

welcome

the lesson of the bi disc

A FRIEND RECENTLY SAID that the only piece of jewelry his girlfriend wanted for Christmas was a bi disc. I was startled. A bi (pronounced *bee*) disc isn't jewelry. It's an ancient stone artifact—a flat circle with a hole in the center, usually made of jade or agate and about 4 to 12 inches in diameter. The Chinese used to place the bi disc on the chest of a body before burial. The hope was that it would give the soul a gateway to its next life. The idea of the bi disc as jewelry—perhaps ornamentation is more accurate—my friend explained, is that the disc would be looped on a silken cord (no drilling through sacred objects) and worn as a necklace. That struck me, suddenly, as a lovely idea. To walk through your days carrying a gateway to another life. (Maybe you could even slip into your next life in the course of the day—during, say, a terrible phone conversation—only to return a while later and find everything had happily progressed.) There's something both comforting and exciting about the idea of a clear way in—or out.

How many of our houses no longer have a real front door—by that I mean one that's well considered, designed to welcome, and built to bear up under heavy traffic? Anyone living in a house constructed after the 1950s is probably making the passage indoors from the garage. Not much chance of a meaningful doorway experience there, and not much of a celebration of the moment of arrival, either.

Having lived in my house for 15 years, I have decided that I have two front doors. Though one opens into the kitchen, I can no longer think of it as the kitchen door. It's the door used most frequently; my children, my friends, and I come and go through that door—the garage is inconveniently and wonderfully unattached to the house. I have made an occasion of the small porch outside that door, filling it with stuff: an old Spanish wooden bench; an ever-changing collection of potted plants; statuary left one day long ago as a gift; a simple white marble bowl from India in which I sometimes float fragrant gardenias or orange blossoms; even an old-fashioned milk box, from the days when a milkman arrived with his bottles before dawn. I put down a rug that stays out from May to October, inexpensive enough to throw away at the end of the season, nice enough to give a cheery welcome. The door itself is half glass, which gives it a forthright openness; and maybe because of my Moroccan mother, I have hung bits of blue glass beads on the top

half, amulets against the evil eye. The bottom of the door is patched where I covered an old cat door that was far too hospitable, I discovered, to curious squirrels. In other words, the door bears some of the history of those who have come—and gone.

Though I enter through the kitchen, the first thing I do is go to the center hall to open the other door. It is a heavy, old, wooden door with bands of small windows running down either side of it. I have come to think of it as the front door to the garden. That door opens onto a small boxwood hedge, and behind that the late daylight filters through the leaves of the old trees and shrubs, which harbor the frantic activity of squirrels and rabbits and clicking cardinals. I will go through this ritual of opening two front doors when I get home—a front door to the house and a front door to the garden—even in the dead of winter, when all I can bear is a quick crack of cold air before I turn snugly inward.

The bi disc reminded me of the sacred importance of the front door. The way in, and the way out. After all, there is something special enough, or there ought to be, about walking into the house that it should be an opportunity for reverence. I hope the girlfriend gets her bi disc. (I'm assured the discs don't come from plundered graves; they are usually turned up by farmers as they plow land that was once a burial ground.)

I also hope that we all give ourselves the same sort of gift this holiday season, and let ourselves stop, even for a moment, before putting the key in the lock, to consider the next life. Are you opening the door, every evening, with the proper sense—glad-hearted, respectful—of ceremony? Are you sure you are opening the right door? After all, it is your passage home. In this life.



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