good old childhood, and homecoming to ourselves, to be in touch with ourselves, is significant, healing/relaxing, deserving of *our* laughing wholesome happiness.

We must note a significant point here. Laughing happiness is ours, not the child's, who is happy but need not laugh. That young lady was angry in all her happiness. She is happy-and-angry because she is *spontaneous*. We are not, and so we must be jolted to laugh into the child-happiness of spontaneity, where our laughter is both happy and spontaneous. The child saves us

into the child. The child fathers the man, for kid-nonsense saves and heals adult-nonsense.

b. *Then*, we consider the second pair of stories. These stories have the same four elements of the first story-pair to make us laugh. (v) In addition, we note that “I'm cute” and “I'm not cute” are *contraries* pointing to the *same* conclusion—both are “cute.” And this point—their nonsense—is also part of what made us laugh.

Why do contraries point to the same point? (vi) Because both come out of and express the same point, that is, kids are straightforward. (vii) And the fact that contraries express the same point indicates that kids' straightforwardness *breaks* through our ordinary logic/sense to reality. Our sense-turned-nonsense allows us to come straight home to our heart of being. We stand in awe in front of the kid-world shot through with adult illogicals/nonsense, where kids frolic and thrive. And this fact makes us think. (viii) To grow up means to grow *out* of such kid-freedom from stringent adult logic. Our growth makes us lose creativity that defies logic/sense, for logic is part of our common sense, what we take for granted, where there is no room for creativity. Logic keeps us within common sense. Creativity must break logic, and is nonsense.

Now, we can integrate/illuminate the rambling points above by putting them this way. Our adult world is the world of separation/distinction among things/events/ideas—this from that, mine from yours, right from wrong. The kid-world has no such separation. It is the world not of mine (against yours) but of-me, that is, the world is part of me and I of the world, or rather, here it is senseless to say “of,” “me,” “world.”

This is hard to imagine. We have to look into our adult world for something that corresponds to kid-experience. I feel/live kids' undifferentiated world in music, swimming, and the peak experience (Abraham Maslow) of a concentrated act. I am made of music, water, and act, as they are made of me—no separation/difference here. No “this-that/right-wrong separation” means no “names” to separate/identify. Sense separates/names. Nonsense non-separates (not even separated from separation), non-names (even naming casually), as kids. I asked a little boy how old he was. “I don't know.” “What's your name?” “I forget. Mom knows.” A brother beside him proudly said, “He doesn't know anything!” And both joined hands and ran away. I stood there—

awed. Kids' world is the world of "aesthetic undifferentiated continuum" (to borrow from Northrop)² of dynamic pulsation. Here things, events, and ideas erupt to disappear, only to erupt again, and again. Such undifferentiated non-separation is nonsense to adult sense made of separation-logic.

Significantly, this kid-realm of non-separation has no room for "mistake" or "cute," for both assume separation. We adults say that the boy "mistook" an adjectival "cute" for a noun, his name, that the girl in anger "mistook" people's loving epithet "cute" for an insult, that the boy "mistook" Pilate as pilot, or post-Eucharist silence as funny nonsense. Such adult explanation gives no reasons why their "mistakes" are "cute" and evoke our happy laughter. The explanation is an arbitrary adult imposition, and produces no "mistake," no "cute." How so?

"Mistake" assumes *distinguishing* this from that, correct from incorrect, then taking "incorrect that" as "correct this." And making a "mistake" amounts to realizing a mistake—by two separate subjects P and Q.³ That is, a "mistake" involves the subject (P) standing apart from another subject (Q), judging Q to have "misjudged" between things, A and B, with an independent standard S, these five *separate* items, P, Q, A, B, and S. But kids have no such separation/distinction, so they have no "mistakes."⁴

Likewise, "cute" makes sense only by, again, assuming [a] a separation of the others from the self and [b] others' judgment from outside on the self, who therefore is not aware of being "cute."⁵ Such an entangled meaning-complex of "cute" is entirely foreign to kids who live in dynamic non-separation. The boy is as completely *reasonable*—not "mistaken"—in taking "cute" to be his name, as the girl is in feeling invaded/insulted by an unknown epithet, "cute." We adults judge kids as "cute," pleasant nonsense, as they judge us as irrelevant nonsense.

To repeat: Neither kid is "mistaken." Their behavior is natural/spontaneous and "right," and such natural spontaneity is what charms us into ourselves. For natural spontaneity is rightly/truly/authentically the self-as-it-is in/with the world-as-it-is. So, kids pleasantly surprise and charm us, for we adults have been living in the senseless (so kids would say) world of separation for so long, as to be completely unprepared for such naturalness that is "nonsense" to us.

And kids charm us to heal us. For separating things one from another separates oneself from the world, and oneself from oneself. This radical separation is existential sickness. Natural spontaneity manifests self-possessed wholeness, and being at-home-in-oneself is existential health. So, kids, judged as "cute," incite our hearty laughs to heal us whole. Kid-nonsense heals adult-nonsense.

All this seems to make sense, but does it, really? We can answer, "Yes," either way, and we would be correct.

For *first*, these stories make a wholesome sense because they actually please, cleanse, enrich, heal, and put us at ease. No proof is more conclusive than actuality. As the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so the proof of kids' profound significance is in their *making* us laugh, making us pleasantly whole/wholesome. And so the above explanation of the kid-stories makes sense.

Yet, *secondly*, after all, kids look forward to growing up, and adulthood completes growth. We cannot so "grow up" and be "improved" to "turn immature again"; we cannot need to be straightened by the previous immaturity of the child we have tried to outgrow, and have succeeded in outgrowing. Creativity, for instance, is what we strive to grow up to. And growth consists in learning how to be logical. Yet creativity allegedly belongs to childish disregard of logical decency (pilot as Pilate, *I am Cute*), which we must unlearn by learning from the child not to make such childish mistakes.⁶ Thus all the above explanation of our pleasure with the kid-stories of nonsense is itself nonsense. We must look elsewhere to explain our pleasure, for instance, our condescending pride/satisfaction at *our* improvement over childishness we have outgrown.

So both answers, pro *and* con, make sense. "Both answers, 'Yes' and 'No,' are correct" shows that this entire situation of adult-child mismatch is nonsense.⁷ Thus "the child is father to the man," who yet fathers the child—and this is nonsense. "Kids" are our root-of-being, so the nonsense shows that we *are* nonsense at the root, existentially, significantly.

Old Age and Nonsense

AFTER CONSIDERING the child who began/begins our life, we must now consider its other end—old age. Old age has at least three features. (1) "Old age" deserves pondering. (2) The pondering

produces nonsense. (3) We cannot help but ask, "Are both these points connected? How/why?" Yet asking/answering such questions is odd/nonsense. We must elaborate on these points in order.

1. A Jewish friend of mine wisely said that everyone stumbles. Yet after they do, young people say they stumbled, while old folks say it is because they are old. Someone said of Confucius that he was "one who knows it cannot [be done] and [still] does it." He said of himself, "I'm not one born knowing, but one who loves the old [and] is quick to seek it." He also said—at 62, the tradition says—he was "one who, so fired-up, forgets meals, so happy, forgets worries, not knowing old age is *about* to come."⁸

All the above amounts to saying that we impose our "age" on us. We really *are* as young as we *feel*, and as old as we think we are. There is one thing we are not allowed to think. We should not think we are senile, decrepit, and useless. For we can/should live happily beyond 97 as a laughing Bob Hope, and then die a young magnificent Mozart.⁹

Let us go in the other direction, from feeling young to growing old. We see two related aspects: (a) aging in this life grows into second childhood to life beyond; (b) one's aging is an important community matter that goes beyond the individual.

a. *First*; they say we grow old to return to the child to be cared for. Three points can be seen.

One; to "return" here means not to turn back but to turn again into the child. And this means to grow again into childhood for the second time, to grow beyond our first childhood into the second. Senility is second childhood.

Two; the second childhood grows beyond the status quo into the "great one" (Mencius¹⁰), which can mean "adult" in Chinese. The second childhood grows into the Adult beyond adulthood-in-this-life. Seniors, now senile, are children ready to grow beyond this world, beyond the grave.¹¹

Three; we, their posterity, serve our seniors in second childhood because we respect their future beyond this world, much as we do our posterity because we respect their future in it. Yet these two services also differ. We gladly nurture our kids we love; we gratefully nurture our beloved seniors who parented our growth.

b. Thus, *secondly*, as "old age" grows "up, up, and away" into divine heights, our reverent gratitude grows into veneration. Kemung (1998), the Papuan theologian, reports that old folks' many years of social contributions earn them such

"riches" of communal respect that their merits and reciprocal relations with posterity "last forever" beyond their earthly life. They are the apotheosized beyond this side of the grave—to be served/fed/appeased to protect their posterity (pp. 52-53). This theme/sentiment/custom sounds familiar to the Chinese people, whose convention of devout filiality so spreads all over morality and politics as to tip over deep into religion. Just think: By parenting children, we grow and are promoted into the Beyond, persisting/surviving/caring beyond time through time.

2. Now, such claims as the above are extraordinary. They impress us with interest, even awe, and at the same time offend our common sense. They are nonsense in four ways.

One; are they correct? Are they incorrect? Both questions can, again, be answered affirmatively, and something that can be both correct and false is nonsense. Thus the extraordinary character of the above claims bespeaks nonsense.

But, *two*; what extraordinary nonsense these claims are! Can we really psychically "beat" physical age? As for parenthood extended to the Beyond, such phenomena may also signify that the parenthood that towers over us as children of our parents is also immanent among/within us, even part of us as our nature, for without our parents we would not have existed. But how can we be an extension of what is beyond-us (we are children) or how can we extend to the beyond-us (we turn divine when deceased)?¹² In short, how can the beyond-us be part of us (we are children, we turn divine)? All in all, old age is extraordinary nonsense.

Yet, *three*; we cannot simply brush these claims aside as "silly," for they enable us—the community—to live richly and happily. They are significant nonsense, then. And yet, obviously, "significant nonsense," meaningful meaninglessness, is itself *nonsense*.

Four; one can of course *object* to taking as nonsense the above claims/pondering on aging. For although these claims offend our logical/physiological sense, they are meaningful/significant as so inspiring an exhortation to our present living, for such logical/physiological nonsense provokes us into thinking afresh, empowers us to live better and richer. Divide and conquer—one meaning of it is senseless logically and physiologically, while the other is sensible, hortatory, and empowering.

But how could nonsense make us think? How could nonsense enable us to live better? Moreover, the fact that these claims are divisible in meaning—that such nonsensical division in meaning obtains at all—is inexplicable, that is, nonsense. The objection, then, amounts to a powerless/nonsensical quibble against the nonsense.

3. So, it remains that “old age” deserves pondering (1) and the pondering produces nonsense (2). Now, we cannot help but ask here why and how these two strange points obtain and become connected. An obvious answer is: that is the way it is, that the actuality of life is nonsense at the core, and that the above two points serve to describe, if not explain and reveal, this actuality-as-nonsense.

But, as we ask and answer as above, we also cannot help but notice that this very relation of our asking to answering is itself somehow odd, that is, nonsense. For why is it “obvious” that life-actuality is nonsense? Isn’t our pondering on “old age” and its resulting nonsense supposed to explain that life-actuality is nonsense? Why is it that, on the contrary, the nonsense character of life-actuality explains our pondering and its nonsense character? How could explanation be explained by what it explains? Turn and twist as we may, we remain deep in the realm of “nonsense.”

All this of course underscores how significant “nonsense” is, and also that, no less significant, the very possibility of this assertion—that nonsense can be significant at all—is itself nonsense, for how could senselessness be sensible and significant? Life is significant nonsense, because it is nonsensically significant.

But all this sounds awfully abstract, to the point of irrelevance. To drive home the nonsensical character of old age ending in death, here is a confessional meditation on my Abu’s (Mom’s) death at age 90.

I Miss Abu My Love Powerful

THE CALL from my niece, Jenny, bludgeoned me numb. “Ama (Grandma) went straight Home at 6 p.m.!” I crawled into bed. “No! How can it be! It cannot be! O God.” I was just puttering around for stuff for tomorrow’s hard-won flight to Abu (Mom) in a Long Island hospital. I thought I would bring her home soon. All that was gone, nothing. Pain.

But then, strange things kept happening. The next morning I found myself in a limousine sitting beside an English professor who loved to teach foreigners. Later, I rushed to the TWA ticket line. Then I realized that my jacket was missing. I was too thrilled at our conversation to look around before leaving the car. I was thinking of how to contact the limousine company, when suddenly a man came up to me, saying, “Here is your coat. It’s going to be mighty cold in New York.” It was the driver.

No need to go on. My eye is not the best, but every tearful step of my trip to Long Island and back went incredibly well, without getting lost or stumbling. And, to think of it, I have been taking for granted Abu’s protection and guidance all my life, constant and impressive as they were. She has been praying and caring for me every waking minute. Now she is with Jesus. So, she is now more powerful than ever, caring for every loved one—child, grandchild, and great-grandchild. Abu is our Guardian Angel, our Angel guiding/protecting/prospering us.¹³

Early in the morning before the visiting night at the funeral home, I dreamed that Abu was a kid climbing up There in the bright morning mist. Her favorite sister, Si-i, favorite brother, Si-ku, and then all her family members—all kids—flocked to her, shouting, “How come you came up here so late? What a slowpoke! What took you so long?” They formed a ring around her and danced and sang. Then they, like kids, for they are kids, pointed fingers at her, laughing, “How come you are still bent over like a hunchback, an ugly hunchback? Funny, funny!” They kept laughing at her so much that she tried hard to stretch up straight, but could not. I sneaked up, whispered to her in English (Why in English is beyond me), “Pray!” “Oh!” she said and prayed. And she jumped straight up and joined the dance and handclapping and singing. Then I woke up.

I told my dream to the first person that I met that morning, A-liong, my youngest brother, and he was awash in tearful joy. For he was worried about Abu, who confided before death, that she did not know if she would recognize her brothers and sisters, when she went up bodiless in thin air to see bodiless loved ones. My dream assuaged A-liong’s anxiety.

Later, the sleeted wind cut into me. I stood, unfeeling, a stone in the garden, as I watched Abu so low in the ground. Michi, my sister, sobbed,

saying, "O no, it's so chilly here. Abu will catch cold." I softly answered, "The ground and the soil—everything is God's creation. Abu is okay." We hugged in tears.

Thus Abu is nestled there in the ground and far high up There in the Heavens. Abu is everywhere alive, now that she is no more in body. Desmond Tutu said that only the wounded doctor truly heals. Kierkegaard said that only the deceased teacher truly teaches. And Jesus said that it is good for us that he goes away, for then his Comforter, his Spirit of empowering care, is in us for us to be in him. Abu is now love-powerful in us, more for us than while she was alive in body, for she is now in Jesus the All-Powerful for us, in us.

As for myself, the death of my beloved parent, who gave me life and unconditional support, is my "motherly sickness to death," ever living to drain away all my sicknesses to death. It is a happy twist to Kierkegaard's gloomy "sickness unto death that never dies," that is, despair. Yet in the twist that drains away my sicknesses, this death-sickness remains sickness, now poignantly inducing despair. This love-sickness to death is my love-quicksand sinking me, my black holes ever-hungry, draining me. A dilemma now wrecks me. It is not that I head-know that Abu is in me and heart-miss her. It is that I both gut-know that Abu is in me protecting, guiding, and gut-miss her in wrenching, draining pain. My terrible pain confesses all this paradox, but does not describe it.

Strange thus is my Abu Homecoming, my motherly Nothing Alive, my sucking suckling Nothing. I'm cut, drained, and nourished. I miss my Abu so terribly.

—Kong-beng, her Kid

Now, let's put all this pain and paradox in our perspective of the Beyond. This is one case where the Beyond impinges on existence. We feel the impact as catastrophic, in the mode of Nothingness. The Nothing is beyond our logic/sense, and we have it and take it as Nonsense. The pain of paradox in my Abu's death graphically illustrates it.

But we may laugh at Nonsense. The laughter either belongs to low people who take it as something beneath them, as Lao Tzu said in the *Tao Te Ching* (41), "Low people laugh on hearing the Tao. [If] no laugh, [it] deserves no Tao." It is Zen Enlightenment resulting from daring to tread

Nonsense as steps—Tetralemma, continuous double negatives frequently through tears—to Parinirvana (Takakusu, 1947, p. 79). Both low-laughter and Zen-laughter are nonsensical, laughing at our life nonsense that is often catastrophic, invariably experienced as an unexpected confrontation out of nowhere, as in death.

Such Buddhist Mahaparinirvana is—for us now existing—indistinguishable from plain Nirvana. Inevitably we all bump into it as death, an unbearable Nothing that draws and drains us into wrenching pain. I've met it in my Abu, my significant other, described above, and I will meet it in my own death soon enough. Old age is profound Nonsense.

Conclusion

WE HAVE gone through our observation and thought experiment on both ends of life—childhood, old age and death. Such specific meditations apply to all other spheres of life between these two ends, and we simply feel refreshed. Such refreshment indescribably quiets, replenishes, and strengthens us, at least while we are attentive and pondering. Our personal life is transpersonal: We are bigger than what we can understand, and such life-nonsense heals. For seeing that life is nonsense frees us to affirm or deny life and death, romping as kids with that Oglala Sioux shaman.

Notes

1. We will soon consider how kid-obviousness bypasses adult-judgment ("They are 'mistaken'") because the kid-world of obviousness has no room for "mistakes."
2. F. S. C. Northrop (1946) used this rather convoluted phrase to characterize the world of the Orient.
3. P and Q can be the same person at different times—P-self judging, later Q-self judging P's judgment.
4. Adults—separate from kids—can and often do pronounce kids to be "mistaken." Such judgment, however, is an adult imposition, an "insult" irrelevant to the kids' world.
5. When this meaning-structure of "cute" is violated, something unpleasant occurs, as expressed in the accusing tone of, "Now, don't try to be cute."

6. Even a compromise, for example, creativity, combining the logical adult with the illogical child, is nonsense, for combination of the logical with the illogical is an impossible contradiction.

7. One can say that nonsense obtains only when yes and no obtain in the same sense/aspect, and our situation here may well not be such. Instead of tediously examining this claim, however, we can ask *why* the situation is so complex. The child in us shouts, "What's going on here?" No answer to both questions shows the situation to be nonsense, after all.

8. The *Analects* 14/38, 7/20, 19.

9. Chuang Tzu (2/52) says that the oldest person alive has lived as long as the baby just born and died, and the baby stillborn is the longest lived of all. Does this mean that our elders are in their second childhood?

10. Mencius (4B12) said, "The Great One is he who loses none of his 'baby's heart.'" I interpret the "Great One" to be the true "adult." We must remember, such a Taoist-sounding saying is Mencius', and Mencius is the second great sage in Confucianism.

11. "Exempt from the complications of life that devolution introduces, ancestors are thought to enjoy a wholeness of character that their offspring lack. The assumption probably arises...from an instinctive ontological recognition that closer-to-the-source means to be...better...Even the childlikeness and naiveté of [elders'] later years tends to be regarded as an advance toward the state of paradisiacal rightness that preceded the world's decline. Toward the close of his life, Black Elk, a shaman of the Oglala Sioux, often fell to all fours to play with toddlers. 'We have much in common,' he said. 'They have just come from the Great Mysterious and I am about to return to it'" (Smith, 1991, p. 374).

12. So it becomes very difficult if parents turn unreasonable. While they are alive, we can only respectfully urge/plead/entreat. When they are up There, deceased, we can only offer sacrifices to appease them.

13. Does this feeling-conviction jibe with praying to St. Anthony or Buddha or Jesus for finding things by tuning our brain frequencies into the frequency of the things lost? This is yet a matter of course, for Abu is now with/in Jesus our Guardian Lord who, through Abu as Abu through Jesus, impresses on me how protective of me He and she are, together.

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