

JOHN E. DAVIS II
July 12, 1933 - February 24, 1984



Like everybody, I have my struggles, but I now also have my joys; and the fire from those struggles—from the pain and the loss—burns away the dross from, and purifies the gold of life, and the gold of the soul. And so for several years now I have been trying to save what I can of that gold, so that when I die men and women will come to know how much I too have loved, and cherished life; how I have touched the earth, and gazed upon these hills—West Virginia—and dreamed at night of the many-billowed sea. So that they may know that I was not a stone or a beast, but a man, with a warm heart, and a soul honored and proud to be a part of the Family of Man.

2.23.84

JOHN E. DAVIS II

The Resurrection of John Davis by Louis Khourey

"CITY LAWYER JOHN DAVIS DIES AT 50" said the small headline on the obituary page of the Charleston, West Virginia Gazette on February 25, 1984, noting the death from acute kidney infection the previous day of a spiritual giant. So great was the achievement of John E. Davis II in a realm where results are rarely palpable, and so dramatic were the conditions of his enlightenment, that even his hometown newspaper included an outline of his astonishing history:

In 1964, an auto accident left Davis with brain damage that led to his being suspended from practice...in 1977. He began a program to restore his health and resume his practice and once said the beginning of his recovery came at a cemetery where he had been sleeping. He was readmitted to practice in 1980.

Davis's life was a powerful re-creation, in modern dress, of the spiritual struggle of the "hero with a thousand faces," which Davis came to recognize in himself. He did not live the life of a monk or hermit, but of a warrior on a contemporary battlefield, who reached heights of worldly success, was almost destroyed physically and mentally, and found, deep within himself, the spark of divinity which he kindled into a roaring fire that purified the dross of his damaged brain.

The value of John Davis's story is its verifiability, for the facts about his life are known, his remarkable medical history is documented, and his personality and charisma were witnessed by many. Combined with his own accounts in interviews and in his poetry, the depth of his experience is evident. It has all of the hallmarks described by Richard M. Bucke in his classic analysis of the mystical life, *Cosmic Consciousness*:

- a. The subjective light.
- b. The moral elevation.
- c. The intellectual illumination.
- d. The sense of immortality.
- e. The loss of the fear of death.
- f. The loss of the sense of sin.
- g. The suddenness, instantaneousness of the awakening.
- h. The previous character of the man-intellectual, moral and physical.
- i. The age of illumination.
- j. The added charm to the personality so that men and women are always (?) strongly attracted to the person.
- k. The transfiguration of the subject of the change as seen by others when the cosmic sense is actually present.

The intellectual brilliance and ambition of John Davis manifested early in his life. From the poor coalfields of Buffalo Creek in southern West Virginia, he made his way to eastern prep schools, then to West Virginia University for college and law school.

He quickly demonstrated great talent not only as a lawyer but as a political theorist and strategist, and had an instrumental role in John F. Kennedy's victory over Hubert Humphrey in the 1960 West Virginia primary election, often credited as the pivotal campaign of Kennedy's successful drive for the presidency. Before he was 30, Davis was forming a law partnership with former governor W.W. Barron and had already become wealthy.

An emblem of his wealth became an instrument of his destruction when he wrecked his Jaguar automobile in January 1964. Brain damage was quickly confirmed by EEG and the impairment was diagnosed as progressive. John Davis continued to practice law despite increasingly frequent seizures and deteriorating mental function. Even in 1968, he was asked to work in Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign. But as he told Steve LeVine, an A.P. writer who interviewed him in 1983, by 1969 he could not function at all.

By that time his career had effectively ended. He fought disbarment, even while his facilities continued to decline. His wife divorced him and he finally suffered an indefinite suspension of his license to practice on his birthday in 1977, July 12.

In 1976 Davis literally became a homeless derelict, spending nights in hospital waiting rooms, under highway bridges, and in graveyards. The severity of his impairment was summarized in a report dated December 13, 1976, by Donald C. Carter, M.D. of the School of Medicine of West Virginia University:

This man's cognitive functions are grossly impaired...[T]he overwhelming evidence from my examination is that of cognitive deficit, unregulated emotional control and severe memory and judgment impairment.

The long, agonizing descent into hell of John Davis ended suddenly on the day in 1977 when his doctor and friend, Edward Lewis, told him that he had less than one year to live. He walked into the Spring Hill cemetery in Charleston where he often slept, carrying his Styrofoam "bed." It was there that he had his deep spiritual experience that was to be so dramatically validated. As he told Steve LeVine:

I didn't see lights, didn't hear voices echoing from the mountaintop, didn't have any mission sent upon me, except being a human being...I felt my whole brain reorganize. I learned more things that night than I'll ever be able to explain.

He described the experience as a "sense of kinship, a oneship with the universe."

Davis never had another seizure. He immediately began a rigorous program of exercise, reading and-most importantly concentration. He discovered pranayama, the Hindu art of breath control, and kundalini yoga, and employed them as techniques to retrain his mind and body. He had virtually lost his faculty of speech, once one of his brightest jewels, and practiced speaking in front of a mirror with his mouth full of marbles.



The monument in Spring Hill cemetery next to which John Davis had his transcendent experience.

An EEG performed on July 29, 1979 was completely normal. Dr. Carter, who in 1976 considered him to be permanently and totally disabled, reported on April 11, 1980: "Mr. Davis was found to be healed of his cognitive, emotional and attitudinal problems...the healing process has very adequately compensated and remedied these defects to a remarkable degree, not previously thought possible."

On May 31, 1979, his longtime personal physician, Dr. Lewis wrote:

When Mr. Davis in the summer of 1977 undertook to rehabilitate himself, his physical health, alone, was perilous, perilous in the extreme. But it has been my clinical experience that for a few highly motivated patients, a trauma or ordeal such as Mr. Davis experienced of losing the right to practice their profession, their livelihood and even their home, sometimes is a catalyst to cause them to be able, under close medical supervision, to arrest their progressively worsening condition and reach a sort of equilibrium where minimal functioning can be maintained. This is not infrequently reported in our journals, and even occasionally observed in our clinical experience. But for a person to be able to self-motivate themselves and so mobilize their physical and psychic energies so as to make the simply astonishing complete physical, emotional and mental recovery, as to become as fully functioning as has Mr. Davis, is unique in my clinical experience. It just is not found in our medical books!

In 1976, John Davis's score on the WAIS Performance IQ test was 112, only a little above average and far below what would be expected from someone of outstanding educational and professional achievement. In 1980, his score on the same test was 156. Dr. Carter's colleague, Dr. Quarrick, said:

This score is outstandingly high and is in sharp contrast to the mediocre one obtained previously. Neither the psychometrician nor myself have ever seen such a high Performance IQ. In fact, it is 8 points shy of the highest score that can be statistically generated by this test.

So John Davis was restored to his license to practice law, with the help of attorney Rudolph DiTrapano who had employed him as a law clerk during his recovery. And he was remarried to his former wife, Ruth. But he was somehow more than what he had been before. Although he spoke with some apparent strain and effort, his eloquence was somehow greater,

and his persuasiveness somehow more compelling, both in the courtroom and out. In their introduction to his privately printed collection of poems, Adeeb McCarus and Ruby J. Miller explained:

All this unique personal magnetism, this growing ability to mesmerize, this charisma, dates from the experience in the graveyard. While he was always considered an amiable and affable person, a warm if somewhat distant personality, there was no "magic" about him. He was a young man in a hurry, but it was his intellect that shone forth and won him the honors. It is from the graveyard experience that the new man begins to emerge.

John Davis struggled mightily to convey the message that he brought back from the graveyard. And if his poems do not always reach the highest level of art, they never fail to convey the passionate intensity of a man who knew, beyond doubt, what is, and what reality awaits every struggling soul, sooner or later. Perhaps he sensed the inadequacy of his words alone, for when he read his poems aloud it was in a dramatic voice, now shouting, now whispering, trying to move his listener to really understand.

There was real magic in the life of John Davis, lawyer, of Charleston, West Virginia, won at great price. Sadly for all who knew him, the magic of his return to his faculties and his powers was short-lived. But for John Davis, the greatest victory had been won. He had conquered himself, he had, by force of will and a divine inspiration, overcome a damaged brain and body and restored them to that of man-as-he-should-be.