**Steve Spilde:** Today. I am honored to welcome my friend and mentor, Vince Hatt. Vince was a longtime director of the Franciscan Spirituality Center, and he happens to be one of the wisest people I know. Welcome, Vince.

**Vince Hatt:** Thank you very much. [It’s] good to be here.

**Steve:** Vince, you were on the podcast a couple years ago, and since then you spent some time in the hospital, correct?

**Vince:** Correct, yes.

**Steve:** You were diagnosed with a form of cancer?

**Vince:** Yeah, Acute Myeloid Leukemia.

**Steve:** Have you been feeling OK?

**Vince:** Yeah, most of the time.

**Steve:** As you face the challenge of cancer, Vince, how has spirituality changed for you? What seems more important? What seems less important in your life?

**Vince:** Well, let me start with a story. In 1967 – 55 years ago – I was a young priest [at] Holy Ghost of Dubuque, and I was visiting Eleanor in the hospital. Eleanor had breast cancer. It was Stage 4, and finally they knew they could do no more for her. I came in there very worried when I got that information. She looked at me and said, “Vince, either way I’ll be OK.” I was to lead a tour to Europe for 17 days, and she was not supposed to be able to survive that long. I said goodbye to her tearfully and thanked her for who she was in my life, and I went off to Europe. I got back 17 days later at 2 a.m., and I went immediately to the rectory office, looked into the book of deaths in the parish, and she was not in there. I got up at 6 a.m., went to the hospital and said, “Eleanor, I can see you again.” She said, “Thank God you’re back. You can have my funeral,” and she died two days later. She prepared me for this moment: Either way, I’ll be OK. I’ve kind of prayed into that over the years knowing that someday I’m going to get a death sentence. My response was actually, “Either way, I’ll be OK.” I had also had heard that [St.] Francis once said, “What if you find out you’re going to die tomorrow?” and he said, “I’d continue to hoe the garden.” I’ve continued to hoe the garden. I still do spiritual direction. I still do groups. I still write articles. So really, my life hasn’t changed significantly except every six weeks I go in for IV (intravenous) chemo. The things that were important are still important, which are relationships and my desire to love God and neighbor, so it wasn’t really drastic.

Now, I’m no hero. I hate pain. I’m not afraid so much of death, but pain? I’m afraid of that. But on the other hand, I’ve had severe depression for three years, and this is trivial compared to that. Depression is 24/7, and it’s everywhere. It’s omnipresent. This [cancer] is … well, you know, I go in every six weeks; otherwise, my life is pretty much the same. So, that’s kind of my story right now.

**Steve:** How many years ago did you have the depression?

**Vince:** The worst depression was from 1986 to 1989. I’ve had bouts afterward, but that really was the one that was god-awful.

**Steve:** What did you learn from that journey that’s been helpful since you’ve had cancer?

**Vince:** Probably acceptance. There is so little I can control. You just have to show up each day and see what the day presents. I was a compulsive driver and, uh …

**Steve:** Do you mean, like, pushing yourself all the time?

**Vince:** I’m a 3 on the Enneagram. If something wasn’t successful, I just worked harder. Now, I’m at a stage where if I’m riding a horse and notice it’s dead, I get off of it. I don’t push like I used to.

**Steve:** How did that work for you, riding a dead horse in the old days?

**Vince:** It didn’t work very well. It just didn’t work – it exhausted me.

**Steve:** That’s why I said you’re one of the wisest people I know – when the horse is dead, you get off, which isn’t a universal response.

**Vince:** No. Sometimes I’m on a little too long. It has to start smelling, and then I get off.

**Steve:** When you’ve been challenged in the last couple years and throughout your life, what are your sources of resilience?

**Vince:** That’s a good question. I suppose my parents. My parents went through hard stuff, but they never gave up. My mother was depressed all my life, and she never gave up – she always hung in there. A source of resilience is my Christian faith. If you want to live, you’ve got to die, and the dying you’ve got to do is to one’s own ego. That’s been a never-ending challenge. I’m much better at it now than I was when I was young.

**Steve:** For someone who maybe doesn’t use that language, or maybe “dying to the ego” is a new term for some folks, how would you put that in simple terms for someone who [asks], “What do you mean [by], ‘dying to the ego?’ ”

**Vince:** We all create an image, and we want that to be maintained. That image isn’t really who we are; it’s kind of created. And it depends upon what looks good in your culture. I belong in a culture where success looks real good, and so I strove for that. It started in college. In college, I majored in science because that was really a way to get considered really smart and important. If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn’t have majored in science. I would have majored in psychology. It’s this creation of myself that’s not really where my passion is.

**Steve:** As you talk about the way you described the ego [and] being who the culture wants you to be or who you think other people want you to be, it sounds kind of like a character in a play, [with] the ego being the character you play onstage, [and] the character that you show up and play for other people. But that’s not really who you are once you take the costume off, correct?

**Vince:** That’s correct. That’s a legitimate way to describe it.

**Steve:** So, you go through life playing the part that you think other people want you to play, or play the part that you think will make you more likeable for other people.

**Vince:** Exactly.

**Steve:** But then, dying to that is to say, “Wait a second. I have to let that part die and just be who I am.”

**Vince:** Mm-hmm.

**Steve:** Who is it that says, “The spiritual journey is to have the big death first so the other death becomes a little death,” or something to that effect?

**Vince:** I believe you have to face your death and accept it to a high degree, and then you can go on living without fear. I’ve tried to do that. I’m not always successful, but I try to do that. The other source of resilience and this is kind of flippant – I like to be flippant. The whole Christian message is, “Jesus is risen. We win. Let’s party.” I believe that. That’s not to deny pain and suffering or all that, but if we believe it’s Gospel that is good news, then my challenge in the worst of times is to say, “Yeah, but it’s going to work out.” It’s hope rather than optimism. Optimism is based on exteriorly analyzing the situation and plotting how it comes out good, which is the way I used to work. To hope is the belief that it comes both internally, and from the transcendent presence of the divine other. It’s not that you believe things are going to come out well, but you believe regardless of how they come out, I want to commit to this because it’s tied up with who I am rather than a cast in a play or an ego-driven idea of myself.

**Steve:** The optimist believes that in the end, I’m going to win the game. The person with hope says, “Win or lose, I’m going to be OK.”

**Vince:** Yeah, right.

**Steve:** And that sense there is that having a real faith in the presence of God that you’re not going to be alone, however it turns out, right?

**Vince:** Yeah.

**Steve:** The ego had to do things right, or else people would abandon you.

**Vince:** Yeah. One of the phrases that means more to me now … I didn’t get it at first when [Pierre Teilhard de] Chardin talked about living in a divine milieu. We live in this milieu, which is divine – in God we live and move and have our being, as Paul says. It’s a different way of seeing the world. It’s not like I’m going looking for God; I just wake up and God is all around.

**Steve:** He talked about “the divine milieu,” a sense that the divine permeates all of reality? Is that the right understanding?

**Vince:** Yeah. Or to use an old example, a young fish swims up to the older fish and says, “Where’s this ocean I’ve heard so much about?” And of course, the answer is, “You’re in it.” So, where is this God you’ve been hearing so much about? Well, you are in that sacred presence we are moving around in.

**Steve:** What do you wish you had known when you were younger? It sounds like that’s one of the answers: that you wish you had known that sooner.

**Vince:** Oh, yeah. Everything belongs. At my age, it’s not much [that] I didn’t do things right, but it’s more like, “Well, what did I learn from that?” There are certain things that are valuable. I used to think sometimes I wasted so many years in a chemistry and physics lab. But on the other hand, I learned some ways to be patient and thorough, and to be able to say, I don’t understand. There are always opportunities to learn.

**Steve:** You mentioned that your mom was a source of resilience just watching her handle her struggles gave you courage or an example. If she were around now, what do you wish you could teach her that she didn’t know when she was going through those struggles?

**Vince:** I wish I could teach her that she was OK as she was. She did not have to measure up to anything, but God loved her just as she was. I don’t want to get into the whole story of her life, but she felt all the time about being inadequate, and that came from her childhood. I wish I could teach her that.

**Steve:** What is your sense of where your mom is now? Or what is your sense of what happens to us after we physically die?

**Vince:** I’m kind of chuckling to myself because a couple of weeks ago I was watching Steve Colbert. He asked Shaq O’Neal, “What happens after we die?” And Shaq says, “Well, we really don’t know. But I’m sure Charles Barkley is in hell.” When I was little, Heaven was a place … My earliest dream was heaven was playing baseball in the perfect green grass field, and the game never ended because we both kept scoring. Now, I’ve thought a lot more about consciousness, and I think we might believe we’re different, but underneath the same consciousness is in all of us. And when we die, all of that outer stuff that keeps us from being connected is lost and you just realize your consciousness is one with everybody else in God. That’s my take right now. Of course, I’m kind of like Bob Schneyer, who said, “You’re not really curious about this dying. I’m ready to die; I’m just really curious.” He wasn’t afraid; he was just really curious. He says, “A lot of people are trying to keep me going, but I really don’t want to keep going. I want to have my curiosity resolved.” I’ve been fortunate to have really close friends go through dying. It’s not like it’s a new thing in the universe. I have dozens of guys and gals who have gone before me, and I say, “Well, it’s going to be interesting.”

**Steve:** As you look to the future, what is important to you in the future – not only in Vince Hatt’s future, but the future of everybody as you look forward?

**Vince:** I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. When I look at climate change and gun violence and the war in Ukraine and all that stuff, I’m not optimistic, but I am hopeful. I think there is a bigger force in the world that’s loving and that is going to win out in the end. That’s [Pierre] Teilhard de Chardin’s idea: We’re moving toward an Omega Point where love wins. And once we understand the fullness of love, it’s like we’ve discovered fire again. I have this hope, but I’m not too optimistic.

**Steve:** Both of us are familiar with 12-step recovery and know people who have been involved in 12-step recoveries. I know I’ve heard a lot of people talk about their bottom, and I’m sure you have too. Oftentimes, the whole concept of a bottom is just the place where it gets so painful that people are ready to do something different. As you described that, I wonder if at some point as a human race we’ll reach a bottom [and] the level of pain will get high enough that we’re ready to say, “This isn’t working. Let’s try something different.”

**Vince:** That’s very interesting. That would be my hope [that] what we do individually in 12-step spirituality that collectively we might get there.

**Steve:** I know you share your concerns and your hopes very eloquently in the La Crosse Tribune twice a month in your columns, and now you’ve gathered those and published them as a book, is that correct?

**Vince:** Yes, it is.

**Steve:** What’s the name of your book?

**Vince:** The name of my book is, “Five Minutes Matter: End-Of-Life Reflections on Spirituality and Religion.” The title comes from someone who suggested you can read any of those essays in five minutes, but hopefully people will ponder them for a long time afterward. That’s where the “Five Minutes Matter” come [from]. I write them not because I am unique. I write them quite the opposite [in] that I’m not unique. A lot of the struggles, feelings and challenges I find in my own life, if I’m honest, I hope people will say, “Yeah, I kind of know that,” and maybe be able to put words to their own story. My hope is that people come to a realization that they have their own sacred story, and it’s a story of holiness and fullness and the divine other.