

The Koan

by [Buddfred Levi](#) (March 2025)



Matisse et Terrus (André Derain, 1905)

Spenser opened the garage door with the remote. While he parked to the right of the motorcycle, a gust of wind pushed a bunch of dry end-of-summer leaves in behind the Jeep before the garage door slid shut. *Shit!* Spencer tried to keep the garage floor swept and free of debris. He popped the trunk and helped unload Richard's luggage. There were two suitcases which Spencer thought excessive for a weekend stay.

"What's in this smaller suitcase?" he asked as he led the way through the kitchen entrance.

"Memories," Richard said. "By the way, that was quite a meeting, but I was looking forward to this evening together, just the two of us."

"No way. Tonight was the birthday celebration at my club ... it's always a big deal. Usually, three or four of us celebrate each month by telling our stories."

"Is that why you invited me this weekend?"

"No, it just coincided. But after hearing my story, now you know how I've spent the last four years in Wichita."

"You left out the first few years of our New York experiences."

"I know. Those were special memories. I don't share them."

"And it didn't explore why you left New York in the first place. We have NA meetings there, also!"

"I found what I needed in Wichita, Richard. You know how many years I struggled to get clean in New York."

"I'll show you your room, and you can freshen up. My friend Kirby is on his way over to meet you. Do you want some coffee?"

"Something stronger. If it's okay, I brought brandy."

"Go ahead. It won't tempt me. There's ice in the fridge."

"No ice."

After Richard showered, he found Spencer and Kirby in the small den behind the kitchen.

Kirby stood up and extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Spencer's NA sponsor and best friend. In Wichita."

Richard returned a hearty handshake. "Best friend?"

"I'll put my cards on the table, Richard. No sex. I'm hetero."

Spencer laughed. "And my local confidant. Kirby knows me almost as well as you do."

"Does he know why I'm here?"

"He knows I called you and asked you to come out to Wichita."

"And I know that you put yourself aside and flew here because Spencer needed you here and that you care for him," Kirby added.

Spencer woke at daybreak and fixed a batch of bacon and eggs so Richard and Jason could heat up some breakfast in the microwave later. Sitting on the rug in the den with his legs crossed, he considered his current koan. *A monk falls off a remote cliff and grabs a tree sticking out 20 feet below the cliff and hundreds of feet above the ground. Should he yell for rescue or pray?* Spencer meditated for a short while on this when he heard the microwave humming.

"Good morning," he said, returning to the kitchen.

"You have a lot of interesting friends," Richard said, crunching on a bacon strip.

"Addicts can be a lot of fun."

"Where did you meet them?"

"Mostly through meetings. But I've also sponsored several who came to me for advice."

"Good morning, Dad," said the teenager joining them in the kitchen.

"Hi, Jason, come on in and meet my friend Richard from New York. You were already asleep when we came home last night."

Richard stood up and shook hands.

Jason gave Richard the once over. "You're dad's old boyfriend from Manhattan."

"Yes and no. I'm not old. I'm still in there pitching."

Spencer jumped in. "Jason is my son. He lives here with me. That's his bike in the garage."

"I'm running late, Dad. I told Cody I'd meet him for breakfast and a round of golf. Glad to meet you, Richard."

Richard nodded.

Spencer listened as the bike revved up and left the garage.

Richard broke the silence. "You have a son?"

"I'm blessed."

"Jesus, Spencer ... you never mentioned a son."

"I didn't know there was one when I ran away to New York. Rita tracked me down when I came back to Wichita. A short affair before I moved to New York. I didn't tell you about him because I didn't want to complicate our relationship."

"Where's his mother now?"

"Once I was in the picture, she took off back to the streets and dropped out of sight."

They moved to the den and sat in two armchairs facing the TV. "This is my quiet space." Spencer pointed to a half-filled bookcase along one wall. "These books—and most of the house furniture—were Dads."

Richard scanned the titles. "He was a philosophy buff?"

Spencer nodded.

"So you want to move back to NYC?"

"No," Spencer said, "that was a ruse. I want you to move here. I need the peace and quiet here."

"I've been hoping someday you would move back in with me. To the apartment."

"The city's not what I need, Richard. I need you. Here, with me."

"What about all the friends you left behind? They'd love to have you back."

"Really? You're the only one who's always been there for a chat or a letter or advice."

Spencer stood up. "The truth is, Richard, I need some reckoning time. I have a terminal cancer."

"How terminal?"

"Six months."

"Six months! Jesus! Why didn't you call sooner?"

"I just found out."

Richard stood and hugged his friend. "I'm so sorry." Spencer welcomed the warmth of the hug and melted in Richard's familiar scent. It had been too long.

"I haven't told Jason."

"So this is why you invited me to visit?"

"You've always been there for me. Even when I realized I needed to come back to Wichita to get well, you've been supportive. I trust you."

"You've been gone long enough. It's time to come home."

"I'm asking you to move in with me here and help raise Jason. It's his last year of high school. You can help him after I'm

gone.”

“You know I only have a one bedroom apartment in NY. There’s no room for a guest.”

“You have a nice couch.”

Richard smiled. “I brought our photo memories. There are several of the couch. Can we share them for awhile?”

“That would be nice.”

“And can I sleep with you tonight?” Richard added. “I’ve missed you so damn much!”

“I’d love that.”

“I’ll brush my teeth so you don’t smell the brandy.”

“Don’t—I want to smell and taste you as you are.”

The first picture in the album was of Spencer lying on the couch in Richard’s living room. His face was bruised.

“I’ve never seen that picture,” Spencer said. “I look like a bum.”

“You were a bum. It’s the first night you spent in the apartment.”

“Why did you take it?”

Richard laughed. “In case you killed me while I slept, I wanted to leave a record for the police.”

“Do you have any fun memories?”

“Many. I put them all in this photo album after you moved. It’s my prized possession.”

“Can I look through it?”

"I want you to—that's why I brought it. But I'm really tired after the flight and all. Let's go to bed and you can look through it tomorrow."

Sunday morning Spencer woke early and drove downtown to the Buddhist chapel. a small house in the downtown area, and meditated with his koan for several hours. The building was a relic from the WW2 influx of workers to the aircraft factories in Wichita. It's four rooms were referred to by color. Spencer meditated in the orange room which gave him a sense of tranquility.

He returned from downtown about nine. Jason and Richard were chatting over coffee in the den.

"While you were gone, I've been telling my stepson all about the New York apartment and how exciting it would be if he visited me for a few weeks before his senior year starts."

"Stepson?" Jason said.

"We never divorced, Jason," Richard said.

Spencer turned to Jason. "What are you thinking?"

"It sounds like a fun trip, Dad."

"I'm enrolling you in school this coming week and school starts the week after. Two weeks is a no go."

"How about one week?" Richard bargained.

Spencer gave this some thought. "Jason?"

"One week would be great!"

"Why not join us, Spence? The three of us. We'd have a grand time."

"Not in the cards, Richard."

"I'll make the reservations for tomorrow. We'll be back next Sunday." He turned to Jason. "Better start packing."

Once Jason left, Spencer told Richard he was wary of returning to his old haunts in New York. "I never managed to get sober there. Controlled. But always high."

"How was Wichita different from New York?"

"A no-nonsense sponsor. You loved me for what I was—not for what I could be. You were too tolerant of my weakness."

"I can change."

"Maybe. But I've already changed. And I don't want to return to the old ways. I'm not sure I'm strong enough to safeguard what I am back in the city. And I know what I am here—clean."

The ride to the airport Monday morning was full of excitement. Jason's first flight. Inside the terminal, the line for the flight was short. The baggage was shipped off to the plane. Richard and Jason walked to the departure gate.

Spencer returned to the Jeep and headed for home. It was a lonely ride. He remembered how alone he had felt years earlier when he had flown to Wichita to settle his father's estate. He never told his father about the relationship with Richard.

He took an Uber to the house where the lawyer was waiting. The lawyer had already opened up the house Spencer had left when his drinking and drugging first got to be a habit and hard to hide.

"Your father died suddenly from a heart weakness. Luckily, we had prepared the will several years ago. His ashes are on the fireplace ledge. The insurance settlement is contingent to your keeping the house "as is" for five years. He was hopeful that you'd move back in. The furniture and the Jeep will be waiting for your return."

Although he and his father were not close, they had still celebrated holidays and birthdays over the phone. Spenser agreed not to sell the house when he settled the estate, and the house is where he moved when he returned from New York. His father's Jeep was still in the garage. He called AAA for a jump and it was as if the Jeep woke up from a long nap.

Cycles, he thought. He wondered if his father was anxious or excited when he drove Spencer to the train station to move to New York. Did his father know how bad his addictions had progressed? Did he suspect the gay lifestyle, that the drop-off was the start of a life living on the edge?

Back at the house, he called Kirby who came right over.

"Jason's off to New York with Richard," he said when they had settled over coffee at the kitchen table.

"Are you nervous?"

"No, I'm relieved actually. I expect they'll have a terrific week in the city."

"So how are you relieved?"

"I told Richard about the cancer and how I wanted him to help take care of Jason."

"And..."

"He wants us to move in with him although my plan is for him to move in with us here. He wants to find a cancer doctor in NY. He says we can enroll Jason in a private school and spend the rest of my life together."

"Does he know how strong a support system you have in Wichita?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

"Let it rest for now."

Spencer confirmed an appointment with his cancer doctor for the following morning.

Jason called that night. "We walked to a round museum where you stroll in circles from the top to the bottom. It was just a couple of blocks from the apartment. And we ate hot dogs from a cart in the street."

"So, you're settled in?"

"I had a good time today."

Spencer sensed the excitement in Jason's voice. He was glad that the two of them were having a good time.

That night Spencer wondered what Jason and Richard were talking about. *He imagined Jason asking Richard about how he had first met Spencer.*

Richard is honest blunt but will put a soft spin on it. He'll say: "I was heading to Harry's Bar where there was a folk singer performing. Just before I got to the bar, I saw a young man slumped against a building. His face was covered in blood and he seemed groggy. Usually I just walk by scenes like this in the city but for some reason I stopped and asked him if he was alright."

"No," the young man said, "I screwed up. I thought they were looking for a good time, but they were queer bashing."

"Let's get you cleaned up," I said, helped him stand and steered him to the bar. I took him into the head and washed off his face and hands. His face was bruised. Blood had poured out his nose but had dried. Cleaned up, we went back into the bar area and I ordered us a couple of beers.

"I had just turned 23 so I wasn't much older than the young man. After a couple more beers he said he wanted to go home. I

told him it wasn't a good idea unless he had someone to watch over him, which he didn't. So, against my instincts, which said "No," I took him back to my apartment for the night. I setup some bedding on my couch and watched him fall asleep.

"When I woke up the next morning, he had crawled into my bed and was sound asleep beside me. I waited til noon for him to wake up before suggesting he go home."

"Can I clean up first?"

"Sure."

"It was an hour before he finished his bath. He came out nude with washed and rinsed clothes in hand."

"Okey if I pop these in the dryer?"

"Go ahead."

"That's when I noticed the body bruises. His stomach, chest and back were covered with discoloration.

"I asked him if they were all from the altercation the day before."

"No. I run into a lot of toughs in my neighborhood. They don't like gays."

"Why don't you move?"

"It's hard enough scrounging up rent for my rat's nest. I hustle but I'm not very good at it. I can't afford any better."

"I made a rash decision. I told him to stay a couple of nights at my place and I'd try to find him a job.

"He stared at me for a minute. 'Look,' he said, 'the truth is I've also got a habit.' He began to cry.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "The best decision I've ever made."

The next morning on his way to the doctor's, Spencer wondered how deep his roots in Wichita really were. The neighborhood he had grown up in was changed but a lot of the families living there were just a new generation. Many of the houses showed wear. Many had aged well. His house was in good condition although it was one of the oldest in the area. The neighborhood slate sidewalks had been replaced by concrete; the tall oaks and elms had thrived.

His doctor assured Spencer that he could arrange for a smooth transition to a specialist in Manhattan if Spencer moved. Spencer felt uncomfortable at hearing this. He didn't like the sense of change.

Spencer drove to the Buddhist chapel and wrestled with his koan. He feared he'd spend the next six months hanging from the tree.

That night Jason told him of the trip downtown to the 9/11 Museum on the subway. "And your friends Charlie and Wanda are throwing a party for us Friday night so I can meet all your NY friends."

Spencer switched off the phone and wondered if he should have gone with them. The Wichita house was empty without Jason. And, he admitted to himself, he was missing Richard's company as much as when he first moved back to Wichita. He had been very lonely that first month. But he had survived the loneliness, and the turbulent withdrawal from drugs and alcohol he experienced. He found an NA meeting he could walk to and transitioned into sobriety. New friends, new activities.

It had been a shock when Rita showed up at his door with Jason, who was already taller than Spencer and just shy of a teenager. She had been a one-week fling before he left for New

York. Within a month she disappeared while he and Jason were becoming friends.

The cancer had surprised him. Two packs a day should have prepared him for the hunk of blood he coughed up. The diagnosis was quick and a preliminary six-month timeframe established. What a loss. Spencer had just four years of sobriety behind him and too soon they'd be over.

Friday night, Jason called from the party and all the friends took turns asking how Spencer was doing and when was he coming back to New York. Richard was the last to take the phone. "Jason's ready to go home and I really miss you," he said. "And I did find him a good school if you'll come back to New York with me."

Early Saturday, Kirby came over and they revisited all the good times they had shared the last few years. Spencer brought out the photo album and talked him through its pages.

Just before he left, Kirby suggested that Spencer stop overthinking. "You're sober and you're sick. A move will be stressful."

Spencer spent several hours Sunday morning downtown in the orange room. He suddenly understood there was a third alternative to the koan's predicament. Instead of praying or hoping, he could let go of the branch of his own accord.

He left just before noon to pick up Jason at the airport. He was surprised to find Richard had flown back to Wichita with Jason.

"So," Spencer said, "you're staying? That's great!"

"No, I've come to help you start packing. We'll sit down with Jason back at the house and tell him the score. You and Jason and me."

"That wasn't my plan, Richard."

"Go with the flow, Spence. It's my plan. I want to take over."

Back at the house, Spencer asked Jason to bring a chair from the kitchen into the den. "I have some bad news I have to share with you."

"What's up, Dad?" Jason said settling into the chair.

"My doctor told me I'm very sick."

"What does that mean?" Jason said, straightening up in the chair. "How sick?"

"He says I won't be able to be able to take care of myself sometime soon."

"Sometime soon? What the hell does that mean!"

"It means I have cancer. And will need a lot of medical treatments."

"I don't understand. When did all this happen?"

"Several weeks ago. That's when I asked Richard to come out and visit. I'm going to need someone to take care of me."

"I'll take care of you, Dad. I'm a senior this year and almost 18."

"And your senior year is very important for your future. I don't want you distracted by my disease."

"I want you and Spence to come back to NY with me," Richard interrupted.

"Why would we do that?" Jason asked.

"So Spence and I can live together again. He can come back with me where he belongs."

"You're nuts. He belongs here. With me."

"I want you to come and live with us in NY," Richard added.

"I don't sleep on a couch here. I have a bed."

"I'll get a larger apartment so you can have your own space."

"I already have my own space here. And my friends. And Dad's friends. If you want, move here. We have room."

"I don't think I could take New York full time just yet.," Spencer said. "But I want us to be together as much as possible while we can. And that's enough discussion for today. I'm done in. *One day at a time*," Spencer said

"Okay," Richard stood up. "I'll do it. I'll take a leave of absence from work to come back and take care of you. I can't think of anything else to do. Or say."

The next morning when Spencer was driving Richard to the airport, he said, "I want to visit you in NY for a week right away. That way we can spend some time together before I get too sick to travel. And I can say goodbye to our friends while I visit."

"That would be terrific, Spence. It would mean a lot to them."

In his afternoon meditation, Spenser decided it was time to move on to a new koan.

[Table of Contents](#)

Buddfred Levi is an octogenarian living in Wichita, KS. He is in the graduate program at Wichita State University and has had several stories published in *Mikrokosmos*, the WSU literary annual.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)