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I DO NOT WANT TO SAY GOODBYE TO MERLE

*David D. Gregory**

I do not want to say goodbye to Merle. If I must, I do not know how to do it right. Merle was the philosopher, not I. His famous puzzle was "What is property?" When I gave him my answer, "Property is earth," he laughed as if to say that he understood my clever joke, that we stood together on the same intellectual plane where irony can be used to teach. But I still do not see the joke. Merle, a practicing Christian, wrote of matters spiritual that I do not understand. He expressed his thoughts in poetry I can but partly grasp.

Once I heard Merle speak of death. The occasion was the death of his own wife Jean to whom he was devoted and who, with their daughter Kelley, was the treasure of his life. When Merle spoke of death, he fixed that inevitable fact in a larger context of relinquishment, a letting go, and he expressed that view of death in terms of air leaving a sea gull's wing. So he should be here instead of me to help us come to terms with unexplainable loss. All I can see is a mistake in the grand design.

Merle was self-contained. He was reserved, a trait I attributed to his midwestern origin but which I now think was all his own. Even to me Merle was an enigma. He is a riddle I cannot quite solve. I do know these things: He was rigorously analytical. He was forthright and honest without exception. (Whatever it is about the study of law that leads good and intelligent persons to lie never touched Merle.) He did not yield to any external standards for deciding who he was or what he should be or do or for measuring his worth. He was sure of himself. He was content. His self was centered without his being self-centered. He was a man of inner strength. As far as I can tell, he never faltered in obedience to the injunction "To thine own self be true."

On the night I learned of Merle Loper's death, I received a call from our former student and our friend Yping Yang. We cried about Merle's death. Then she asked me (who but a Chinese student would ask this question?), "What is the lesson?" Think on this: What would Merle say? Recently I asked a friend how long we would be able to see the comet. He said that for a very long time the comet would be "theoretically visible." He meant that the comet could be seen with proper instruments and could be viewable by us were it not for limitations on our own vision. I would like to

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believe that we can rightfully think of Merle that way, as being “theoretically visible,” within our sight and hearing were it not for our own limitations. My own mundane answer to Yping was “Hug your loved ones.” Merle would do far better.

What is death? Is it day? or is it night? Merle, I do not want to say goodbye to you. Goodbye. Goodnight, my friend.