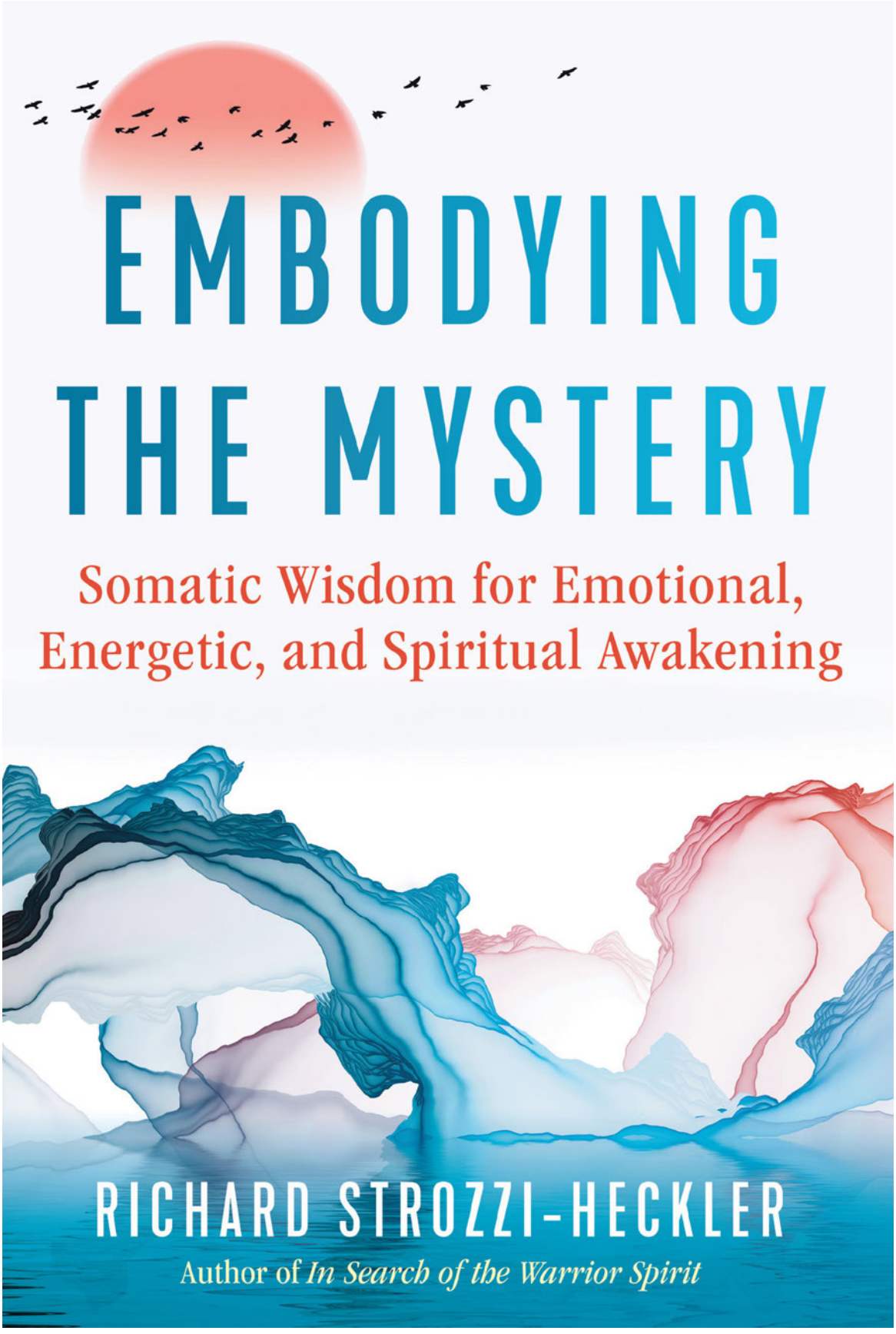
EMBODYING
THE MYSTERY
Somatic Wisdom for Emotional,
Energetic, and Spiritual Awakening
RICHARD STROZZI-HECKLER
Author of *In Search of the Warrior Spirit*

EMBODYING THE MYSTERY

Somatic Wisdom for Emotional, Energetic, and Spiritual Awakening

A Sacred Planet Book

RICHARD STROZZI-HECKLER

Inner Traditions
Rochester, Vermont

This is dedicated to Logan and Ronan and to all those who are captured by living the sacred mystery.

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous to be understood.

MARY OLIVER

EMBODYING THE MYSTERY

“Richard shares his journey through healing, learning, and growth into awareness and appreciation of the sacred interconnected web of life. Part memoir, part inquiry, part transmission, it is a beautiful reflection about living consciously in a human body.”

ELIZABETH A. STANLEY, PH.D., PROFESSOR OF SECURITY STUDIES AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY AND AUTHOR WIDEN THE WINDOW

“Embodying the Mystery is a gift of bone-deep wisdom and spirit springing; you’ll find yourself celebrating the wonder and possibility of living in a human body. It is the kind of book that only comes out of a life as deeply lived as Richard’s has been—wonderful to read!”

GINNY WHITELAW, AUTHOR OF RESONATE AND FOUNDER AND ROSHI OF THE INSTITUTE FOR ZEN LEADERSHIP

“Richard Strozzi-Heckler shares his life’s journey with us with inspiring vulnerability and grace. Story after moving story, exquisitely written, reveals the powerful experiences, personal struggles, and healing practices that have shaped him since childhood. How wonderful, how refreshing it is to read the honest questions he continues to ask, as he offers clear wisdom

from a life of deep practice. He encourages us all to dig deep, find the treasure within, practice courageously, and share our gifts with the world."

LINDA HOLIDAY, 7TH DEGREE AIKIDO SHIHAN AND AUTHOR OF JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF AIKIDO

"This book is a gift of love from Richard. A true artist of embodied spirituality, he helps us explore every experience and transition as sacred moments to awaken the divine spark within us. This is a heartfelt book of empowering purpose for the soul in times of crisis and transformation."

RICHARD LEIDER, AUTHOR OF THE POWER OF PURPOSE

"Do you seek to have a stronger leadership presence? You must become more fully present. Richard Strozzi-Heckler embodies presence, and he generously shares it. This wonderful book traces his fifty-year quest for full presence through the practice of meditation, aikido, and somatics. Embodying the Mystery shows the struggle and growth of one of our great teachers. It will stay with me for years to come."

SALLY HELGESEN, AUTHOR OF THE FEMALE ADVANTAGE AND COAUTHOR OF HOW WOMEN RISE

"Perhaps the most profound and valuable teaching in this book is the importance of being fully present in our bodies in order to reify our spirit. This presence nourishes and enables the spirit to be expressed in our lives in very profound ways. StrozziHeckler came to this path through his macho

upbringing in working-class neighborhoods as a military brat, leading him to explore the martial arts, meditation, and somatics. The mastery of aikido allowed him to find the vulnerability of being fully present. And, in so doing, he discovered the spiritual way of the body."

NANCY J. HUTSON, PH.D., FORMER SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF PFIZER GLOBAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

"There isn't a better teacher for this human moment, amid climate change and pandemic mourning, than Richard Strozzi-Heckler. This book is a guide to awareness and gratitude through seasons of grief and loss. He helps dignify our fear and trains us to live 'in the mystery' of all we don't know."

SAKET SONI, FOUNDER OF RESILIENCE FORCE

"What an honor to watch a man who has worked on himself his entire life make his harvest of wisdom. How generous of Richard to share this abundance of insights with us and to share himself so openly through Embodying the Mystery."

ARKAN LUSHWALA, AUTHOR OF THE TIME OF THE BLACK JAGUAR

"In his beautiful prose, Richard shares his personal stories of longing, grief, vulnerability, and 50 years of spiritual practice that took him deeply into the world. Reading it, I found myself welcomed home, invited into the unknown I, too, long for."

STACI K. HAINES, AUTHOR OF THE POLITICS OF TRAUMA AND FOUNDER OF GENERATIONFIVE

“Strozzi-Heckler offers us timeless anchors to ground ourselves, adapt, and fully meet our challenges with heartfelt strength and dignity. This life-changing book invites us to pause, take a relaxed breath, and embody our lives to the absolute fullest. Reading this awe-inspiring work will leave you feeling excited and alive. Fortunate are those explorers who venture into Richard’s doorway of wonder and pragmatic wisdom.”

FRED KRAWCHUK, COLONEL (RETIRED), ARMY SPECIAL FORCES

“Embodying the Mystery is an eloquently crafted guidebook for exploring human existence. Richard’s stories illustrate an infectious curiosity and teach that with continued practice my world-changing ideas become reality. This is a deeply empowering book. I had to fully exhale to feel it, to be it.”

LISA PICARD, FORMER PRESIDENT AND CEO OF EQ

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As this book was about the shaping and ripening of a life there are innumerable people who have contributed, in large and small ways, and some whose influence continues to this moment. I thank you all, and if your name is not here, accept my apologies and know that despite the oversight, you are remembered.

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INTRODUCTION

My quest to understand the mystery that is human life began with the influence of my grandmother's early teachings on the nature of Spirit. Along the way, there were a number of significant teachers and events that opened a view into a way of being that had no previous location in my life. These occurrences were signposts and confirmations of a landscape, both inner and outer, that pointed to an ineffable mystery that was alive and potent. They pointed to a life of deep questing and reflection, a life that would be filled with purpose, struggle and meaning, of peace and belonging. I was drawn to this state even though I had neither language to express it nor a historical lineage that gave it standing. But what evolved was a longing that became a force unto itself. A deep impulse that inexplicably moved me to seek the answers to what it means to be in a human body with one's feet firmly on the ground, while reaching for the heavens. Along the way it became more evident that the heaven I was being pulled toward was within me. As Henry David Thoreau said, "It is in vain to dream of a wilderness distant from ourselves."

This book was initiated by a marveling, an adventurer's longing to explore, and follows a shifting thread of continuity rather than any pedagogical urge to tell. It is not meant to instruct or distill something into a lesson but to leave a lingering presence of what an embodied reality offers. It provides no formulas or prescriptions, only an explorer's insistence to go over the next hill, literally, metaphorically, and physically.

This is an inquiry that doesn’t assume there is a final answer. It does not attempt to prove something or validate the underpinning of a practice or philosophy. It’s about committing to looking straight into what it means to be a complete human being and what lens affords the best view. At times there is a look around that connects meaning to the mystery, but the intent is to consent to the complexity of the unraveling to see if it forms a pattern, either of a trajectory of inevitability or of the mystery forever asserting itself.

The signposts along this journey were mystery, energy, Spirit, and embodiment. Mining these themes was at times the summoning of something out of nothing; yet at other times something gave itself up, relinquished from the odd mix of familiarity and the unknown, as if a speck of light from a distant star landed on my hand like a f ly. Then there was always the question of the veracity of memory. Pieces formed into wholes, a gestalt gave way under the weight of particulars, colors made themselves into voices that served the moment, one after another. Wise counsel told me not to be concerned with making circles and spirals into straight lines but to just let it have its voice. Still I would fret but not enough to keep the memories from becoming thoughts, the thoughts from becoming sensations, the sensations from becoming words, and words from morphing into an unexpected insight. When I hobbled myself with self-consciousness, it would feel like a crime against nature.

This journey is taken from over fifty years of working with a wide range of individuals, teams, and organizations in embodied leadership, somatic coaching, martial arts, body-oriented therapy, and meditation. The infrastructure underneath these practices comprises the disciplines of meditation, somatics, and aikido. The foundation beneath the infrastructure is made up of a legion of exemplary, quirky, ordinary, extraordinary, and otherworldly teachers. Beloved all.

My wish is that these stories become seeds that germinate and blossom in the rich soil of your living heart.

LIFE FASTENED TO DEATH

When I was eight years old I would routinely explore the woods that were on the perimeter of the navy base that was my home. I would travel with a group of friends, and on one particular day we decided to go to a creek far away from our usual haunts. As we cleared the thick hardwood forest we saw something lying in the gravelly shallows. It was a large yellow dog, yet even at a distance I could tell there was something untoward about it. It was completely still, unlike anything I had ever seen before and nearly indescribable. There was a profound silence emanating from it that utterly disregarded my reality of what I knew a dog to be. The stillness was full of import and something entirely unknown to me.

We walked slowly forward and saw that it was dead; freshly dead. There were no marks on it, no trauma, nothing to indicate that it was either sick or old or had died violently. Some of the other boys poked at it with a stick or threw pebbles at it. I was fully mesmerized. It looked like a dog sleeping, but something was missing. It was what was missing that captured me.

That evening, when I told my mother and grandmother what I had seen, my mother immediately went into a germ story: “You shouldn’t go near it. It might be diseased. You don’t want to touch it. Did you touch it?”

“It looked like it was sleeping, but it wasn’t. What was that?” I asked.

My grandmother nodded, “Its spirit was gone.”

“It might have germs. Don’t go back,” my mother interrupted, ignoring my grandmother. “Promise me you won’t go back. I don’t want you to get a disease.”

I went back the next day.

This revealed a characteristic of my nature that bucks authority. It also foreshadowed a tendency to refrain from fully disclosing my intentions so I could do what I wanted. This became a standard way for me to navigate the complexities of my family dynamic and supported my penchant for adventure, but later it matured into a psychological liability that created numerous breakdowns and required hours of therapy.

I gently touched the dog first with a stick and then with my finger. It felt intimate, yet impersonal. It looked like a dog, but what made it a dog was no longer present. It was a house without a resident; a vacant body and a doorway to the unknown.

What is a spirit? Where is a spirit? When my grandmother spoke of it, it seemed so tangible and commonsensical, no more mysterious than taking off a shoe. Yet it was ineffable; it had no real location but existed

everywhere. Her response ignited something in me like a second heartbeat, a distinctive pulse that permeated everything. A mystery had been presented that was enigmatic, seemingly unsolvable, yet as tangible as the next breath. These questions I would wonder about for the rest of my life. Right up to this moment of tapping these keys.

As if in a spell I went back to the creek every day, often alone. I was captivated; my curiosity was like magnetic filings embedded in my marrow, and the dog was pulling me forward to something formless, unknown. This was an urge that was larger than me; a flood of sensation that had its own way with me apart from any conscious choice. This was not a hankering after a simple desire, like a candy bar, but something I now know was a spiritual hunger, a charge of aliveness that began at the center of my chest and seemed to usurp the “me” that was accustomed to making mental choices. This feeling, this longing, pulled me as a river would and formed a new reality composed of the intimate connection between life and death. A great circle of change and transformation played out before me in real time. And I was enthralled by the mystery of it.

I began to see that what looked like a dog began to sag and was eventually reduced to an unnameable mass that repealed everything it had ever been. A dark premonition sharpened my senses and silhouetted the depth and granularity of my longing. What began to take shape in the core of my being was an understanding that the covenant of spirit was intimately matched with the vulnerability of the incarnate life. Death, loss, change, and birth were deeply woven into the fabric of Spirit and mystery. What came to form would pass.

In my daily treks to what I called Dog Creek, I was shown how endings were accompanied by new beginnings. There was something perpetually wanting to come to form out of the ending I was witnessing at the creek. As the days passed the stillness of the dog was replaced by a relentless

shimmering laced into the very animal itself: hordes of ants, spiders, maggots, and things that looked like spastic black apostrophes were colonizing the dog. Then gaping holes in the hide appeared, showing putrefaction and rib. The fluted sound of the creek folded into the song of the crickets, tree frogs, and whip-poor-wills; a background symphony to the theater of change. Ravens sat watching in the gloom of overhead boughs, waiting to return to their task once I left.

I was alone in the sense of not being with another human, but I was never lonely. There is aliveness, too, in these exacting moments of ending. Movement became stillness, which became movement in the unending wheel of life expressed. By week's end the dog was only a suggestion of what it once was, becoming a ripple in the current itself. The smell was bracing; the reek of death, caught in my nose, insisting on its place in every breath.

Life fastened to death. Instead of calling it living and dying should it be termed livingdying, just as in China they don't say yin and yang but yinyang? Is Spirit the thread that unifies death and birth?

A peculiar entropy now appeared everywhere I looked; everything dissolved back into a larger preexisting order that was without nostalgia or sentimentality. There was an unnameable darkness that I couldn't touch orbiting around me. This ceremony of ruin and renovation is best viewed at a distance; up close it's difficult to see its dark gift. Deep in my tissues, where this primal opening to life, to Spirit, was twined with death, a central theme about existence appeared: there is a polarity endlessly acting on itself and the world, opening and closing, receiving and giving, living and dying, f lexing and extending, lighting and shading, making and unmaking. As Ovid said, "Everything is changing into something else."

Is the interacting of these polarities the engine that creates the whole, the direct, unmediated experience of unity? Is this the womb out of which there is a ground of being that holds this polarity? Is there something deeper and wider that has the space to hold opposites, contradictions, paradoxes?

The in-your-face actuality of decay revealed a shadow that hovered over everything that accompanied me as I walked the trail home. Every opening was preceded by a contraction. There was an animating principle, a spirit, that invoked a metamorphosis, a constantly changing fabric that included disintegration and renewal. Conspicuously, life feeds off life, life is Spirit, and in that tension there is a mystery that calls for surrender to something larger than the duality of subject and object.

As I stood in the clearing I wondered if the horizon, gigantic as it seemed, was big enough to hold these seeming opposites. Something massed at the edge of my skin that reached for the depthless sky, an inexplicable quality of relentless loss felt and known deeply, and of relentless life that surges in widening circles where thought cannot follow. Life is not a pouch of gold coins that we must spend prudently and not all at once. Life is infinite; it doesn't run out. Yes, I will run out of life just as we all will, but the world will never run out of life. As the poet Mary Oliver so elegantly states, "These are the woods you love, / where the secret name / of every death is life again." The shadow side of love is loss.

I studied our dog Bailey as he slept, looking intently for signs of a spirit and what was the same as or different from the dog in the creek. When Bailey slept his ears would twitch, and he'd scrabble his feet on the floor in the ancient dream of the hunt. His chest would rise and fall without interruption. Even when sleeping an animation flowed through him like water over cobblestones. Thousands of tiny creatures snacked and lived on the dog in the creek without the slightest tremor from him, only a final quiet that conveyed an unfathomable emptiness.

I brought the same curiosity to the guppies in our small aquarium with their unhesitating darts to the food sprinkled on the surface of the water. Occasionally I was offered the contrast of a single guppy floating lifeless on the surface as the others continued their random dashing. Yes, the theme of movement certainly repeated itself as a differentiation between spirit and no spirit, but it was not always reliable. When I scrutinized the flowers in the kitchen vase I looked for spirit in the flush of the rhododendron as well as the petals that fell from the stem to the yellow linoleum table. There was no movement in either of them, yet something radiated from them that whirred with aliveness. When I asked my grandmother about the where and how of spirit she would say emphatically, “Spirit is everywhere. Just look!”

Spirit is not a thing, a concept, a symbol, or a good idea. Spirit is a process in which the dynamics of polarities acting in concert with each other produce a life force that is emergent, evolutionary, transformative, and embodied, organizing itself toward the affirmation of life. In this process there is the potential to be touched by pragmatic wisdom, grounded compassion, and skillful action. Spirit is a feeling that has texture, intent, and force; a gravitas that constantly feeds on itself and replenishes itself. Life saying yes to itself.

∞

Eight years later I again experienced life fastening itself to death. During a calving operation on the family ranch in Montana, I helped pull a calf from a struggling mother with my Uncle Sonny. We attached a rope from the calf ’s protruding foot to a saddle horn, and I heeled the horse slowly forward as Uncle Sonny maneuvered the rope until first the hind legs, then the torso and fore legs, and finally the bloodied calf came free. The mother bled out; the calf lived.

I watched in bafflement as one life ended and another life began. After a few wobbly moments the calf stood by its mother on shaky legs peering expectantly at the lifeless form of which she had been a part just moments before. While my uncle had seen many animals perish, by his hand and by the force of nature, and was normally stoic and stalwart, he was shaken in a way that disoriented me, as if the spinning world was having its way with him.

The dogs sniffed at the lifeless heifer and then began licking the blood pooling on the hardpan, quarreling and snapping, the hair on their backs bristling. Uncle Sonny hazed them off with his hat, and they shied away, the continuity of their world endured as if nothing untoward had occurred at all. My uncle pulled a Pall Mall out of his shirt pocket and lit it with his Zippo lighter imprinted with “USMC 1st Division.” He held me in his gaze, cigarette dangling from his lip, turned both hands up empty, shrugged, and began wiping the calf down. “Shit,” he said. Something raw and tender passed between us, but as I was learning what he already knew, men don’t linger with their feelings, especially with each other, so I undid the kerchief from my neck and joined him wiping off the afterbirth, steaming and warm. “Shit,” he said again.

Like a small sharp splinter caught under the skin, the memory of the lifeless dog unexpectedly pierced my thoughts. There was a sacred confirmation in this ancient ritual of bringing life to term: dog, cow, calf, horse, man, blood darkening the ground, vultures swimming overhead in the thermals, and the earth seething with heat. Under the impossibly blue sky, we were a frank symmetry of life begetting death; or was it death begetting life? My breath was urgent; something was pressed against my chest, demanding release.

What does it mean to have a life, to be in a body, to have thoughts, to be someone? What does it mean to die, to lose a life, to no longer be in a body?

But there was no time for reflection. New life called. We tied and penned the calf, cut the umbilical cord, and dragged the dead heifer off behind our horses for the vultures and coyotes and all manner of things to transform it to another form of life.

At the conclusion of the complex calculations that science offers us about life is where the mystery begins. Just as when my grandmother pointed to life everywhere, I was entranced when my uncle mumbled, “Shit” in consternation and held up his hands helplessly, as if there was nothing to hold but the shining emptiness of the moment. I have wondered if his tender lament was part of his abiding healing from being gut shot at Peleliu where he almost bled out, but survived to witness death and birth again in a different form.

The transformation of the dog at death—and later the cow—was mirrored by a transformation in me that imprinted signposts to reflect on, wrestle with, try on, and eventually embody. Witnessing the radical transformation of something known and familiar to something utterly unrecognizable revealed not only the mystery of an animating principle called Spirit but the intersecting alliances of change, loss, and renewal.

A central question lodged in me: How is Spirit embodied, how do we live from this deeper wisdom?

BABA

The first person to hold the mysteries of Spirit, energy, and metamorphosis was my grandmother. Her name was Alba Renstrom, and she arrived in this country with her sister Alma at the age of fifteen by boat from Oland, Sweden, making it through Ellis Island with a few coins in her pocket and eventually settling in Montana where there was a growing Swedish community. I was her first grandchild and I pronounced her name Baba, which stuck, as even now my sister's grandchildren call her Baba.

Baba married Gustav Anderson, another Swedish immigrant, and they raised three children. While he worked on the Union Pacific Railroad as a mechanic, she cleaned houses, took in laundry, and later had a job as an orderly at a hospital where she mopped floors and cleaned patients and their bedpans. I vaguely remember that her job at the hospital was a point of celebration. Was this because of the immigrant story that said being employed by a respectful institution with a steady paycheck elevated one's working class identity to the next tier? Maybe, but I think it was more the perception that she had a real job that brought her into the folds of the American dream.

When her work at the local hospital was done for the day, Baba led séances and held psychic readings for her community of Swedish immigrants. On

Friday nights I would stand by her side as she sat at a round table with the others in a darkened room, a single candle throwing shadows against the stolid figures and the bare walls. She would ask aloud the questions put forth by the petitioners to their ancestors and the relatives who had passed over, and the table leg would knock once for no and twice for yes in answer to the questions. The candle flame would twist and right itself as the table moved, and the shadows would then settle down in the stillness of the uncomplicated response. It was as straightforward as the darkness itself; this simple interaction with the unseen was the norm.

There were no pretensions about it at all; it was simply what we did while others watched The Jackie Gleason Show. It was like gathering around a two-way radio or a conference call and having a conversation with someone you never saw, except in this case they were dead; certainly they no longer resided in a human body. Yet something was present. When we dialed into a certain frequency, suddenly something arose out of nothing. What was inoculated into me is that life can be present in forms that are far from the norm. Later in college, when I was seeking identity and belonging through intellectual pursuits, I would question how the table had moved and be suspicious of the entire ceremony. But the notion of invisible worlds that are both near and far away, intimate yet impersonal, found a place in me. This became an eternal guidepost that was made plausible by practices of meditation and aikido and learning to listen closely to the space between the stimulus and the response.

After the séance, the communicants would file into the small living room in their formal Old World way and drink sweet coffee from saucers and eat svenska bullar, the Swedish bread spiced with cardamom and raisins and sprinkled with sugar, while they sat around and gossiped. My mother would put me to bed on the fold-out couch, and I would listen to them talk in Swedish until I fell asleep, remembering the filaments of light and shadow the guttering candle threw in the room.

Once my grandmother took me on a trip to the zoo. It was just the two of us, which made it a very special event. When we stopped in front of the bear cages, a large brown bear that was lying down lifted its massive head to us. He deliberately ambled toward us, stood up on two feet, and began to move its paw, as if he were waving to us. She squeezed my hand and whispered, “Oh my God, it’s Gus!” Gus was my grandfather who had died some years before. She was very still, almost rapt, as she took in the bear’s greeting. There was something flowing between them, like a vapor that was the very air itself, yet distinct from it. The bear finally returned to all fours and began to do what bears do, but my grandmother continued to watch him in her quiet concentrated way. She nodded and looked down at me, smiling sweetly, and we turned and walked to the next cage.

On another outing, while we were sitting on a rocky beach at the Spokane River, my grandmother held out her hands with fingers spread toward the flowing current, the wind billowing in the trees, our dog Bailey snuffling at the driftwood, an osprey cutting paths in the air, and the clouds scudding through the sky and then bent toward me whispering, “Look! It’s alive. It’s all alive.” Her eyes resting on me as if tapping a tuning fork; then she smiled her very sweet, knowing smile.

I looked out and yes, all of it was moving, and all of it was alive, all of it. Everything seemed to liquefy. It was all trembling, a rolling sheet of quicksilver, blazing with a radiance that fused the parts into a whole that would abide with me far into the future. I was shown that there is an aliveness that is inseparable from how we see or listen or feel, and there is nothing apart from it; not even the moments of fury or sorrow or jealousy are separate from this aliveness. I was also shown the terrible equanimity of its power to instantly take any of us, or restore us, at any moment.

At another time she fished a small plastic magnifier from a Cracker Jack box, and through it we viewed the geography of her skin and then mine, the

ribs of a potato bug, and the lichen on a stone. With awe, she marveled at the mystery in the natural world declaring, “This is alive, this is the world God made too. There are universes in here!” She looked at me intently, finally asking in an almost whisper, “Do you see it? Look closely, feel what’s there. Yes, that’s right. See it.”

Her affirmation planted in me a reality of a vast interconnected web which I could view, participate in, and was never apart from; a billion cells vibrating in me, in her, in the dark hairs of the dog, in the solar winds across the fields and across time.

Is what we call the mystery, or the divine, our genetic aspiration toward those unnamed truths that we long to live, to embody, that we reach for even in our dreams? There is a nonempirical phenomenon that is as present as the unfolding rose, and with us all the time. Rudolph Steiner, whose books were on my grandmother’s bedside, said, “Just as in the body, eye and ear develop as organs of perception . . . so does a man develop in himself soul and spiritual organs of perception through which the soul and spiritual world are opened to him.”

Baba also introduced me to many of the ways the body reflects back to us the mysteries of our life. One day she took my hand and showed me how the pale crescent on my fingernails could tell if I was healthy or not. It was called the “lunula” she explained, after the moon, luna, and if I looked at the moon at a certain time I could see its crescent like a faint smile in the night sky. She told me that the crease above the corner of the mouth lifting upward next to the nose was called the zygomatic, and that a Chinese face reader had explained to her that that line could tell them if a person was happy or not. She turned my palm over and studied it silently, her broad, worn fingers carefully tracing the lines as she explained how they represented life span, health, intelligence, transitions, how many children I

would have, and the themes of life, love, and loss. I saw none of these things but was mesmerized by her touch mapping a life to be traveled.

When she returned from work each day, she would sit in a frayed recliner and call me over and tell me how she had been on her feet all day and asked if I would massage them. Following her instructions I would remove her flesh-colored compression stockings to reveal a tangle of plum-colored varicose veins, small and large like vines climbing up her legs. Her toes were squeezed together from wearing shoes that were too tight, and a sweet-sour smell came up from her feet. I was at first repelled, and as I recoiled away a wash of shame came over me when I realized that she could feel this.

In her kind but firm voice she began to tell me what to do, and I let my hands follow her guidance about where to press, where to smooth, where to hold while thinking positive thoughts. “Bring your energy into it; don’t be afraid to press harder; use both hands together,” she would instruct in her thick Swedish accent. She would tell me to visualize the Rosicrucian cross, with the rose in the intersection of the horizontal and vertical beams that was at her bedside. I would hold her feet with both hands trying to do what she said, and we were silent. This was my first teaching in how to touch, an introduction to the fundamental elements necessary for a healing presence. Be quiet inside, feel, and reside in something larger than yourself.

THE FRIEND

Around the time of my encounter at Dog Creek, another incident occurred that brought me closer to that something that was larger than me and furthered my tangled initiation into the mystery of Spirit, life, and death. Unexpectedly, I developed a severe ear infection and was sent home from school. I set out on my own to walk the few blocks to my house. This now seems like a time in some forgotten past when you could comfortably send your child home alone, even with a painful earache. However, I also lived on a military base in the South, ironically one of the safest places for a child to live and roam at the time.

Every few steps it felt as if a hot poker was being pushed through my eardrum into the center of my head. I would contort from the blistering pain, a shudder running through the length of my body. It seemed some imponderable beast was appropriating my body and consciousness, grabbing me by the head and shaking me as if to snap my neck. My vision narrowed; everything was pervaded by a bleached whiteness. I stumbled forward. Looking back I can see that this was the moment that I realized that this life I was living was my life. And it was like cold water thrown in my face.

I’m sure that if an adult were present I would have cried; I would have sought some measure of comfort. But with no one to reach out to I retreated into a deep place within myself. This was a previously unknown space of solace that grew each time I visited it, so when the pain returned I sought refuge in this vast quietude that was commensurate with all that might be asked of it. I was shunted into a level of consciousness where an accepting, detached observer began to take shape. It was like a friend who appeared to help me as I navigated myself home through the consuming waves of pain.

This was the beginning of my relationship with this state, which I named the Friend, and each time I have returned to it over the course of my life, I have become increasingly confident in its presence. Speaking of this state as if it is a friend is a way of representing it as an intimate spiritual shelter, an original dwelling place that is comforting, safe, loving, and wise. This is not shelter as a place of denial or hiding, or a fantasy friend, but an internalized awareness that sees with a spiritual clarity. In various traditions this state of consciousness is referred to as the witness, the observer, conscience, the comforter, a refuge, a metaperspective, an awareness free from fear. It’s a felt state for which relaxation, alertness, and inclusivity are the foundations. At the time, however, I simply knew it as a place that comforted me in my misery.

As I continued toward my house the light became increasingly stark, an appalling transparency that left no place to hide. Objects appeared in clear profile without history or any kind of reckoning at all. The typical descriptors of the objects that were assigned to my everyday life—sidewalks, street signs, telephone poles, trees—were inaccessible in this state. Everything was distilled into a simple accord by the stabbing pain. At the same time the Friend, both intimate and detached, could see everything without conveying any particular significance to any of it. A particular perception arose that did not have the narrative thread that normally assigned the customary order and meaning to my living. I was in pain. I was vividly awake. My attention was bare, unadorned.

Is this what it meant to be alive, to live a life fully in every moment? Is this what the carvings of wrathful deities in dimly lit temples in the Himalayas symbolized? Or was I dissociating? Had I left my body to cope with the seemingly interminable pain? Is an awakening a painful birth into a different body? Is suffering a country that is necessary to cross for self-realization? How vast the mystery; how complex to hold all this.

That evening I spiked a temperature. In a restless sleep I dreamt of being escorted through an original darkness by a procession of cloaked monks who repeated a low guttural chant as they walked through a mountain pass that held ancient imprints of shells and fish while pictographs sketched on the limestone watched silently. The penitents bore torches through the dark narrow passages casting primeval shadows on the facing walls. On their bodies were garments sewn of animal hides, adorned with feathers and bone. Their skin was painted and they had necklaces composed of teeth, beads, and seeds. I was placed next to a personage in an elaborate palanquin that was held aloft on the shoulders of minders who moved as one to the beat of a drum.

My mother would rouse me from this night journey and take my temperature and give me a dark, thick, lukewarm tea that my grandmother fashioned from the herbs and salts she was taught to use as a child. Warm drops of olive oil and crushed pepper and garlic wrapped in cotton were placed in my ear. I would fall back into my uneasy sleep, returning to the company of the steadily moving supplicants as if they were taken by a great river. The travelers progressed gradually toward a thin gray line of daybreak that slowly swelled into a uterine reef throwing off a light from a far off world.

Threads and tatters of this dream live with me to this day, invoking a journey that is inherently purposeful but hazy in objective. Being part of an assembly of pilgrims moving through dark narrow passages does not have me question if this is suitable company or a true direction, but invokes the question of how to be on this journey. As Epictetus said, "First, say to yourself what would you be; and then do what you have to do." This dream reminds me to ask daily, What is the dream that I am presently living and how do I choose to be in it? Or, How must I be to live in an entirely different dream? This question of how to be must be answered in our living presence as it's reflected in our gestures, carriage, utterances, and the collecting and expansion of our life force. Ask, What am I choosing to embody and how can I do this? This awareness gives rise to choices that reveal worlds of both light and shadow, a step into creation and destruction, completing something to begin something. To what end, who knows?

The next morning I began to hallucinate. A chronic, low-grade fever and a deep fatigue had replaced the pain. I was listless on the fold-out couch that was my bed, watching the trees as they flared and listed in the wind and became furious ogres beating wildly on the windows as if to gain entrance. The design on the curtains morphed into turtles and outsized bugs, swallows with wings pointed like daggers moving shadowlike against the wall, and serpents that coiled and twisted in menacing helices.

The world became a wave of pulsations, everything stretched and blurred as though liquefied. I was curious but not afraid. The images and events were clear, well outlined, but the narrative was fugitive; coherence was present while the axis of meaning was absent. Again it was a directness that was comforting and kindly in its simplicity. There was no story about it; nor was there a desire to compose one or a concern that something was missing. This convened a great spaciousness and peace within me; the warmth of my breath braiding a link between my sweat-soaked sheets and the breeze from the open window. This became another form of the Friend, one which was not solely internal but inclusive of the world about me. Throughout this ordeal my grandmother would sit with me for a time, then disappear, and

then return. She would stroke my forehead with her broad hands, placing a cold towel on me, murmuring something I could never quite understand. In my house of pain she was a constant reminder that all would turn out okay.

This space seemed to have momentarily evaporated the distinctions between inner and outer, providing a trail of crumbs to follow into the inquiry of unexamined polarities: me and others, thinking and feeling, spirit and body, sensations and concepts, and so forth. This entire experience couldn't be easily distilled into an insight or lesson; it simply perseveres as a lingering affect. It's akin to someone who grew up living next to a river and then moved away. Regardless of where this person now lives, when they slow down and become quiet they can still hear the sounds of that river. And the embodied memory of those sounds can recreate in them a feeling of wellbeing, of the rightness of things.

This experience revealed a state that had a self-possessed response to struggle and adversity instead of one of panic and anxiety. At a young age I was shown a way that was not limited by my conditioned personality. This left an enduring mark on me. I wanted to know how to get back to that place. It was a longing for the Friend.

I once heard Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a meditation master, speak about these kinds of situations as "pouring gasoline on a fire." Later I found out that Tibetan Buddhism referred to it as "adding wood to the fire." I imagine Trungpa adapted this phrase for a Western audience, as he often did with Buddhist teachings, without compromising the essential meaning. When asked what it meant, he told the story of a monk who lived in a small flat in Oxford below a man who was a tap dancer, and whenever this man practiced his tap dancing, the monk would sit in meditation. "That's throwing gasoline on the fire," Trungpa said, his eyes shining with glee.

This earache became a cornerstone for the practice of using difficult situations to cultivate an awakened state. Back then I had no training to invoke this state of mind, so this didn't happen overnight, and I'm still not free of my reactions to difficulties. But over time I have come to have confidence in the wisdom of using breakdowns to expand awareness and therefore my choices. Instead of trying to avoid, deny, or fight the experiences that throw me into fear, anger, or contraction, I see now that I can face them and work with them directly, using them like I would someone tap dancing on the floor above me while I try to quiet my body and thoughts.

In aikido we say that the solution to the problem may be in the problem itself. The term is irimi, which means "enter"—to enter into the heart of the conflict to find a resolution. This is the recognition that the causes that trigger us into a reactive state do not go away, they are what they are, the world is always present with its dilemmas and conundrums, and our reactions to them can be all consuming. When we become curious about the nature of our reactions instead of trying to change the cause we're doing an irimi move.

We also say in aikido that the uke (attacker) is never wrong. In other words, we don't try to change others because of our reaction to them. But we train to observe our reaction and move into the attack in an open, present way. This gives us the opportunity to increase our awareness of how we respond under pressure and to develop an ability to deal with ourselves and others in a nonreactive, unharmful way. This moves us from trying to change the "other," or the cause of our upset, to being responsible for our automatic, historical way of reacting when we feel threatened. This opens the possibility to discover within ourselves the Friend, or the field of consciousness that has the spaciousness to include both the causes and effects that are a part of us. To be clear, this is easy to say but difficult to live, and I am reminded daily that this is still cooking in me, and I expect it to be a lifelong challenge.

It was pointed out to me that someone else could have taken this painful experience and vowed to become an allopathic doctor on the quest for curing people with conventional medicine. And though it did lead me to study and practice various healing modalities, it more profoundly opened up my curiosity and longing to embrace the possibilities and mysteries of life and to discover how to draw from this life energy and give back to it.

Is it vulnerability that opens the gate to the sacred?

I have no desire to return to the concentrated pain to gain more insight or to duplicate the experience. However, neither am I repulsed by it nor necessarily grateful for it. It was simply the impetus that provoked me into awakening from my previously unaware state, as if I were sleeping and someone nudged me to wake up. I've come to recognize that, however fleeting, these challenging experiences become shards of light on a vast, tumultuous ocean reminding me that it's possible to experience life from an expanded, inclusive state.

It was almost six years later when I experienced once again the wisdom of the body and its ability to connect us to a greater awareness.

EMBODYING THE PRACTICE

I was twelve years old when my mother put me in judo classes at the advice of a vice principal who told her it would keep me from fighting. He gave her this counsel when she came to his office to take me home after a scrap with a fellow student. This was not the first time that she had to come to school to pick me up because of these rows, and she wasn't happy about it. While she did not understand how learning a martial art would keep me from fighting, the vice principal insisted that it would give me discipline and an outlet for my energies.

My father, a warrant officer in the navy, was at sea and not to return for six months (that was my good fortune), and she was at the end of her patience with my delinquency, so she took his advice and enrolled me in a judo class on base. My protests that I was not the aggressor or even looking for a fight but merely defending myself found no purchase in her. Almost every day I walked to school in dread. I was regularly the new kid in class since we moved so often, and I would routinely have to endure catcalls and taunts in the first weeks of assimilating into a new school culture. But when the name-calling turned into shoves and fists, I would push back or start swinging myself.

My mother accused me of being a bully, but basically I was afraid. At some point I could no longer tolerate being called a sissy or some other derogatory name when I didn't respond to a physical attack, and a core survival strategy sent me flailing into battle. In my playground scraps there had been torn shirts and cut lips and bloody noses, but none of this led to permanent grudges. In the complex way that young working class males bonded, my tormentors and I actually became closer once we engaged with our fists. I also believe that part of this calculus of bonding was an undisciplined fury that would unexpectedly take me over, and it had the effect of creating enough respect in others that they would not provoke it again. This was not respect as a virtue but a fear that they would become the target of my unhinged adolescent mayhem. It wasn't that I wanted to fight or that I was good at it, since it could lead me to being wholeheartedly trounced, but it was something that happened so fast, I never felt I had a choice.

I can say now, without hesitation, that the path of aikido and meditation helped heal this rage that was a through line from the generations of men in my family transmitted directly to me. I was always afraid that I would pass it on to my sons, but I've been deeply relieved not to see it in them.

On the day of my first judo class, my mother and I step through the entrance of a World War II airplane hangar that has been converted into the base gymnasium. I'm dumbstruck by the sheer size of the building and the pandemonium roaring through it. It's a cavernous facility that houses the sports and recreational activities for the military personnel and their families. Three stories high, it could easily accommodate a block of housing projects. There are four basketball games in progress, a clutch of volleyball and badminton tournaments, a gymnastic meet, and boxing rings, all with their own cheering sections, referees blowing whistles, and officials holding up numbered cards.

I’m shaken out of my overwhelm by my mother nudging me forward, “Over there,” she says. We walk to a far corner where a knot of men in white uniforms are grappling on a worn wrestling mat. No bleachers, fans, referees, scoreboards, or even shoes, just men throwing each other over their hips or sweeping their feet from under them. The noise recedes as I stand at the edge of the mat mesmerized. Two players grab each other by the lapels of their white gi jacket, shuffle around feeling for something that is obscured from me, and then one hoists the other on his hip and throws him with skillful nonchalance to the mat. The person who was just thrown springs to his feet with a smile on his face, grabs his partner, and executes the same moves. A cascading waterfall. Simple. Effortless. Spectacular. This isn’t fighting; it’s grace. A choreographed prayer of dignity and elegance. I want to take a body’s weight and deliver it to gravity; I want the surrender of that falling and the resurrection that follows. There is no thought whatsoever of how I could use this to defend myself or to triumph in a confrontation. I only want my body to shape aggression into poetry with another.

When I sat on the mat for that first class, lined up in a single row with the other participants, all else in that vast space faded into the background. It was like sitting on a front pew at the Vatican. We bowed solemnly to a photo of an older Japanese man and then to the teacher, whom I was told to call sensei, which left me perplexed until I later found out it meant “teacher” in Japanese. Soon after I learned that the photo of the old man in the front was the founder of judo, Kano Jigoro Shihan. This was far distant from any of the other sports I had played. There was no cheering or rooting for one person or team or shouting of any type at all, only a focused intent that came from deep within oneself and connected you to your partner. Even though there was nothing particularly aerobic about the practice, I would sweat with intensity and concentration.

Remembering this hulking, boisterous airplane hangar as my first dojo I’m inexplicably recalling the countless dojos I’ve trained in over the past fifty years in over a dozen countries. They’ve ranged from the immaculate,

meticulously handcrafted dojos in Japan, to converted chicken sheds in rural Canada, stone rooms in Greece, corporate board rooms in New York City, under a shade tree in Ethiopia, along with the innumerable standard dojos at strip malls, re-furnished store fronts, and dedicated dojos in stand-alone buildings. These were dojos whose surfaces ranged from fiber tatami mats to tire filings under canvas, straw mattresses, stretched vinyl, and worn blankets over a hardpan of baked earth.

There were dojos dedicated to ancient fighting arts that had an austere formality that one finds in the archives of prestigious universities. Others were dojos never publicly advertised but passed from person to person if you were found suitable. These were filled with those in the profession of arms: special forces operators, secret service agents, law enforcement officers, bodyguards, bouncers, all looking to learn and test themselves. In the small changing rooms you could hear the sound of Velcro and buckles being released as handguns and knives were being unstrapped from waist and ankle holsters.

While I thoroughly enjoyed the classes taught by the young marines and sailors who brought back the martial arts from Japan, they were largely lessons in the physics of mechanical leverage, joint manipulation, and pain compliance in a bubbling soup of testosterone. There was no talk of ki, martial spirit, or presence. I discovered that what looked so effortless was quite difficult and provided no immediate gratification, as it was only sincere practice of endless and often boring repetition of technique that created minimal competence.

One of the things I’ve learned in dojos and sports is that attentive recurrent practice at some activity or task will reveal universes of insight, but more importantly it will insert skillful action and daring into our tissue and marrow; that is, we will embody what we’ve been practicing. Practice is how ideas become action. Of course one has to pass through the gate of

commitment to the practice, which is comprised of one's conditioned responses to training pressures including answering questions such as, "Why are you doing this? Why not just stop and hang out with your friends?"; figuring out what genuinely matters to you; letting go of the old and surrendering to the new; then always returning back to practice, not just at certain times, but whenever we can remember to follow our passion and to love our life.

The lesson is that practice makes us different actors in the world, and it teaches us how to let the world act on us. Aristotle allegedly said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit." This is a lesson that is so obvious in the martial arts and sports, since we're always practicing, that it's hardly mentioned. We can overlook that training through the body can also serve us in domains apart from mastering an irimi nage (entering throw) in aikido, a golf swing, or a tennis backhand. In other words it's a basic ontological principle that practicing with intent is what transforms us. For example, we can practice patience, compassionate listening, making clear boundaries, and so forth as well as a properly executed kote gaeshi (wrist-turning throw) or tennis serve. Navigating the path, the journey of awakening, is the practice of embodying the path. The path teaches the path. Otherwise it and all other things stay at the conceptual stage debated in academic and intellectual circles instead of becoming embodied, and therefore part of who we are as actions and behaviors.

An early lesson in the inviolate power of practice was gifted to me early on in my judo training. I was riding my bike into town from the base housing with a neighbor kid who called himself J. B. Taking a short cut through a patch of woods, we ran into three kids from school. They stopped us and one of them demanded that J. B. pay him the money he owed him, and a heated argument ensued. J. B. said he would pay later, and he began to ride off when one of the kids pushed him hard, sending him and his bike skidding to the ground. I knew that J. B. had a reputation for not keeping his word, for taking what wasn't his, and the other kid's anger was probably

justified. J. B. had borrowed a baseball mitt from me that was yet to be returned, and he wasn't beyond extorting the younger kid's milk money at school. It crossed my mind that he was just getting what he deserved, but when he stood up the other kid hit him, I shouted, "That's enough!"

This kid glared at me, his fists tightly balled, cautioning me to stay back. I remained silent, not knowing exactly what to do. I could feel myself getting hot, my breath tight in my chest. I was alert for what might happen next, while a part of me felt a surge of anger toward J. B. for getting me into this. But he looked so helpless with dirt and tears streaming down his face that I was moved to help him. As I stepped forward to pick him up, the same kid grabbed me by the shirt with both hands and started to push me back. Unexpectedly the blanket of self-consciousness disappeared and my practices took over. Without thinking, I turned my hips into him and threw him over my leg in a yama arashi (a hip throw)—a move we'd been practicing relentlessly for months.

I wasn't trying to defend myself, to hurt him, or to really do anything at all. He grabbed me exactly as my partner would have if we had been practicing in the dojo, and I simply responded, or rather my embodied practices responded. In actuality there was no "I" who made a willful decision to execute the throw. A thunderous silence roared over us. We were all dumbfounded. What was different from the dojo was that the kid didn't know how to fall and he landed in a crumpled heap. I could see that he had blood on his arm where he had fallen on the rough ground. He looked up at me with eyes as large as saucers. An electric current had galvanized on the edges of my skin, and I seesawed between the very tangible and the ephemeral.

The three boys slowly drifted away as though further contact would result in a grave disease. The hierarchy on the food chain had abruptly shifted, and I suddenly found myself above the plate. J. B. and I slowly began to

walk our bicycles to town in silence. My breath seemed to be caught high on the inside of my ribs; everything brimmed with an indeterminate brightness. J. B. had quit crying, and he was wiping his nose with his arm. As we turned into the main street he shrugged, muttering something like "Thanks." I shrugged back, not knowing what to say.

This was a profound lesson in how embodiment is cultivated through practice, but at that time it was simply what spontaneously emerged to meet the moment. It's this notion of practicing a skill, a character virtue, or a leadership or spiritual principle through the body versus cognitively understanding it that has kept me curious and engaged throughout a lifetime —on the mat, in practices of everyday life, and in my teaching. "Keep practicing" was my teachers' litany if I ever became discouraged or frustrated. This meant more time in the dojo or on the sitting cushion and an ongoing awareness as I moved through my daily activities. Just as we can improve a dance step on the dance floor or a backhand on the tennis court through physical repetition, we can also embody relational, emotional, social, and spiritual skills through somatic practices.

When I was studying in Japan, a group of Western students would gather at the end of the day over a bowl of noodles and sushi and tell stories about their training. Often these were highly charged testosterone discussions about what worked, what didn't work, who could do what better than the other, or who would be victorious in a match. One evening a young man from New Guinea who was usually quiet during these exchanges spoke out: "In my country we have a proverb that says, 'Knowledge is only a rumor until it's in the muscle.'" We all fell silent for a moment to let that metabolize in us. I'm still digesting it. Knowledge, in whatever domain, becomes apparent and operational when we see it in action; it is then that it is embodied.

This is one of the invaluable lessons I learned in sports and dojo life. Practice even when you've reached a plateau, practice when you're bored, practice when you've convinced yourself you're wasting your time. It's not rocket science, but to evolve, modify, and transform ourselves, it's necessary to practice. It's not uncommon that when a visitor comes to the dojo at the end of practice they might say something like, "I don't know if I can train here because these moves look so difficult." It takes them a moment to understand that it's not expected that one arrives already fully trained, but that to be trained, to learn how to do the moves, is exactly the reason why they're there.

I use this example to underscore the notion that practice is a fundamental distinction in the dojo, and it opens us up to the possibility of being lifelong learners. To cultivate the self, to be an exceptional leader, it's important to practice. Thus it's crucial that we put aside any pretense or anxiety about being a beginner. In the dojo it's all we do—practice, practice, practice—and it assists us in embodying a skill and trusting that we can be learners throughout our lives. A friend of mine, who recently died, was familiar with dojo life, and she practiced throughout her dying process, transforming herself in the last hours of her life. It was extraordinarily moving; a gift to all who were there.

Those first judo teachers that taught me how to fall properly, which was 50 percent of the practice, simply grabbed me by the sleeve, swept my feet from under me, and scrutinized me as I lay sprawled at their feet. "Yeah, not bad, relax more," they would say. As soon as I stood up they would throw me again and say the same thing or "That's better" or "No! Never ever do that!" but I was never sure what that was. So I learned to watch carefully, and my body slowly transformed from a hard-edged square to an octagon to a hexagon and finally to a circle that was supple and at the same time held a reliable form. These various instructors were like stonemasons, tenacious, pragmatic men who readily leaned into the work at hand, which was teaching a bunch of edgy adolescent boys how to properly execute judo

techniques. It was an initiation in cooperation, learning, and a 1950s ethos of masculinity as invulnerability.

There was no hand-holding or time for sympathy if you were hurt. I saw more than one novitiate, me included, with jaws biting down hard, chins quivering to hold back tears after an especially hard throw or joint pin or public criticism. Men don't cry and warriors are impervious to pain, and that message was enforced by a merciless pounding. This, of course, was the well-established male norm in the broader culture, and it was ceaselessly reinforced in the dojo. Hanging outside the dojo after class these instructors would incessantly punch us or put us into brain-numbing headlocks while their unfiltered Camels dangled from their mouths, their hair lacquered in place by Royal Crown pomade, comb tracks straight as bean strings. To this day the acerbic mix of cheap cologne, sweat, and tobacco remains with me as a warning signal that some level of harassment is nearby, and it's best to stay vigilant. They weren't necessarily mean, but they were rough, unmannered men whose hands felt like bark; they pushed us around as if it were their duty, a homoerotic ritual masquerading as what it meant to be a man. A long way from my grandmother's teaching, but looking back I can see that this was their way of acting out their specific brand of World War II PTSD.

To my mother's relief my altercations at school mysteriously ended soon after I began classes. It certainly wasn't because of a reputation I might have earned as a judoka, because no one knew I was taking the classes, and I certainly hadn't mastered any fighting skills. In fact my limitations as a fighter had become even more apparent to me. I did notice, however, that I was less reactive to the mocks of my antagonists, and they now seemed equally indifferent to me. The only thing I could think of was that I would practice the widespread, rolling gait of someone keeping their balance on a ship's deck pitching in high seas, mimicking one of my instructors.

In any case, my mother was a convert and the next time we moved, she immediately enrolled me in another dojo. I was happy for this as it gave me an instant community, which was always an issue as my father was constantly reassigned to a different port. We would move once a year, occasionally twice, and dojo life became a home away from home.

It was at a new dojo that was off base where I reconnected with the mystery and power of energy, or ki as it is called in Japanese. This dojo was in one of those military towns that accumulates bars, tattoo parlors, diners, uniform shops, and used car lots. It was in a converted Quonset hut and George Hirata, a tree trunk of a man, ran it. Sensei Hirata was not just the difference of a degree but the difference of an order from my former instructors. They taught technique; he embodied the ground out of which technique emerged. If the instructors were a doorway to a new world, he was the abundance of that world. He had an air of samurai antiquity about him that was at odds with an easy, deep-seated delight that illuminated his broad face. He was so available to laughter and joy that you could imagine him juggling balls in a clown suit at a child's birthday party. This is not to say he was a trivial man, far from it, but rather someone who was indelibly marked by a robust connection to the ironies and joys of life. It was as if he was assigned the task of being in wonder of it all.

He was in no way mindless but rather breathtakingly powerful and all-encompassing. When he threw you it was as if you were being snatched by a rogue wave and thrown within an inch of your life. His throws were uncompromising; terrible in their fierceness and powered by a swift unmitigated force that utterly lacked any hesitation whatsoever. Yet even as he dashed me on the mat as if I were some flotsam in a furious storm, I was never hurt by him and went away feeling blessed by the power that roared through him. I can see now that Sensei Hirata was pivotal in demonstrating to me that power is not brute force. It's not power over, it's power with; power commanded by care. Rainer Maria Rilke's words spoke to this power when he said, "Whoever was beaten by this Angel . . . went away proud and

strengthened and great from that harsh hand, that kneaded him as if to change his shape.”

Before class he would sit in front of us like a gigantic oak door, and all the power in the room flowed toward him like water to a drain and then flowed back into the room. He generated something that could not be defined by ordinary means. There was a grace about him like that of a poisonous snake handler who is never bit. His careful attention to what was happening in the dojo was a demonstration of love in action. When he bowed to the kamiza (the altar at the head of the dojo), it was like the sixteenth century feudal Lord Hideyoshi supplicating to the mighty Kami Amaterasu.

Sensei Hirata was the embodiment of a fierce kindness that revealed the rigor of presence. It was clear that his power didn’t come from size or strength. While he loomed as a very large presence in my mind, he was actually small in height and certainly without the muscles that my previous instructors flexed from their time lifting weights. His power came from an indeterminate source that was invisible yet at the same time imminently dangerous in its capacity to wreak havoc in a martial sense. I wanted what he had; this undefinable presence that was a powerful extended force outward and a deep quiet within.

Curiously, Sensei Hirata also introduced me to meditation. At the beginning and end of every class he would have us sit quietly in the seiza position, with our lower legs folded under our hips and our backs straight, and instruct us to count our breaths from one to ten and then start all over again. If we lost count, we had to go back and start at one again, which in my case was all the time. In the beginning I wandered around the shifting landscapes of my mind, drifting in and out of focus, mostly just not being there. I might count up to three or four breaths and then vanish into an elusive dreamlike state. I didn’t know where I went other than being in some variation of a waking coma. He said nothing about what this had to do with learning judo;

it was simply part of dojo etiquette, like bowing every time you stepped on and off the mat.

This instruction to be still radically changed the meditation practice for me. Counting breaths had become an analytical mental exercise. It quickly became the numbers I was attending to and not the breath itself or the sensation of the breath. To be still required me to feel. What once seemed categorically defined, like painting by the numbers, was now very fluid. When I made the effort to be still I noticed how I wasn't still at all, and while counting breaths was as elusive as ever, it was much more enticing and adventurous to be in the inquiry of stillness. It was sensual, alive, immediate. In fact I noticed that even when I held my body still, which meant not looking around or even blinking, there was movement somewhere—the breath, an itch on my cheek, a spiking pain in my knee, a pulse somewhere between my spine and the back of my heart and, of course, the endless torrent of chatter in my head. It was like sitting still in a boat on the ocean: still, yet moving. It was actually both a set form and fluidity, like judo itself. As the Buddhists texts say, "Form is formless, and formlessness is form." Later I thought stir was the right word, as I was always stirred by something.

During a meditation before class one Saturday morning, something occurred that further opened me to a larger, more spacious world with its own unique, energy signature. The sun slanted through the windows of the rusty Quonset hut, laying bars of light on the tatami mat. Motes drifted in and out of the oblique rays as a quiet fell on the room. It was as if we fell into a stillness with the candle flame on the kamiza holding steady on its wick, a cherry blossom branch balanced in an impeccable arc in its vase, and the black sparse strokes of calligraphy all placed faultlessly on the simple altar. I felt as if I were seeing these objects for the first time.

I don’t know if I was still, and I certainly wasn’t counting my breaths, but in an instant it seemed as if everything in the dojo was sewn together by an invisible thread. There was a hum that washed over me; an energetic pulse was sending invisible waves to the very edge of the dojo and beyond. No thought, no considering, no time; only electromagnetic oscillations forming and collapsing from some immense nothingness. Stillness yes. Movement yes. I felt porous, as if the morning sun was pouring through me, yet I was as substantial as the floor under my legs. There was more space inside me than I’d ever felt, a space that seemed to expand the walls of the dojo and join the far beyond.

Behind us Sensei Hirata growled something that sounded like approval. When he turned and bowed into the class the mood shifted, but I was informed by this visitation throughout the morning’s training. There was a beneficence of ease that permeated my movements, and I felt the entire space as a single living membrane. It was as if we were doing only one thing, even though we were engaged in multiple moves and roles.

What was that one thing? Did the other kids in the class notice it? If I were to ask them if they felt what I felt, how would I describe it? I knew something was different, and as transient as it was how did it ignite such a deep remembrance in me? My thoughts were searching for something, but I only wanted to return to that deep well of connection and harmony. This one thing emanated from my grandmother and Sensei Hirata, as though it was a generator within them that could turn up this resonance at will. While I wanted to learn judo, what I really wanted was what this feeling that seemed so close . . . and so distant.

In my last class with Sensei Hirata, I told him we would be moving, and I wouldn’t see him again. I bowed and said thank you, but before I could turn away he put a hand on my shoulder. His touch was similar to his throws: indistinguishable from an unexpected breeze, yet mightily affecting your

balance. He said, “It seems that we are in the world, but the world is inside of us. It’s a place both hard and fragile; take the road in between. Keep practicing, you’ll find it.”

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Dojo in Japanese means “place of training” or a “place of the Way.” It’s said that it comes from the Sanskrit word Bodhidharma, meaning “place of awakening.” A dojo in its broadest sense is not made of wood, plaster board, bricks, or fiber but is a declaration one makes about a place or state of being. This could be a grove of trees, a stone outcropping, a mountain, a conversation, a sitting room, or an ordinary moment of inquiry. As I write this we have begun having aikido classes outside on a cleared field, wearing masks and social distancing, thanks to Covid-19. Before this we were doing virtual classes online, which was challenging; both places are dojos. My children and I had a practice when they were growing up, which continues to this day, in which I would say, “Let’s have a talk,” and they would ask, “Is this a dojo conversation?” If I said yes, they knew there was something to be learned in our talk, for them and for me, and we would organize ourselves in respect to the importance of the conversation. Now that they’re grown we simply say, “Let’s have a dojo talk.” A friend of mine who had spent time in prison would bow to his cell when he entered it and bow to it again when he left it; just as we do when we enter and leave the dojo.

These are all dojos if we declare them to be so. The distinction “dojo” becomes operational in that we shape ourselves to listen respectfully, maintain the dignity of all involved, be available to learn, act with compassion and rigor, practice being present, leave our egos at the door, and open to possibility. The dojo, as a place of awakening, is an offer to connect to something much larger than oneself. Over these fifty years of

practicing in dojos, I've come to recognize that the sensei is the rudder that helps navigate through the challenging and transformative gates of awakening. Teacher and dojo: the presence of one automatically invokes the other. The teacher can be a collective of teachers, and the dojo always has a collective of partners with whom we train to wake up.

Together the teacher and the dojo create the alchemy necessary for knowledge to be embodied, rather than just considered intellectually, and ultimately we are led to discover both of them inside of us. Training at a physical dojo, whatever your art, is a place to discover the inner teacher. During a conversation about the possibility of aikido leading to a spiritual liberation, Sensei Saotome, my aikido teacher, tapped my chest saying, Jiri shin kore dojo, reminding me that the dojo is in the sacred heart. In the many conversations I've had with my teachers about being on a path, they've invariably shared the same sentiment: "Look inside. What you seek is inside you."

A BROKEN LEG NOT A BROKEN SPIRIT

I was one month shy of fifteen years old and playing in a youth baseball league and in an egregious moment of adolescent overreach, I tried to steal home from third base. I slammed into the catcher at full speed, which was the equivalent of running into a brick wall. He later became the starting fullback for the UCLA national championship football team, and when I would see tacklers bounce off of him, it brought back memories of the "impact moment" that changed my life. It was extraordinarily painful, and I dragged myself off the field without saying a word while my knee swelled to the size of a coconut.

By the time I reached home it was well after dark and it wasn't until the next day that I was admitted to the naval hospital where they aspirated the joint, set the bone without anesthesia, and put it in a hip-to-ankle cast. In allegiance to the code of "being a man," which I had learned thoroughly from my judo instructors, I swallowed the pain and went through all the procedures without complaint. I was rewarded with pats on the back and comments like "Way to be strong," "You handled it like a man," and "Good grit." Inside I felt alone, bereft, and unsure of how I would come through this. I knew, even as an adolescent, that the life I was dreaming of was going to go through a huge shift.

I spent three nights in the orthopedic ward being processed through various tests and operations. I was with young sailors and marines with a variety of injuries. One patient was in a full body cast that, except for small holes for tubes of various sizes, had only two openings: one for food going in by straw, one for waste going out; the rest was a mass of white plaster. As long as I was in the ward this man never had a visitor, and once I overheard a corpsmen tell a newly assigned nurse that he was there when he arrived six months ago and in that time he never saw a visitor.

I simply had no way to deal with the unimaginable life this man was living, to say nothing of the fact that he had been like this for over six months. I was unable—actually, more unwilling—to imagine his suffering; it was simply too painful. My level of maturity couldn't hold what his experience must have been like. I avoided looking at him and turned away when the other patients or hospital staff spoke about him. Yet in some ways his presence relieved me of my pain and anxiety.

Now I can forgive myself for completely discarding his humanity and not holding him with compassion, but at fourteen I was just trying to survive. In retrospect I think that I was in semishock from the pain of the fracture and just beginning to come to terms with the fact that what I imagined my future to be had instantly, and radically, changed. To be one bed away from this fully casted sailor was a stark revelation of what life could offer, and it was a shock to imagine his life. I could digest this terrible reality only in small bites. While there was no word for it back then, I can now say that I was deeply in trauma mode.

The cast was on my leg for over three months, and I was told that in addition to having a metal pin inserted in the joint, I would probably have to wear a leg brace for the rest of my life, and that I may have a limp. This was the end of a promising future as an athlete. It was sports that gave me the rewards of community, selfesteem, and success that would bring my

parents' (and the world's) approval. While all of my friends were on baseball diamonds and basketball courts and in swimming pools and dojos that summer, I was home, my leg raised in traction or hobbling around on crutches.

My mother put on her "let's keep a positive attitude" face, but I could see the concern in her pinched eyes. My father said little but his anxiety about having a son with a permanent disability was ever present in his loud silence. I was devastated. Every once in a while I would think of the sailor in the white cast and have a moment of respite from my distress, considering myself lucky compared to him. This effort to take the high ground to cope with loss didn't last long as the dream of becoming a star athlete was dissolving by the day and the vision of playing any sport at all or even to walk without a limp seemed unattainable. This was the let go, the surrender, and I had no way of knowing how to navigate it and no help.

I rarely had any visitors, and my family circled around me like I was an exotic animal that had been dropped unexpectedly on the living room couch. They would walk by and nod, give me a side eye glance, and ask if I had taken my meds or if I wanted some lunch. There were no conversations about what would happen when the cast came off, what the next medical step would be, how I would deal with the future, or simply how I was. Mostly I would go for hours without seeing anyone except for our dog who seemed to revel in being with me full time. I didn't question that my family cared, but they didn't have much experience in dealing with this kind of life-altering situation. To put it simply, they just didn't know what to do, and I didn't know what to ask for, so we all kind of muddled through. It was as if I had a contagious disease and was consigned to a bed until the doctors told us what to do, but for this situation, there were no doctors. I put on a brave face, but I felt like a liability.

In many ways this isolation and uncertainty resurrected the time eight years earlier when I had suffered from the debilitating ear infection, was forced inward due to the pain, and stumbled on the inner state of solace and intimacy that provided great comfort and that I called the Friend.

During the three months my leg was in a cast, I read voraciously, reflecting, daydreaming, but mostly being in silence. I can see now that during this time I returned to the inner dimension of the Friend, and my anxiety about what was next was considerably reduced. I was becoming intimate with a state of consciousness that seemed to be already extant in me. This haven of well-being was present without me having to work for it; it wasn't necessary for me to do anything to produce it. If I was simply still enough and sufficiently quiet, it was at hand.

In many ways I now refer to this time as my first meditation retreat: I had minimal contact with the world, I spent most of the time in silence, and I rediscovered an inner landscape that afforded me a sense of well-being, a refuge of peace. Yet this could have also been the perfect environment for an introvert, and I easily fell into just being with myself. Or was it this time of seclusion that embedded in me introvert traits? Or was I depressed, resigned to living a compromised life and retreating into a distant, dark space within myself? Or was this when I learned how to be with myself with all of its ups and downs? However you slice it, without me knowing it, the seeds of an inner life had landed on fertile ground. The vibration of consciousness I had been introduced to in those early adolescent times lit a fire in my imagination and has been cultivated and inspired by generous teachers. Beyond that it's all a mystery, and my apprehension of any of it falls radically short of any constructive understanding.

One day my grandmother visited and after listening to me in her comforting way she said, "You have to quit feeling sorry for yourself. This isn't you; you're stronger than this. It's your leg that's broken, not your spirit. Here,

read this." She handed me The Power of Positive Thinking by Norman Vincent Peale. Published in 1952, it advised its readers to employ a technique of "mind-emptying" at least twice a day in order to succeed in one's pursuits. I tried this with the hope that it would develop an inner power as it suggested, though I had no idea what that meant. In addition my grandmother regularly reminded me that, "Thoughts are things." She explained that if I thought negative thoughts, I would form negative habits, and if I thought positive thoughts I would develop positive habits: "Think positively about your life and you will have a positive life. If you lie around here moping all day you'll never get better. You'll only feel worse."

Since we moved once a year, sometimes twice a year, change wasn't necessarily new to me. Letting go of friends, places, and schools and moving into a new, unfamiliar environment had become normal. All the other kids who lived on base went through the same unending cycle of disruption. These transitions were initiated by the navy, and as a military family we complied. I followed and adapted. The notion of letting go of something was minimal, as was the need to let go into something. Did the transition require adapting? Absolutely, but it was a well-practiced drill with many known elements that diffused the cloud of uncertainty that I was now experiencing. I was following the path that all military kids went through; it was simply something we did, along with all the other families.

But the change I was going through with my fractured knee was not simply a transition of a different degree, but of a different kind. I had had a vision of a future as an athlete that promised meaning and opportunity. This had been supported by the culture's homage to the hero athlete, which my family and community encouraged. I had shown promise in baseball and football, and I was setting a course for my life that would position me to succeed in these sports, which is synonymous with succeeding at life. This had been liberating, filling me with the hope that comes from seeing a positive future. Now that was gone. What was before me was uncharted territory. Who would I be, what do I do with this feeling of dread, how do I give up this dream? A future that I had envisioned, committed to, and was

supported in had suddenly evaporated. It was a loss that left a vast empty space.

I was also leaving adolescence, which compounded this new world of uncertainty. I felt like the person waiting in the theater during intermission for the second act to begin when someone behind a door prop on the stage begins to knock incessantly, and no one comes to open the door or tells them to stop. Finally this person gets out of his seat, climbs on the stage, and opens the door, and at that very moment the second act begins. He is now part of the play although he has no script, no idea how to act or speak, and no clue what to do. That's what it felt like to me. A part of my life was ending, and I was uncertain about what to do or how to be in this new chapter. I was already mourning my old self and ill-equipped to lay it to its proper rest.

The space between the time the current shape of living ends and the next shape of living takes form is unbounded. Usually it's a new uncharted situation, and the typical landmarks or boundaries which we make meaning by are no longer in place. A change in job or profession, a sudden health issue, the kids moving away from home, a divorce, a climate crisis like fires or floods, or a health crisis like a fractured knee can throw us into a tailspin as we deal with a radical change from our usual assumptions about who we are or what the future is supposed to look like.

For most the unbounded space is either a place of creativity or of terror; for me it was the latter. In the unbounded space lies the potential for new eyes, seeing thing freshly, freeing us from our usual inherited constraints. But I wasn't mature enough to grasp the possibility of this evolutionary moment. Years later I returned to this time of my life when I read the insight of the poet John Keats: "and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement . . . I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable

reaching after fact or reason." Of course I didn't think of this then but in many forms this principle materializes again and again in much the same way that terra incognito appears on ancient maps, reminding us that we will first be required to be lost, to walk an unexplored territory, in order to discover the next, more awake, edition of ourselves.

When the cast was removed I went through a protocol of physical therapy, and the attending physician suggested I run and lift weights to strengthen the leg. Looking back to the late 1950s, it would seem contraindicated to run after such an injury, but no one questioned his advice so I began to run and started a strengthbuilding regime. In addition I read The Power of Positive Thinking in its entirety and took my grandmother's advice about thinking positive thoughts, which at this point mostly centered on giving thanks that I didn't have the same fate as the sailor in the body cast. It was a bromide, however fragile, that kept me from sinking.

That fall, in another new school, I joined the cross-country team and ran every day; I then started running to the restaurant I cleaned every morning and back home before going to school. In the beginning I wasn't exceptional at running, but I rejoiced in being able to fully use my body again, to return to being on a team, to belong to something. This led me to join the track team in the spring. I kept running and set school records in high school. I earned an athletic scholarship to college in track and field. I kept running and became an all-American in track and field as the leadoff runner in a 440-yard relay team that set a national collegiate record. I ran in the pre-Olympic and Central American Games in Mexico City where I tied in the 100-meter dash, took third in the 200-meter, and ran on the winning 400-meter relay team.

I don't tell this to be a tale of redemption or of overcoming obstacles or of exceptionalism but to illustrate again that my early experiences revealed to me that to come to a new level of skill, awareness, or transformation, there

was something I had to let go of, and there was something I had to let go into. I needed to surrender something and surrender into something. This theme has also appeared in the tens of thousands of people I've worked with and have taught over the years. I now consider that in order to discover the next awake version of myself, there will be something to release.

While the unbounded space can take many forms, it also travels along varying trajectories of time. Each stage of forming, unforming, and reforming often bleeds into the others, and each one may be a flash moment or an entire lifetime.

DOORWAY TO A MORE SPACIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

Because I was encouraged to play sports and practice martial arts from an early age, I was able to find a place of belonging on the playgrounds, fields, gyms, and dojos no matter where we lived. Whenever our family moved, I would enroll in a dojo and the sport that was in season. This gave me an instant community in which I would find a place among other young males. In these environments I discovered the undisputed importance of having a good coach or teacher; the joy of training hard with others; the challenge of constantly upgrading my performance; the fellowship of being part of a team; the critical importance of practice as a means to improve; and a deeply felt sense of accomplishment. I felt alive. I was electric with purpose. I discovered a deep longing in myself to find out what I was capable of and to go beyond myself, and these athletic endeavors delivered on this, in muscle and heart.

This longing led me to life lessons and into the direct, felt experience of living. In these arenas I felt on purpose. If there was ever any debate about what I could or could not do, it was simply a matter of putting it on the mat or the playing field to see what I could actually do and settle the matter. I would either perform as well as I could, and if I couldn’t do what I said, it was reflected back to me as all talk, no show.

Looking back I can also see that training in these activities helped process the trauma I experienced at home with my abusive father: instead of the stress hardening in my tissues, much of it moved through me in sweat, heat, and competitiveness. In addition, sports were a legitimate way to leave the house, affording me a reprieve from my father.

While I was healing from the fractured knee I received playing in the youth baseball league, I responded to an ad in a magazine for a Charles Atlas home study program that promised increased self-confidence and self-esteem and an inner power by developing a muscular body. I wasn't sure of the logic, but I was willing; and, of course, it was the norm among young men of my generation to be "well built" as shown by Charles Atlas posing in the ad. A graphic narrative dramatized Atlas, with his outsized physique, standing up to a bully who kicked sand on his girlfriend. He was confident and fearless and had the accepted "perfect" white male body of the times: broad shoulders, small waist, muscular arms, powerful thighs, a thick neck, and a head of full, dark hair glistening with pomade.

It looked promising to me and relevant to my goals of healing my knee and confidence. I sent away for his program, put together a set of weights made from coffee cans filled with cement, and bought elastic ties for isometric exercises that would enhance an "inner strength" as well as full-sized muscles. The phrase inner strength bounced around in my imagination without landing any place, but the combination of inner and strength captivated my adolescent mind, and I bookmarked it for further inquiry. It also resonated with many of the things that my grandmother taught me about the connection between my thoughts and my behaviors, what might be called the mind/body/spirit continuum.

During high school I ran on the varsity 440-yard relay team as the only sophomore among three seniors. At a team meeting the coach singled me out in front of the entire track squad and pointing his finger accusingly he

said, “Heckler, you’re the weak link on this team.” My cheeks burned, turning scarlet with shame. Squeezing back tears, I bowed my head wishing to disappear, but at the same time a voice ringing clear as a thunderclap said, “No one will ever say that to me again.” I don’t remember engaging my will to think this, but it was as if some subterranean part of me rose to the surface to declare a future that I was to live by.

What was this voice that lived within me? Modern psychology might say this was the psyche, as if it were something apart from the aliveness of my soma, discrete from the energetic current in my arms and legs, the nine pints of blood flowing twelve thousand miles daily (the distance from my front door to Beijing and back), in the network of sixty thousand miles of veins, arteries, and capillaries (over twice the circumference of the earth). Is this spirit, indistinguishable from the body, a unified expression of emotion, images, perception, feeling, thoughts, wisdom, and energy? Is this an intelligence amalgamating purpose with a fully lived life? Does pleasure have an intelligence?

As an athlete, I wasn’t necessarily a standout, but I was consistently good enough to make the first string on the various teams I played on and to win judo competitions here and there. Eventually I won an athletic scholarship to college, worked hard, and began competing on a national and international stage where it became obvious that while I had made the grade to compete at this level, those I ran against were thoroughbreds, which I clearly was not. These were athletes who went on to become Olympic and world champions many times over, as well as successful professional athletes. I had sufficient raw material, plus the drive to succeed, but it was like a determined saddle horse running against purebreds with racetrack pedigrees.

Yet, win or lose, I loved every minute of it. I discovered courage in challenging myself, friendships that would last a lifetime, and meaning in

being the best I could be. If I ran a 9.5 second 100-yard dash, I immediately asked myself what I had to do to run a 9.4. The exhaustion after a hard workout or race was exhilarating—my heart pounding like a drum, my breath acting with a will of its own, my legs trembling with energy—it was if my body became a sacred song, a church of celebration. I felt necessary, strong, and vital. There was potency and significance in my life.

This also brought me approval and recognition that I didn't get any other place. While I never felt fully safe at home I could rest in myself when I was using my body on the playing fields and dojos. This was not an abstract moral quality but something that was generated and cultivated by an empowering physical skill that was closely intertwined with the qualities of concentration, discipline, and an appetite to excel. I would run five miles round trip to my job cleaning a restaurant before school in the morning; I ran the streets at night setting the dogs in the neighborhood into a barking frenzy; and in the fall the sprinters and hurdlers would build endurance running on golf courses at dusk. We were a pack infused with hunger, a desire metabolized in our hearts to go beyond, a single body tirelessly pushing limits indeterminate in our youthful vigor.

The uncertainty I lived with at home was transformed into burning embers in my legs, great currents of life howling through my heaving breath, and curative sweat cascading off me. My stride was a poem that sparked a muscular imagination: effort and discipline crystallized into the joy of the race. I was neither running away from something nor running toward something; the run itself was the reward. I had a body that served me. It was the ground that organized inconsequence into purpose, a tool that served me in being fully expressed, and a faithful companion that responded to my will and desire. It assisted me in finding a place of belonging. Yet, at the same time, when I was injured I would feel betrayed by my body, as if a committed supporter suddenly withdrew their assistance.

In this way my body was an object, a tool that delivered all I asked of it. It was something apart from me that I could discipline and impress my will on; it did my bidding as would a faithful underling. This is commensurate to Cartesian thought that posits the body as an object separate from self, emotions, and spirit. When Descartes declared Cogito, ergo sum—"I think therefore I am"—in the seventeenth century he created the mind/body split in a single cut by placing rational thought over the intelligence of feeling, sensing, and spiritual longing. So when I saw my body as merely flesh and bones to train to accomplish my goals it was comparable to the Western rationalistic context of the body.

This body tool, which I held separate from mind and spirit, nonetheless ignited my desire for a deeper self-knowing. In the words of Walt Whitman it revealed my yearning as "cunning in tendon and nerve." This longing for self-knowing turned me toward my interior life of images, moods, perceptions, feelings, and reflections that were instrumental in forming a way to go forward. This was a pivotal change in my life as I began to look beyond the normal channels to maximize who I was as an athlete and as a person. I don't remember making a willful, conscious choice to discover and cultivate an inner life, but it appeared as an irresistible, centripetal force guiding me toward the center of my rib cage; the cave of the heart that was a sanctuary and a light. It was as though I was mysteriously pulled toward an undiscovered wilderness within me.

In the beginning it was the promise of discovering something that would help me succeed in my sport, but behind that was the pure excitement of lifting the veil to discover what the mystery revealed. At this stage the body was an object that allowed me to perform, but slowly I was beginning to see it as a doorway into a more spacious dimension of consciousness.

Was this unnamed draw inward the gravity of Spirit longing to be known? Is there a grand design that pulls seekers toward a greater awakening? Were

these the seeds, breaking through to consciousness, that were planted earlier by my grandmother? Was this the manifestation of my aspiration to understand the mystery of life embodied? These were the questions that were evoked, but the words of the Chinese poet Shiwu describe best where I ended up: "True happiness is right here, why chase empty names?"

STEPPING OUTSIDE THE SELF

Professor Li Li Ta was my Pakua and Taijiquan teacher during my mid-twenties. He was a recent immigrant from China, and he would teach a small group of us twice a week on a vacant tennis court, and every so often I would travel to Chinatown in San Francisco to another class he held in a park. He was a straightforward person with a quiet, persuasive demeanor and though he never spoke about it, I learned he was also an accomplished painter and calligrapher. I had a difficult time understanding his instructions, so I carefully watched his movements, which told stories of unlimited grace, balance, and focused power. His crooked nose looked like it had been broken before, and the scar that ran through his eyebrow was said to have been evidence that he had earned his fighting credentials on the back streets of Beijing. He moved like a smooth, deep, flowing river that could quickly turn into an explosive cataract.

Working with me one day he continually and effortlessly threw me off balance when I tried to grab or strike him. This wasn't particularly unusual, but there was a stepped-up severity to his throws and counters. He spent more time with me than usual, and his punches had more sting in them. When I tried to deflect his attacks, he easily pushed me away. Actually, it was more like bouncing off an oak tree. While I knew it was an honor to have this much personal teaching from him, I was edgy knowing he could be unpredictable. After telling me repeatedly to relax, he sighed deeply, took me by the arm, and guided me to the edge of the practice area.

Inexplicably, he began to tell me about an early Chinese painter named Wu Daozi. The segue from his martial arts critiques to the history of Chinese art was abrupt. I was bewildered but also vigilant in case he tried something while he had me cornered, like sweep my feet out from under me or strike me painfully in a nerve center, as he had done before. However, instead of attacking me, Professor Li Li Ta patiently explained to me about Wu Daozi, a Tang dynasty artist who is sometimes named as one of the great philosophers of China. According to the professor, Wu Daozi could paint images of the mythic rain-producing dragons that were so realistic that water poured from them. He could also paint one-hundred-foot scrolls in a single uninterrupted flow, draw perfect circles with his eyes closed, and make worlds emerge effortlessly from his brushstrokes.

As I was trying to find a connection between Taijiquan and this story of an ancient Chinese painter, the professor gripped my shoulder and said, “Listen. One day Wu Daozi began painting a landscape on the wall of the emperor’s palace. He started at one end and quickly moved down the wall, painting mountains and rivers and forests. When he came to the end, he painted a cave, stepped into it, and disappeared.” He held my gaze for a long moment, “Do you understand?”

I didn’t understand. I shook my head no. Professor Li Li Ta’s hand on my shoulder seemed to get heavier. He looked at me thoughtfully and said, “He disappeared, but the painting remained. Do you understand now?” I told him I wasn’t sure. He looked at me as a sympathetic teacher would look at a dull student. Then he nodded his head at some inner knowing and led me back into the practice area. He seemed sad. Patting my shoulders he said, “Then relax these,” and tapping my belly he added, “and breathe here.” Then he turned and walked away. He didn’t seem critical, but I had the feeling that some part of him was resigned to my ignorance.

Inexplicably the first thing that came to mind when he asked if I understood the meaning of Wu Daozi was a time five years earlier when I was on a night navigation exercise in the Marine Corps. I was the team leader of three other marines, and I managed to get us lost in a swamp where we were huddled together on a small rise just inches above the water. When a sergeant waded up to us and bellowed, “Found yourself lost?” (note that I’ve deleted his expletives here), I was momentarily baffled and amused by the contradiction of found and lost, then quickly forgot it as we humped out of the bog. But at the moment with Professor Li Li Ta it seemed random to have this memory surface and, of course, too weird to tell him. So I stored it away and didn’t recall it until years later. It took many years of practice, contemplation, and guidance to understand that what Professor Li Li Ta was pointing to was that in order to truly embody what he was teaching, I had to relax more. In order to relax, there was something that I had to give up, to relinquish. Ultimately that something was me, the self, the ego, my identity. I had to disappear into a cave. This meant I had to release a bodily shape that showed up as an attitude, a pattern of contractions, a set of historical practices, and a worldview that relied on effort and selfimportance. It was the “I” that I had to release into the cave. It was by losing myself that I would find myself.

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Much more recently, two separate but memorable events occurred that illustrated this need for letting go and for forming, unforming, and reforming oneself to move forward in one’s life. These two happenings were two decades apart and in entirely different con- texts, yet both offering embodied experiences of worlds beyond the personality.

A few years ago I was trekking in the Sacred Valley, a seventy mile narrow strip of land in the Peruvian Andes that runs roughly from the old imperial

capital of Cusco to the citadel of Machu Picchu, when I saw a large stone outcropping that was marked with the ash of burning palo santo and sage. It was an ancient Inca prayer site. I sat quietly for a while and then went to the stone, placing my hands and forehead on it, praying for the health of my children and grandchildren. Unexpectedly a voice within me said, “It’s no longer the time for you to ask. It’s now your time to just give.” And at that moment I was thrown away from that great stone. It was as if a skillfully executed aikido technique moved me; smoothly, powerfully, energetically. This was surprising, but not jarring; a confluence of the deep moment, sincere intent, and a receptivity to an ancient wisdom that persuaded me to continue on a path of letting go of what “I” wanted and put my intent into, or rather surrender into, where and how I could give. I thought of this as me being more generous on all levels.

The early Greeks had a word for this: ecstasis, meaning “stepping outside of yourself.” Western psychologists call this “ego death.” For years I swung between trying to be egoless, which was a futile ego experiment, and perfecting the form through organizing my will to accomplish a goal, which only cultivated a certain rigidity. What time, struggle, and bruises (both to my physical body and to my ego) revealed to me was that my personal will or intent was limited. Whatever was to be revealed or accomplished would not come to fruition by trying harder or by mental acrobatics but by a state of receptivity. The ancient Greeks had a unique way of expressing it: anamnesis, which literally means the “forgetting of the forgetting” and points to a persuasive state of remembering. Remembering not simply as an insight or a cognitive revelation but an embodied experience of a reality in which there is no inherent boundaries between perceiver and what is perceived.

What I came to realize was that I had to yield, to surrender, and allow myself to be taken over by an energy that was more expansive than my personal wishes, desires, and expectations, to receive through surrender what the circular tangle of thinking can never grasp. Or, in the words of Padmasambhava, the eighthcentury tantric teacher who brought Buddhism

to Tibet, when he commented in The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation, “When truly sought even the seeker cannot be found. Thereupon the goal of the seeking is attained, and the end of the search. At this point there is nothing more to be sought, and no need to seek anything.”

Is this what “finding yourself lost” means? Or when Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido, said, “True victory is victory over the self”?

Twenty years after my experience in the Sacred Valley of Peru, I was witness to a remarkable expression of transformation on my land in the coastal foothills of Northern California. I was walking the uphill pasture of the ranch, seeing if any new lambs had been born, when a boisterous eruption of starlings took f light from the eucalyptus grove by the spring. Instantly maneuvering into a single body they torqued and wheeled themselves into a spontaneous mutuality. Called murmurations, these enormous flocks execute breathtaking 180-degree changes, sweeping spirals, and extreme rolls at great speed in a muscular clairsentience that effortlessly stitches them into a communal body. I stood in awe as hundreds of these starlings clustered into a knotted ball, sheared into the sunset, reversed in a single iridescent cloud, then disappeared over the ridge. Sixty starlings were introduced to Central Park in Manhattan in 1890 by a quirky German immigrant whose self-proclaimed mission was to introduce every bird mentioned by Shakespeare into North America. There are now two hundred million of these thickset and pugnacious birds in the United States, and sometimes it seems that half of those live in the surrounding hills when they brutishly converge on my fruit trees in the spring.

My neighbor, who occasionally pastured his sheep in this field, shook his head incredulously and said, “I guess they know something we don’t.” I, too, was struck with the beauty and intelligence of their high-speed acrobatics. The moment felt sacred, weighty with mystery. The divine expressing itself as grace and intelligence. The starlings’ collective

acrobatics displayed the universal principles of movement, change, impermanence.

Yet what fully commanded me in this murmuration was again the reoccurring theme of forming, unforming, and reforming. From a loosely grouped flock they synchronized into a cohesive group, released that configuration, and formed into a new shape. This is a theme of transformation that was presented to me early on, and I've lived through many times over. Through my many transitions I learned that to live a fulfilling life I would have to unform, or let go of the shape of my current living, and reform myself into a new shape of living. The more significant these transitions, the more the process asks for surrender; surrender what is no longer relevant, surrender into a new shape of living.

This pattern became apparent as I strove for mastery in sports and martial arts and for spiritual awakening. There would always be a moment in which it was clear that there was something I had to let go of and something I had to let go into in order to move forward, like Professor Li Li Ta's lesson of Wu Daozi disappearing so his art and creativity could come to the foreground. Letting go of my sense of self, letting go into the cave to find myself. Henry David Thoreau pointed to this when he observed in Walden that "not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."

OUT OF BODY PERCEPTIONS

There have been a number of incidents in my life that have made the story of Wu Daozi come to life in a way that deepened my inquiry into the notion of allowing a greater energy to eclipse the personal self to serve skillful action and spiritual inspiration. The first one occurred while I was a college athlete.

It was Mexico City in the summer of 1966. I was there because I was chosen to be a delegate for a State Department track team representing the United States at the pre-Olympic Games, which also doubled as the Central American Games. This was the dress rehearsal for the Olympics, which would take place two years later.

While I was an above-average college sprinter as an all-American in track and field, I was honestly surprised and honored to be selected for this team. Looking back I think of it in many ways as the pinnacle of my athletic life. There were certainly many other sprinters there who were better than me, so it was particularly gratifying to have come as far as I had. I was also surprised, or shocked really, that there was a tremendous amount of media attention directed toward the Mexican national champion and me. The press was squeezing as much drama as possible from our anticipated race as they polished their journalistic chops for the real event in two years. When I

stepped out of my hotel or entered the stadium I was surrounded by fans and reporters wanting my autograph or a photo shoot. This was all very new and disconcerting, and I found myself somewhat at a loss as to how to respond; mostly I was bewildered.

The pewter sky in Mexico City stretched seamlessly into the concrete of the stadium and streets. Sky-to-floor gray. Even though I hadn't seen the sun in four days, the heat was suffocating; like being wrapped in a wool blanket. I had to focus to suck the oxygen out of the warm, moist air. The combination of being above seven thousand feet in a thermal inversion and competing in one of the largest cities in the world with one of the largest global smog factors made breathing a Herculean task.

I had already run heats and quarterfinals in the 100and 200meter dashes and the 400-meter relay, and as I stepped into the starting blocks of lane three for the semifinals of the 200-meter dash, my exhaustion preempted my anxiety. I reminded myself to focus, as I had to be in the first four finishers to qualify for the final the next day. I wanted to do well, but the person who wanted it seemed oddly removed. This came with an unfamiliar level of relaxation. Maybe it was the result of the media pressure, altitude change, and multiple races, or maybe I was just spent and had shucked off the usual nervousness that accompanied these moments. I knew what was at stake, I was committed, yet the usual butterflies weren't present, or maybe they were just flying in formation instead of the typical chaotic swirl in my gut. I glanced into the full stadium and saw movement and shapes pulsing in a swirl of color.

The starter's gun went off, and the crowd cheered. As I accelerated out of the turn into the straightaway, I suddenly saw myself from above, running toward the finish line a full stride ahead of the next runner. I was looking down at myself and I was running. But who was running? How could this be? The "me" who was watching wasn't fatigued or stressed but simply

observing the “me” who was running. It was simple. It was profound. There was a deep, reverberant calm, an unlikely hush that created a certain fugue state. Everything was as it should be, a simplicity of all things. There was movement, there was stillness, there was harmony.

This quietude was abruptly broken by the stark realization that I was not in my body, and with that thought I was suddenly back in my body, running through the finish tape, breath heaving, sweat streaking my neck. I’d won the race and in the distance I heard cheering. Race officials rushed to me to congratulate me and write down my name and the number pinned on my jersey. My teammates on the infield were clapping and giving me the thumbs-up sign. I was struck dumb. I wanted to ask the official if he had seen what I had seen. I wanted to ask my teammates the same question as they congregated around to congratulate me: “Good job!” they shouted.

Could I believe what I had just experienced? Had that just happened or was I . . . was I what? I had no reference whatsoever for what I had just experienced. Had I imagined this? Had it been observable to anyone else? Had there been anything to observe? Was I crazy? I felt alone and unsure of how to make sense of what had happened.

I held this episode close to me for a number of years not knowing whom I could talk to about it and whether this was simply fabricated from my imagination or an actual occurrence that had no traditional ground of explanation. My grandmother came to mind, but she had passed away a number of years earlier. It wasn’t until I had metabolized the conversation with Professor Li Li Ta about Wu Daozi years later that I began to see recurring themes about different states of consciousness, parallel universes, the singularity of a unified field, and our minds projecting sumptuous feasts of reality. But it was the theme of letting go of the self, or the ego, that rose to the foreground as a foundational step for embodying a radically different awareness that affected performance but also provided a portal to a different

level of perception. I recognized that because of the humidity and heat, social pressure, altitude, and fatigue I had let go of my usual competitive stance. I had stayed focused and relaxed without the usual nervousness or performance anxiety. This opened a reality far different from everyday life. These gaps in ordinary consciousness held the promise of a depth and clarity about the nature of reality.

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This type of out-of-body experience happened again five years later when I was thrown in a fast, hard kote gaeshi that fractured my arm in two places. In the middle of the throw, while I was being turned upside down, I was suddenly viewing the entire event from a corner in the ceiling of the dojo. I could see all the other students sitting in seiza watching, I could see myself executing a turning breakfall, and I could hear the snap of my ulna as it split into a spiral fracture. There was no pain, no effort, no drama. There was a roaring stillness. Space became thick with particulates; gravity became compression waves breaking against billions of molecules of air. I suddenly had the alarming thought that I was off my known map and boom!, I was immediately back in my body. All eyes were on me as I sat holding my arm. Did they experience what I did? Was it apparent to them that I was out of my body? That there was not only a fracture in my arm but also in my known universe? My teacher and I bowed to each other, and the students proceeded to practice the technique that was just demonstrated. I bowed to a partner, attempted to respond to the attack, and realized something was terribly wrong. I could barely keep my balance, the pain suddenly consuming me. The next thing I knew, I was off to the emergency room.

I left the hospital with a cast on my left arm that covered two joints—the elbow and wrist—and stabilized a spiral fracture the length of the ulna bone. The cast had to be on for two months, but after two weeks I taped

foam to it and returned to the mat. While I was adjusting to the discomfort and awkwardness of no longer having the use of my left arm, the experience of being separate from my physical body was very close. Even though I had become familiar with out-of-body phenomena through certain texts and experiences with LSD and psychotropic plants, the experience itself was baffling and without a categorical placeholder. Did this truly happen or was it a fiction of my own making? This experience combined with my out-of-body happening in Mexico City made me deeply question what had actually occurred, besides an exceedingly painful break to my arm.

Now, many years after these events, neuroscience can consistently induce out-of-body experiences by stimulating the connection between the temporal and parietal lobes of the brain. Matter is energy, energy is consciousness, consciousness is vast and boundless. The mystery forever deepens.

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Yet another episode occurred when I took my shodan (first-degree black belt) exam. I had been studying aikido intensely for about three years when I began my lead up to shodan. During that time I had been attending class five days a week on average with a period at Hombu Dojo (aikido headquarters) in Tokyo in which I was training six days a week with multiple classes a day. I would also occasionally include periods of judo training at the Kodokan Judo Institute in Tokyo, as well.

During this three-year period of intense training, in addition to fracturing of my left ulna in the kote gaeshi move, I fractured my cheekbone and right wrist, dislocated my right shoulder, and broke the middle finger on my left

hand. I list all this not to make me sound like a masochist or appear to have a bent toward machismo or victimhood but simply to say that I deeply love the art, and I love to train and train hard, pushing myself to my limits. The camaraderie, the fatigue and sweat that came from challenging partners, the repetition that built competency, and the promise of mastery all filled me with joy. Moreover, the aiki principles were positively affecting my personal and professional life. These injuries were not obstacles but places of learning and transformation for me. In a very direct way I could apply the principles of aikido to healing myself and to being accountable for my part in being injured. Each of these injuries, as well as my committed study on the mat, has its own narrative that could be its own chapter. But I mention them only because they frame a context in which to hold the journey toward my shodan exam and the experience that came from it.

We were a group of four who had been training steadily toward shodan together. We'd trained hard for years, suffered and played together, sweated together, challenged each other, supported each other, and did what we could to raise our collective level of training. Our teacher was an exemplary martial artist as well as a highly intuitive teacher. As we moved together in our final months of training he pinpointed each of our weaknesses, asking us to face into them. This wasn't simply about refining our techniques; it also had to do with our character styles and how they showed up in our techniques. His strategy with me was to completely ignore me for six months. At that time I was the most utilized uke (here meaning, "the student used by the teacher to demonstrate techniques") in the class, and with my former experience in judo and jiujutsu I was adept at taking hard throws (it was this teacher that threw me when my arm was broken). In other words I was afforded a lot of attention and cultivated by my teachers and suddenly all that disappeared. I was in front of the class with the teacher as uke for years, and then one day it was as if I didn't exist. I became a nonperson. This was a humbling, painful experience.

At the end of every class in the three-month run up to testing, the protocol would be for each candidate to come up in front of the class and

demonstrate a technique chosen by the teacher. For the candidates it was an opportunity to perform and learn while under pressure, much like the test, and the entire dojo learned by watching us perform, as well as through the teacher's instructions. He would call each candidate up one at a time and then call out techniques to demonstrate. During this time I was completely disregarded. I was never called to be in front. I went through a gamut of emotions and states of mind that ranged from confusion, disbelief, anger, shame, fear, rejection, and abandonment. My name was missing on the posted list of those who were taking the test. At one point I summoned up the courage to ask the teacher if I was going to take the test. He looked away, shrugged, and walked off.

After a while people in the dojo began to treat me as if I had an infectious disease and should be avoided at all costs; eye contact and conversations dwindled to a trickle. Slowly I became marginalized from the dojo culture and my identity in it. This sense of alienation spread to other areas of my life and seeds of self-doubt grew into a dark tunnel of self-criticism, vulnerability, and uncertainty. I became suspicious of people's intentions toward me: Did they feel sorry for me? Were they being nice out of pity? Were they talking behind my back? Even in my work I fell into shady corners, questioning my worth and value.

While it was a routine for candidates to train before and after class in preparation for the test, I was in a gray zone because I had not been confirmed to test. I would help others out but was awkward about what role I was to play. Should I train extra even though I wasn't on the list? Did I belong in this group? Where did I belong? I was self-conscious and paranoid that my situation might taint others, and no one was seeking me out. All communication between the teacher and me had vanished. He would walk by without saying anything or simply turn his back to me. I slowly descended into a zip code that was psychic miles away from where I normally lived.

At the end of class one evening, two weeks before the tests, after all the candidates had completed their demonstrations the teacher asked, “Anyone else?” There was a deadening silence. Thoughts flashed: Am I anyone else? Do I count? Should I say something? I’m someone, I belong, let me show you. The collective discomfort was palpable. My fellow candidate George Leonard spoke up, “Richard hasn’t gone.” The silence was deafening, the air squeezed out of the room.

“Oh you mean what’s his name?” the teacher finally replied.

I flared and then turned crimson with shame. It felt as if everything that I knew about myself or believed in drained out of me. I maintained my comportment as I was trained to do under pressure, but I felt little except for my heart thudding against my chest. In this extended moment there was no reference point at all that could calculate a point of history or a reckoning for a future. It was clear: I didn’t belong. There was no place for me. In some improbable way emptiness became my only point of reference; an inexpressible Euclidean geometry that formulated me as some distant speck floating in a vast space.

Without looking at me the teacher silently lifted his chin to the mat, and I stood and executed what was asked of me without remembering or tracking or knowing what I was doing. Psychically I returned to a deep empty well of isolation, the wound of not belonging. I experienced a rejection that landed squarely on the moment when my father disowned me as his son in my early twenties. Pain piled on pain.

Uncertainty was the only ground I had to stand on. While I entertained other’s reflections that this was part of my spiritual growth, a cleansing of my ego so to speak, I was split between liking that interpretation and

thinking that it sounded like a new age balm to settle my anxiety and sense of isolation, a way to decorate a painful situation with a spiritual window dressing to avoid facing myself.

Now I can see that this assault on my ego was what created a large opening during the actual test. But mostly it felt like shit through and through. I was devastated. I kept up a front of strength and remove so when people asked me how I was doing I would deflect with: “I’m fine. Let’s get on with the training,” or “I’m okay, did you see the 49ers game this weekend?” I was thrown into grave doubts about myself, but my shame and fear became a barrier to authentically sharing myself. I would wake up in the night filled with dread, but I wouldn’t face into it or show it to others. Early lessons from the male culture I was raised in taught me that men don’t show any emotion unless it was anger. If I did show vulnerability I’d be ridiculed or even physically pushed around.

Yet, while I felt completely alone in this world, I miraculously still loved dojo life. Dojos, places of training, had been my home for most of my life and regardless of what was occurring there was always a core sense of well-being when I was there. This was a major contradiction that I had to navigate every day that had no other remedy than making space for these seemingly opposite forces: The dojo was a place of suffering; the dojo was a place of joy and healing. The dojo was a place where I could express myself; the dojo was a purgatory that continually picked the scab from a wound.

Among many other things I learned during this time was that if we truly inhabit ourselves, if we live an embodied life, there is space for contradictions that may have no solution other than to accept and make space for them. This sense of spiritual inclusion seemed like a booby prize for the emotional hurt I was living.

The morning of the test I arrived at the dojo not knowing if I was to test. I was entirely without expectations. I wasn't entertaining hope that I would take the test, and I had no desire to make anything happen one way or another. It didn't feel like resignation but rather that a core part of me had surrendered to what would happen. I simply wasn't planning, rehearsing, or hoping. Someone said to me, "Your name is on the list. You're taking the test today." A tide of sensation swept through me, but nothing spiked; I wasn't elated, surprised, or grateful but simply present. There was nothing to prepare for, there was nothing to prove, there were no questions to ask. The me who was in a dark emotional place for six months was absent; a page had been turned to a new now.

When my name was called I performed the formal bow to the kamiza, to the testing board, catching my teacher's eye for the first time in months, and then to my uke (here, "partner"). There was a still, deep pool in me that widened into a clear energetic space as the test progressed. As I began the first set of techniques every move seemed effortless; there was only a sinuous joining with my uke to do what had to be done. As new ukes were called in with their different sizes and temperaments and energetic signatures, I could immediately sense the best path to convene with them and assemble each of their attacks into an equitable union. Over and over I would enter into the attack, blend with the intent and force of the attacker, join, and surrender to the energy that was uncannily evident to me as I moved with my attackers. I wasn't doing anything; it was as if something was doing me. I was being directed. I didn't question or analyze but simply let myself be guided by the energy flow.

The last part of the test is the rondori, which roughly translates as "chaotic movement." This means that at the end of a black belt test there's a multiple-person attack. While the candidate sits in seiza at one end of the mat, anywhere from three to five ukes sit at the other end of the mat facing you. On a given signal they all rush you at once, and you must deal with the

attacks without them taking you down. This is after approximately forty-five minutes of openhanded techniques as well as showing competency in weapons disarmament and paired weapons forms. It's a time in the test when the candidate must draw on not only their level of training and conditioning but also on an inner spirit that shows their grit.

At the signal to attack I stepped forward to meet the attackers and as I did my personality, the "I" associated with myself, was eclipsed by a feeling of deep interconnectedness with the attackers and everything in the dojo. I sincerely and wholeheartedly welcomed the attacks as well as the morning sun coming through the windows, the sound of a bus changing gears in the street outside, and the bright colors of the flowers on the kamiza. The effortless path between the charging bodies and the light in their eyes were all part of one thing, like notes forming into a single chord of beauty and union.

As I threw one uke after another in an unforced natural way a voice suddenly spoke calmly from deep within me, "This isn't Richard." I felt completely absorbed with what was at hand, namely fulfilling my task as nage (the one who deals with the attacker) in absorbing the attacks without violence, without any personal sense of commendation or gratification. I was a single part of a greater whole that was Being enacted through me, with all parts being constant in their singularity, yet woven together seamlessly as one. I didn't hear the command to cease, I only noticed the attackers had stopped and were going down on their knees to bow as is customary for completion. I bowed in response. Now I could feel the sweat on my face and neck, my breath filling and emptying, the murmuring of the audience. Back on the seiza line I watched the other candidates take their tests. I felt well used, happy, and grateful for completing this important ritual in my life.

The test had ended for me, but something else had begun that was without logic or understanding. Both my intellectual curiosity and spiritual longing had been awakened at a deeper level.

Something occurred that was unique, or had it? Did anyone else notice? What actually happened? I seemed apart from myself, an observer, yet expansive and effortlessly acting in accord with what was required to fulfill the exam standards. Who else could I share my experience with, without sounding foolish or self-indulgent? I was present, executing the various techniques, adjusting to various partners . . . and then there was another "I," an observer outside of who I knew myself to be, a state of perception, a consciousness that was part of everything, from the breeze coming through the open windows to the faces of the visitors and the spaces that I moved through to neutralize the attacks of my ukes. Yes, this phenomenon was similar to the pre-Olympic meet and the incident of my broken arm, but it had a longer horizon of time. It was more than a moment; it was a field of energy that was sustained without intention or volition from me. I found myself by being lost.

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When these incidents occurred they were before or very early in my contemplative practices. The event in Mexico City happened before I had started any meditation, aikido, or somatic practices. When the episodes of my fractured arm and black belt test took place, I had spent just four years in a committed meditation practice, three years in aikido, and five years in somatics, and I had taken plant-based medicine and LSD on numerous occasions, which had unquestionably opened me to the possibilities of alternative realities. All these experiences touched me deeply and again assured me that other dimensions were available, but I hadn't created the depth of awareness to take advantage of the openings they created. This

opening was an alternative view of reality, one that had started with my grandmother.

During these experiences it appeared as though a veil had been lifted and a portal opened into an adjoining reality. However brief these events, they revealed to me an expanded field of awareness that is sacred and mystifying and part of the mysterious path of human incarnation. But without the depth that comes with a longterm awareness practice my attention gravitated to the experience itself. I was simply not prepared to recognize these portals for what they were.

This became even more apparent to me on a rafting trip through the Southwest some years ago when we came across a series of ancient pictographs on the face of a sandstone wall. One of these pictographs depicted a stick figure disappearing into a mysterious opening, his arm and shoulder already gone, his body following. One of the guides, a Navajo tribal member, explained that this person was stepping into another dimension. He explained that “the ancient ones taught that there are many dimensions of time . . . there is sacred time . . . a different way of seeing. This shows him stepping into that other world.”

This image reflected the story of my experiences of parallel universes, or different states of consciousness, that were initiated by my out-of-body experiences. As we spoke further he said that what held power for his ancestors was not that there were different dimensions of time and space but that there was a refined perception needed to detect the opening. He emphasized that for his people it was the heightened awareness that was key. The moment was like wandering in the unknown and unexpectedly coming across an ancient unfurled map of existence that chronicled the way forward.

Just as the guide had explained, I came to understand after years of practice on the meditation cushion and the aikido mat, cultivation of somatic awareness, and the guidance of exemplary teachers that the power was not so much in the phenomena itself but in recognizing what the opening revealed and in building the presence to fully be with this opening and embody it and to be informed by a state of awareness unconditioned by the constant drone of thoughts and images. Over time I came to realize that this expanded state of awareness was not an anomaly but a fundamental ground of being out of which our basic confidence, compassion, and fearlessness arose.

I was learning that recurrent practices promote a field of awareness that enables us to recognize those moments when the veil is parted and an original, unconditioned field of energy is revealed. With this recognition we begin to see that this dimension of consciousness is present and available all the time. The practice is to open to it and surrender to it so we can directly experience a reality free from the ongoing contractions in the body and the conditioned mutterings of the mind. In other words it's a portal to seeing that an expanded state of consciousness is present in our everyday life and suggests that it doesn't necessarily take a health crisis, psychotropic plants, or an extraordinary experience to lift the veils.

For example, if we've sufficiently tended a field of awareness to be able to stay awake in the moment of a cough or a sneeze or when we are held by an infant's gaze, flip a light switch and no light comes on, or trip and almost fall, we can observe that the usual racket of the mind dissolves for a moment and a vast luminous space opens. It might be just a nanosecond, but if we're fully present a veil parts, and we're allowed to take a peek into another dimension. In some way it's simple, but it relies on an ongoing awareness to sustain such a state. It's like an inner GPS, guided by our attention and intent, that maps out this state of luminosity in the circuitry of our nervous system. In this way we're not trying to achieve something but to open and relax so this state is revealed. This is not simply an idea we can act on but something that takes practice.

Over the years through a deepening of practice these moments became more and more obvious. I began to see there were portals or gaps in the usual construction of reality that opened to a deeper, more expanded field of presence, of energy, of life. Now I find it useful to stop during my day and be still, relax, and open and listen for this vastness. This is not to say that I simply step into this state when I choose, as there are many times when I am hopelessly caught in the sticky web of thoughts and emotions that narrow the world, prohibiting a deeper wisdom to appear. Yet it is a practice that I commit to as I move through everyday life.

Is this reality always present? Was it grasping after my preferences or pushing away my aversion that kept me from this underlying ground of being? Is this what Marcel Proust pointed to when he said "the real journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes"? The question seemed to be how to open the eyes, rather than being desirous of the phenomenon itself.

But at that stage of my life, without the firm ground and confidence of a deepening practice, I interpreted access to this state as being free of ego. There was no inquiry into who this "I" was or who this ego was asking the question but simply a mandate to not be full of ego; an intent to be egoless. This was a beginning, but a superficial interpretation of what it means to embody the mystery. Mostly I inferred that this meant to be modest and not brag about yourself or showcase your virtues or triumphs. Looking back, this view created behaviors and efforts that seemed more like reinforcing the ego than reducing it. The "I," in other words, was simply dressing in another set of clothes, but still the "I" or ego was front and center. The idea I had of taking myself out of the equation was psychological window dressing. I often recall Romans I:21–22: "They became vain in their reasonings and their senseless heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise they became fools." The lessons that followed these attempts bent me until my heart opened, replacing reasoning and rationality. Reflecting

back on this history of straining to lose the self by the self can make stones weep.

What I came to terms with after innumerable times of stepping into my self-created pile of dung is that these portals open into an expanded state of consciousness and are always close at hand. They're a threshold between our conditioned perception and the unbounded world of Spirit. Yet these portals do not open until they're first opened in us. Our practices are the ground that allows us to open to a landscape of the heart that is beyond the divisions of perceiver and perceived; a state of being that is unconditional, wise, and unbounded. I'm reminded of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century German philosopher who submitted the perspective that when one embraces the present moment the desire for the absolute ends.

IT S ALL INSIDE YOU

In 1968, I started a meditation practice that I did sporadically and it was at that time that my then Taijiquan and Qigong teacher, Mr. Kaye, told me about Maharaj, a spiritual teacher and meditation master and the head of Sant Mat, meaning “Teaching of the Saints,” a centuries-old meditation path that traces its lineage back over eight hundred years. It was out of character for Mr. Kaye to recommend such a person, as he was decidedly against gurus. I respected him as a martial arts teacher and a human being of integrity and it was his change of heart that captured my attention, as well as the respectful way he spoke about Maharaj.

I read the literature, and I was impressed by the lineage and resonated with the discipline, but it was the pull from my heart toward the man himself that moved me. When I was first in his presence I instinctively trusted him. It was as if he was the first true human being I had ever met. There was a sense of an internal stillness about him, someone relaxed in his own skin, a deep settledness that I had never experienced in anyone before. Outwardly he was surrounded by a potent field of awareness, a palpable warmth charged with a current of indeterminate power. His gaze was loving and kind, and at the same time fierce and wild, almost feral. When his glance passed over you, it was like being raked with laser bolts of light. I longed to interact with the energy that flowed from him, and at the same time I was afraid that if I didn’t have a grounded, solid bearing I might evaporate in his powerful presence.

His service to others was accomplished with unconditional love and care. He built a free hospital and a free eye clinic, he fed people at no charge, and he never asked for any payment whatsoever. In the large gatherings at his site in northern India there would be as many as five hundred thousand people gathered, and he fed them in groups of twenty thousand at no charge. In his various locations throughout the world there was never a request for donations, nor was there any type of collection box where one could donate. There was never any advertising or marketing for his teaching; and there was never a fee. In addition there were no scandals with women or money as was so common in those days with Asian teachers. All of this was so contrary to what I was accustomed to that it felt like my entire world was being rearranged. He was genuine, the embodiment of a true spiritual teacher; the real deal.

Maharaj's presence plus his commitment to serving others made a deep impression on me. He never called himself a master or a spiritual teacher or guru but considered himself a fellow seeker. Over and over again he would repeatedly say that the real teacher was inside you, and you could engage with this energy through a meditation practice. He once told me it wasn't necessary to come to India to be with him since what I was looking for was within me. The last time I visited him, I asked if it were possible to be happy. "Why not?" he replied. I was able to override the awe of being so close to him and thinking that this was a patent guru response, and I gestured to the throng that was sitting around him: "They look happy being here in your presence," I said.

He turned and looked directly at me with that frightful loving way and said, "Yes, this is a wonderful place, but what makes you happy is inside you. It's the way you look at life that makes you happy." Just as when Mitsugi Saotome, my aikido sensei, tapped my chest and said, Jiri shin kore dojo, meaning, "Your sacred heart is the dojo." You are the dojo. Maharaj's consistent directive to go within to discover who you are and to discover the

essential and sacred ground of being has been the cornerstone of his teaching. This is the sacred heart of the dojo.

Contemplative practices and the technologies of neuroscience have shown us that at an essential level, we tailor the world itself to our conditioned interpretations. Empirical evidence shows that as chemicals bind with certain receptors in the brain, they change how and what we see. Is this science confirming what Maharaj said about what we are seeking is inside of us? Is the path, then, a journey from our historical way of seeing to a fully embodied awakening to our role in interpreting, and therefore determining, how we conform to our made-up version of reality? A reality that is imprisoned by our desires, fears, and concepts? Is this why Aldous Huxley called for a cerebral "reducing valve" that closes down interpretations not required for survival—physical, emotional, or social—and is found in tryptamine alkaloids in certain mushrooms? Verse 5 of the Gospel of Thomas reminds us that "The Kingdom is inside you, and outside you. Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you." The implications of this are vast, and startling. Does this inner/outer question bring us to the crossroads of recognizing that we make up reality, and therefore we need to decide what reality we want to create? Or is it that we embody the source from which this reality is formed and act from its intelligence? Does the portal open when it is no longer sought?

When I asked to be initiated into the path, Maharaj said that I wasn't ready. He suggested I wait six months, practice meditation, abstain from alcohol and drugs, and adopt a vegetarian diet. While I was stung by not being immediately accepted, it also gave me faith that he wasn't just trying to collect followers like so many other "gurus" of the time. All of his conditions were easy for me to meet, so after six months he initiated Catherine and me into the Teachings of the Saints, and I began a meditation practice of two and a half hours a day, and continued eating a vegetarian diet and eliminating drugs and alcohol.

At this point my community was primarily those on the path as well. I wouldn't say that I had a close personal relationship with Maharaj, although when I visited him in India or other places in the world, I always felt I received a powerful transmission simply by being in his presence. I was in my mid-twenties and Maharaj and the practice of meditation became a ground for my life. It was as if some metaphysical force had soldered me to him even though I often struggled with the philosophy and guidelines. I was by no means the perfect student, as there were countless times I slipped from my vows, yet he remained ever a signpost to a central purpose in this life—becoming one with the unconditioned Source and ground of being. Again, I was asked to surrender something and required to surrender into something.

I met Maharaj at a time when I was struggling with the conundrums of loyalty, belonging, purpose, and betrayal. These themes were framed by many concurrent events in my life: my father rejecting me and thus alienating me from my family, belonging to the cultural revolution of the sixties and seventies, being recently discharged from the Marines, losing many friends who had either been murdered, killed, or imprisoned, and trying to figure out what it meant to be in a relationship. As I interpreted it at that time, the path (which was what we called it) offered a way to transcend these worldly problems by elevating myself to a "higher" dimension of consciousness and spirituality. This view of a separation between the worldly life and the spiritual life was amplified with the emphasis clearly toward withdrawing from the world and surrendering to the spiritual life. I had a sincere spiritual longing, but in all frankness I was looking for a way out; and I often speculate that I was also unconsciously looking for a benevolent father figure. If I did the meditation practice and followed Maharaj's instructions, there was the promise of rising above my "earthly" problems and living in a spiritual domain free from the struggle of the incarnate life.

At the time this formula fully worked for me; it was noble, virtuous, and elevated above others. In many ways I reverted to the shape of the

competitive athlete. There was a goal to reach, and if I worked hard and trained diligently I would be able to achieve it with the help of this great "Coach." I lived in the assumption that if I meditated more, I would achieve the goal faster. I was back on the playing fields training to win, improve, and get ahead.

It took many years to let go of this competitive striving and to relax, open, and surrender to what was revealed. I was fully in, yet even in the youthful flush of my yearning for personal liberation, there were the proverbial small pebbles in my shoes that began to grate on me. Despite the meditation practice, abstaining from alcohol and drugs, and becoming a vegetarian, it was clear that it was me who continued to create breakdowns in my personal and professional relationships. In other words, I wasn't transcending anything; in fact my dysfunctions became more amplified. It was necessary for my internal conflicts to become an integral part of the path, instead of thinking the path would solve them. I had a ways to go before understanding that there was no skirting around my shadow, and as Maharaj had counseled me, "It's all inside you," which, I was learning, meant both the light and the dark. At another time he said, "The path is not like having pudding with your auntie." Transcending was not to be.

The philosophy of Sant Mat presented the concept that the body and the senses needed to be detached from in order for one to be free. They were depicted as the elements (by some followers, as even the enemy) that kept us trapped in the illusion of the world. The message was clear: transcend the body and earthly desires to find peace and happiness by becoming one with the Supreme Being. This was very much in line with Hindu spiritual philosophy.

My problem was that I was just beginning to build a profession in a somatic-oriented therapy practice, as well as teaching others in the helping professions how to include the body in their practices. For some on the Sant

Mat path this was heresy; others would look at me suspiciously as if I were an infidel in the land of the faithful. Some would bluntly say, “You’re just wasting your time. The only way to discover what you’re looking for is the path.” This hurt, and it was confusing. I felt guilt and shame and was uncertain how to reconcile these seeming differences. In addition, so much of my life previously had involved the body in the form of sports and martial arts, both of which had provided me with pleasure, identity, community, and meaning and were now represented as something trivial and superficial, not only lacking spiritual value but actually hindering it.

The implication was that I was delusional about the truth, and I was clearly veering in the wrong direction. I also want to be perfectly clear that this was a point of view that Maharaj never cultivated. He promoted living the life of an ethical and moral householder. His acceptance of all paths, religions, teachers, and spiritual inclinations was unequivocally evident. I recall that when a student asked him a question that placed separation between those who weren’t initiated on this path and those who were, he immediately interrupted her and said that was a false dichotomy. “There is no separation,” he said. “We only make up the separation.” His tone was swift and decisive, a sword cutting through ignorance; he let the silence ring loudly so the message could penetrate. A commonly used paraphrase from the Upanishads came to mind that said, “Where there is the other, there is fear.”

There was a gap between the interpretation that the Western students brought to Sant Mat and what Maharaj embodied and taught. In my last visit with him I told him about this dilemma, and that my experience was that the deeper I entered into my body, the deeper the inner experience became. What did he think of that? He looked at me with those eyes of wisdom and said, “Yes, that’s the way it works.” In the moment his reply seemed so simple, as if that’s what he had been saying the whole time, and what’s the big deal anyway. It was like he was reminding me to put on my pants before putting on my shoes. I felt a deep relaxation settle over me. I wanted to hug him. I also needed time to digest the simplicity and

directness of what he said, and what it meant for me. Many ideas, such as there is no separation, there is a unity, the seeker and the sought are one, and it's all within us, fell into place that I wouldn't understand until years later. While this was evident in Maharaj's speech and presence, the sitting practice helped distinguish the difference between my conditioned perceptions and the experience of an unconditioned reality.

Maharaj and many of my other early teachers were doors that opened me to new realities and new ways of seeing, exploring, and embodying the mystery. Their Beingness galvanized me toward exploring and practicing what it means to be on this path of life.

But as profound as the interactions with these teachers seemed in the moment, I would later intellectually deconstruct them to make up meanings that were conceptually coherent to cultural norms. I now see this as an effort to cognitively manage a force that cannot be managed. This was a fear-driven contraction in me that I used to sidestep uncertainty and vulnerability. Going to college I was vested in knowing, having answers for the unanswerable. This was also a way of trying to cover up my workingclass background, which lived in me as shame. This called for, at least in my interpretation at that time, critical analysis and penetrating insight to keep away the embarrassment of my blue-collar upbringing.

This need to intellectualize or use thinking to understand the pieces of the mystery I experienced along the path would also often keep me from actually embodying these insights. Therefore, a fundamental principle that many of my teachers taught me was how to move from the thinking self to the feeling, sensing self. This idea took varied forms such as "Get out of your head," "You think too much," "Feel the movement," "You're overthinking it," "Feel the energy," and "Quit trying to understand it, and be it." Over time I began to see that what they meant was to shift my attention from the cognitive mental space of judgments, thinking, isolation, symbols,

and ultimately despair to the felt sense of temperature, movement, contractions, sensations, energy, breath, and the radiance of life. In other words, becoming aware of and building a relationship with the aliveness that was streaming through my body.

Making this transition brought me into the present moment and allowed a direct, intimate relationship with my inner life and with the world. When this occurred there was an unguarded, direct relationship with what actually is, instead of my historically conditioned idea of what I thought it was. When this happened it produced a sense of expansiveness and freedom that was entirely seductive. It also became clear to me that this shift can be fraught with anxiety around losing one's identification with a particular ego state that is characterized by an intellectualized separation from life. But as I persevered and was guided by my teachers, I began to experience the feeling state as a coming home, a returning to a fundamental ground of being. I was also learning an incomparable skill: the ability to move my attention by choice. Our attention is not reified into a fixed organ but can be moved deeply inside us, as well as extended into the corners of the Universe.

The embodied practice of moving the attention from thinking to feeling resides in a cellular medium, in bone and blood, skin and electrical impulses, and driven by muscles to behave and act in the world; not from a conceptual knowledge of the disembodied mind. The neuroscientist Daniel J. Siegel points out that modern neuroscience has shown us that the "power to direct our attention has within it the power to shape our brain's firing patterns, as well as the power to shape the architecture of the brain itself." For any sincere practitioner this should surely be enough to attend to our attending as a way to transform our way of being and our society.

Am I directing my attention, or is my attention leading me, undisciplined, from one frivolous thought to another? Shifting the attention in this way

seems like such a small step, which is inarguable, but it opens an entirely new world. I stop thinking about what to write next, and let my attention shift into my legs, and presto! an entirely new world is revealed. I'm now present to my weight; my head lifts up from the page; my eyes relax, and I let in the redwood and palm tree outside the window; my breath effortlessly drops to my abdomen; the hinge in my jaw releases, the breath deepens. I am now more relaxed and inexplicably what I'm going to write next suddenly appears to me. The teachings of Dzogchen (literally meaning the "Great Perfection") in Tibetan Buddhism point to relaxation as a key to enlightenment, relaxation down to the cellular level . . . well, there's much to reflect upon in that statement, but for now we can say that the capacity to collect our attention, to cultivate a relaxed body to hold the attention steady is fundamental for an awakened consciousness. My meditation, aikido, and somatic practices taught me this: energy follows attention.

To know life directly we must feel. Feeling is a personal experience that has universal implications. This does not mean having a feeling or an emotion, although that may occur. It's feeling the field of awareness, feeling the breath released from the body, the tides of heat in the chest, the temperature at dawn, a homeless person, a thought. To feel the radiance that accompanies beauty, the warmth of love, the bright aliveness of joy, as well as that which we find reprehensible in ourselves, including the razor edge of vengeance, the searing heat of anger, and the bitterness of envy, are important gateways into being more awake.

Taking on feeling as a practice will lead us to sensing, which is subtler yet. We sense the awareness in the energetic field; we sense subtle mood changes in others; we sense disorder in a team meeting. Feeling can be learned and remembered; feeling can be forgotten. It's simple, and it's rational to feel, yet it goes against the current of the Western tradition of rational thought.

Despite my early challenges in moving out of the intellect and into my feeling self, I always felt an energetic presence within me, an alive, pulsating, and life-giving force; we are tabernacled within this force, and it is tabernacled within us. What at first looks like a reciprocal exchange is eventually experienced as a complex, endless spiral of coherence ceaselessly expanding from our breath, through the edge of our skin, outward to the heavens, and inward to our cells. This energy is beyond what we think, and what we know. It surpasses what we conjure through our rational and often desperate ordering of the world. It's a ground of being out of which everything comes to form. In English, the word energy is primarily used in the language of science, physics, and engineering. In other cultures it's called ki, chi, prana, shabd, and élan vital, which all convey a force that is always very close, emergent, immediate, and life-giving and shapes our lives.

This energy was firmly embedded in me by my teachers and contained the possibility of embodying an energetic, loving, wise presence. Just as the airborne seeds from the summer thistles may either burrow into a horse's mane, a dog's fur, or one's socks and come to nothing, they may also, with good fortune, land in the dark loam, and with sun and rain, grow into their essential nature. This, I think, is the good fortune I've been gifted: so many seeds of compassion and wisdom sown by generous teachers and cultivated by the light and water of rigorous heartfelt attention found their place to grow in me. May all the wise teachers be blessed.

Sometimes teachers come in the form of people who would never call themselves teachers. As parents are often their children's first teachers, my father opened an entirely new dimension about the role of emotions in spiritual life. During an incident early in my life, I found out how inextricably emotions are tied to spirituality. This experience provided a ground in which it became clear that an emotional literacy is fundamental to living a fulfilling spiritual life.

DIGNIFYING FEAR AND VULNERABILITY

My father was a career navy officer. He enlisted after high school, fought in World War II and Korea, and as a promising seaman was promoted to warrant officer. In the idiom of the military warrant officers are called mustangs; they were seasoned enlisted personnel that became officers without needing a college education. They were experienced, tested, hardened, smart, trusted to handle the toughest jobs, and had zero capacity to put up with any bullshit.

He spent most of his time at sea, and until I was a teenager he was deployed throughout the world on various battleships, destroyers, cruisers, or aircraft carriers. He was seldom at home except for brief interludes when he would return from some tour of duty, have a brief period of time on base, and then be reassigned to the next ship. I was told that as a young boy I would go up to policemen, mailmen, even the milkman, anyone who wore a uniform, and ask them if they were my father, much to the embarrassment of my mother and amusement of her friends.

When the ships returned to base after being at sea for the better part of the year we would go down to the docks with the other families to welcome him and the rest of the sailors home. The docks were crowded with wives, children, parents, friends, flags, and balloons waving in the sea breeze,

high-ranking navy officers making speeches, an official navy band playing rousing Sousa marches and, of course, “Anchors Aweigh.” It was festive, anticipatory, and boisterous. I could feel my mother all aflutter and sometimes it would be my grandmother, great aunt, or aunt that would take charge of my sister and me. There would be gifts, photos, memorabilia, and a lot of catching up to do. This would be reenacted a month or two later when he would deploy to a different part of the world, except instead of a welcoming, it was a leaving for God, country, navy, and family, the hierarchical order of the navy code.

My first distinct memory of my father was when I was seven years old. He had recently returned from a yearlong cruise to the Far East. He had all the trappings of the hero-warrior with his ribbons, medals, uniform, sidearm, and distinctive military bearing. But what left a lasting impression was an event that happened shortly after he returned and was reinforced throughout the time we lived together and well beyond. We’d been out for a walk in the navy housing projects where we lived. I basked in the glow of being special, just me and him walking down the street with me holding his hand. I belonged. I was safe. I had a secure place in the aura of the hero-warrior father.

Ahead of us were three men sitting on a bus stop bench, and as we approached they stood and blocked the sidewalk so we would either have to step into the street to get by or apologetically wiggle through them. I quickly learned that my father was neither the apologetic or wiggle-through type. My connection to him suddenly and radically collapsed. There was now a tautness, a collecting of will, a coiled spring without feeling or warmth, a weighted, undeterred intent. I was confused; the known world had abruptly shifted, and my entire existence retreated into my father’s tightening grip. There was a simultaneous flexing and extending in him as if a serpent from some older order was responding to the impulse of a primordial instinct. He pushed through the knot of men with me in tow. One of them grabbed my father by the elbow as if to block his progress. He released my hand, pivoted into the man, and kneed him in the groin; he

grabbed another by his jacket and hit him in the face. The third man ran down the street with my father in pursuit yelling, “You sunavabitch! Get the hell out of here!”

The world became opaque, without depth or dimension, the sky bending around me; then my vision tunneled. It was like a spotlight, narrow and tight, the periphery indistinct. I could see the two men lying on the sidewalk: one was tightly curled holding his groin and moaning, the other sat limp and dazed, his face covered in blood. The images consumed me as if they had agency separate from my seven-year-old world. The hero-warrior father was a savior. He had protected me from danger, and outnumbered, he had triumphed over injustice. He had rescued me.

But the hero-warrior father was also terrifying, violent, unpredictable. He was dangerous. The calculus of how to relate to this man, my father, had quickly increased in complexity to an order of magnitude that was wholly incomprehensible to me. A new world had been disclosed that was impossible for me to grasp. There was a contradiction present that I could not name but knew only as the sensation of a simultaneous pushing away and a pulling toward; my rib cage thickened against my galloping breath.

There were now two voices that equally made sense but stood in a fierce opposition to each other. The perception of wholeness in which I knew myself a moment ago splintered into separate parts tugging and competing with each other. I wanted to scream, and I wanted to give thanks. My hands wanted to curl into fists to pummel and defend, my heart wanted to grieve, to soften. My pulse pounded, a dark lump parked in my throat, vigilance coated the edge of my skin, my stomach clawed and released. Though I couldn’t name it then, this was fear. I was afraid. A complex of sensations and narratives began to organize me to either fight or run. At the time I didn’t know that fear would be a primary and fundamental teacher for me; I

only knew I needed to pay attention to this man, my father, because my life depended upon it.

He returned, his breath labored, grabbing my hand as if he were pulling a plant out of the ground, lifting me to my toes. He glanced down at me, his face distorted and red as if a cane fire were burning below the surface. His features trembled and seethed and like a malevolent god he glared at the men at our feet, his eyes hard, jaw muscles rippling in a promise of reckoning. He released my hand and rubbed the knuckles of one hand in the palm of the other. He looked down the street where the other had fled. The man with the bloody face bowed his head and raised his hand in submission, uttering something incomprehensible.

There was a roaring in my ears. They were broken, hurt, and I wanted him to see that and not inflict any more pain. I wanted to leave, to let them be, but I was petrified to say anything at all or to move myself in any way that would set him off. I wanted to be gone from this place, to be gone from them, to bury this entire episode as if it never happened. I had been told that perhaps this was compassion, but it felt more like dread, a sense of self-preservation to avoid any more of his terrifying violence. He looked hard at them, snorted, and turned away with me in hand.

I simultaneously felt fear and relief as we walked away. The violence had stopped, possibly gone, yet the purveyor of the violence was walking next to me. The hero-warrior father was alive, seething and pulsating, holding my hand. The shape of this experience was fear, but I didn’t know how to birth the sensation into language. From the depths of the unconscious a voice said, “You have no tools or resources to deal with this, so bury it, or you will go crazy.” So I helped it find a home deep in a dark corner of my consciousness. I stored it in my cells and locked the experience away. It takes energy to keep this fear door shut, and this was a wise survival strategy at the time. In order to return to the appearance of a norm, it

required that I construct narratives and behaviors that presented self-reliance, bravery, and an undaunted vigilance against showing fear. This somatic strategy also obscured the solitude, separateness, and loneliness I felt. In the moment I knew I needed to pay attention to this man, my father, and ultimately to all men, which I came to learn included myself, because of a dark violent response to a real or perceived threat that lurks within us.

I came to understand that this level of violence lived very close to the surface in my father, placing me at perpetual risk, which was confirmed as I grew older. I needed to pay attention to avoid being the target of his wrath. And paradoxically I was grateful that my father would protect me. Fear, safety, loss, and vigilance became intimately fused together as a survival strategy in ways that I wouldn't understand until years later. Safety was in attending to the behaviors, signals, and moods of my father, and this was eventually transferred to others. It was the beginning of understanding the emotion of fear. It was the commencement of training my attention. These were my early meditations.

We walked home in a very different state from which we had left. It was as if this event was a template of Hans Christian Andersen's persuasively simple but profound fable about an emperor's new wardrobe. What was stripped away from me was an inherited innocence, a willed fantasy of the parameters of safety, the idealized notion of the father/son relationship. This was a moment in which I was asked to shed the embodiment, the story, or clothes if you wish of what I had imagined my father to be and take on a new set of clothes, although I had no clue what that was at this point.

Here again was the theme of letting go of something and letting go into something as a way of transformation, or at this early age a necessity to ensure my safety and survival. It was not only that I saw my father differently. I assumed that at some deep unconscious level something was laid bare for him as well. His "clothes" were taken off, and his young son

had a clear look at who lived under the uniform and badges of authority. We never talked about it, as we never talked about anything in depth, but I've wondered if his shame blocked him from seeing the effect of his ferocity; or if he was self-justified and self-congratulatory in his actions; actions that were commensurate with his role and position. I never heard him apologize for anything so my assumption is that his shame, denial, or pride kept him from seeing anything untoward about his behavior.

When we arrived home he disappeared, and my mother looked at me curiously. Immediately I began shaking and tears rolled down my face. She reached for me, then I heard my father's voice: "He's okay. Quit crying." When she inquired again he brushed her off and turned away. "Nothing happened to him. He's okay." I was crying and trying not to cry. My face was contorting to control the tears, my body trembling uncontrollably. I was torn between my mother's embrace and the commands of my father. "What happened?" she asked more forcefully. "Nothing happened, nothing at all. He's fine." His voice rose: "Stop crying; there's nothing to cry about for God's sake. Quit babying him."

This was a pivotal moment that framed the path of what it meant to be a man. I wasn't supposed to cry, I wasn't supposed to find comfort with a female, being afraid was unacceptable, and letting my body shake was shameful. The only emotion accessible to me was anger. I was supposed to be brave, even heroic, and violence was not only allowed but valorously linked to these manly virtues. Aggression was a legitimate path to being a man. But the truth was that I was afraid; but to belong I had to squash my fear to avoid loss of belonging. If I told other males that I was afraid, it was a sure way to be rejected. It was the same for expressing grief, sadness, regret, shame, confusion, and guilt. Love and tenderness were permissible with dogs, cats, and horses, but not with humans; camaraderie and celebration had their place in sports and martial arts as quick hugs, back pounding, pats on the butt, or festive hooting, but no other emotions were allowed if you wanted to be part of the pack. In other words, the best way not to belong, to be excluded from the inner circle, was to express fear or

weakness in any form. Another aspect of the code was not to give in to pain or injury; you were rewarded to play through the pain and not complain. This was “being tough,” a key virtue in the neighborhoods, dojos, and gyms I grew up in.

When I saw another male show fear or weakness, I would move away from him as if he carried an infectious disease. It’s painful to acknowledge that, even when I felt something akin to empathy for him at the time, at my core I was afraid that if I associated with someone who was weak, it would risk my status and place in the pack. This I deeply regret, as I now know that I betrayed myself for not taking a stand for what was right; but in the moment it was self-preservation that took over. What I was blind to was the courage it takes to directly face one’s fear. Furthermore it took courage to see that the aggression, anger, and false confidence I showed were all disguises to conceal the fact that I was afraid, or felt vulnerable. After years of deflecting, avoiding, and otherwise defending myself it took decades to face into the reality of how much fear was part of me, and how our emotional life is also our spiritual life.

“It takes courage to be oneself,” Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan meditation master, told me when I asked him about fear and the role of emotions in spiritual practice. When I queried if he had ever been afraid he simply answered, “Once.” Startled I asked him when that was, and he replied it was when he was in the process of taking off his monk’s robes. I was incredulous that he had experienced fear only once.

Was I to believe him? Was this possible and could I learn from him about how to deal with fear?

I also knew nothing of the Tibetan culture's relationship with emotions or the impact that being trained in his lineage since he was four years old had had on him. The state of fearlessness that was modeled and ingrained in me was focused on taking physical risks: driving fast, jumping from high places, going into combat zones, not backing down from a fight, and physically confronting anyone who insulted you. It had nothing to do with the courage of being a fully mature emotional being. To stand with dignity, and say, "I'm afraid" or "I'm in pain" was not in the playbook. It was a challenging and rough road to dignify my fear.

Behind the appearance of a calm bravery my fear took residence in my body as knots of tension in my low back, a gripping in my stomach, and a racing mind that robbed me of being present. Sometimes fear was embodied in me as a darkly menacing vigilance, as if I were crossing a five-lane highway barefoot and in traffic. Other times it was subtle, like a fleeting shadow in the corner of the room. I disguised the fear to the point that I believed it was not really part of my emotional makeup. I was an alert, awake person I told myself, and there was no need to reflect more deeply on the somatic markers that would arise in me in moments of risk, perceived or otherwise.

In overriding these sensations I justified being defensive, selfprotective, and distrustful. In addition I compensated by being counterphobic. I would move toward that which scared me so I was seen as someone who would readily take risks. I would then be in positions of leadership in which others relied on my posture of courage, making it more acceptable to stay on the surface of my emotional life. But this only further cloaked a deep fear of loss and of being transparent about my needs, along with my shame of being vulnerable.

In addition, the martial arts and a meditation practice reinforced the idea of noticing the sensations of emotion but not listening to what those sensations

were signaling. In meditation I learned the practice of noting the sensation and emotion and then returning to the present moment of my breath or reciting the mantra I was given. Yes, this is a powerful skill to learn in order to take appropriate action when you're in the middle of a fray, and you don't want to act out or needlessly be carried away by conditioned narratives. But it's limited in the interpersonal domains of intimacy, vulnerability, authentic connection, and respecting your needs and the needs of others. The virtues of autonomy and self-reliance served me in certain areas, but as they migrated to my social sphere they choked off my longing for genuine contact, for love, for transparency, and for the freedom to express myself authentically and reside wholeheartedly in community. I was creating a hole inside myself that mirrored a hole in the world. I had constructed a barrier to feeling, emotions, and authentic relationships.

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Closely tied to this prophylactic view of emotions and needs is the mythology of self-reliance in order to become a suitable midtwentieth century white heterosexual American man. "Don't be so needy" was spoken as a prod toward manhood. It was said in a way that produced instant shame, correcting me to a behavior that would earn belonging, honor, and love: take care of your needs yourself, don't even show your needs, in fact you shouldn't even have needs. I was taught that self-reliance was a central foundation of being a man. This myth was narrated through the fiction of the competent, solitary, noble frontiersman who pitched himself against the forces of nature and warred against "uncivilized heathens." He was the taciturn, self-reliant individual who stood apart from the constraints of social institutions that threatened his individuality and personal freedom.

I was fed the tales of Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Sam Houston, who were elevated to legend through folklore, and James Fenimore Cooper's

stories of Natty Bumppo, a.k.a. Hawkeye, Leatherstocking, and Deerslayer, who further promoted the lore of the white man taming nature solely by his wits and his mesmerizing power of individualism and self-mastery.

What gets lost in this myth of masculinity are the acts of genocide, the oppression of indigenous peoples, racism, and the need to dominate nature. This narrative was further reinforced by Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe in which a slave trader, stranded on a remote island for thirty years, raises the heroic, self-made man archetype to its pinnacle with the unlimited resourcefulness, innovation, and improbable work ethic of an eighteenth-century MacGyver. Along the way he puts a stranglehold on any emotion except for anger, which was expressed through violence and dominance. In the book we are repeatedly reminded that he was the height of selfreliance, therefore manliness. Enthralled by these virtues it's easy to forget that Crusoe got into this fix by bringing slaves to the New World. Then he murdered the island's natives and forced his religion and worldview on his personal slave, Friday.

Then there's the quintessence of this model in the gunslinger Shane who, in the movie of the same name, rides into town alone, dispatches the bad guys, wins the heart of the widow and her son, and then, without asking for any acknowledgment or compensation, imprints in us his manly ability to find gratification solely within himself by riding off alone into the sunset, the widow and the son silhouetted as they watch him with adoration and understanding. They will miss him terribly, but they know Shane needs his time alone, and we're to be clear that he's not looking for recognition either in pay or emotional tribute. He's the guy who simply tips his hat to the choir knowing he just did the "right thing."

Then it's the image of the athlete as hero who makes the game winning catch, the final basket, or late-inning home run that wins the game in the last second. While the fans are going crazy in the stands, and his teammates

are jumping all over him, he simply raises his cap or gives a single wave before disappearing down the dark tunnel alone.

This quintessential quixotic breed of heroic, noble self-reliance was metabolized in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance," where he codifies the principles of manhood. His essay positions the freedom of the individual as true north in relationship to the state: "The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it." He repeatedly warns against the authority of institutions, government, and religion mostly in that it suffocates the individual's personal freedom and autonomy. Arguably this macho posture of self-reliance first found ground in the moral gyrations that so-called Christian pilgrims enacted in coming to America in the fifteenth century, committing genocide, rape, war, racism, and legitimatized slavery in order to steal the land from the indigenous peoples whose home it was for centuries.

When I was writing In Search of the Warrior Spirit I researched the warrior tradition in different cultures, and I became intrigued by Homer's Odyssey. At one point when Odysseus was about to enter into battle, Ares, the God of War, came to him and advised that he take Phobos (fear) and Deimos (panic and dread) with him into battle.

Hold on. You're supposed to take your fear and panic into battle? How can that be? Fear is the enemy. The warrior is supposed to be fearless. I reread the passage over and over. It was like driving down a well-traveled thoroughfare and suddenly looking up and realizing you've been going in the wrong direction. How do I make sense of this?

Over a millennium ago Homer's instruction to his fellow countrymen was to embrace your fear as if it were an important ally. This was a tiny seed

that dropped on hardpan, but it took hold. I was afraid to say I was afraid. I was angry that I was afraid. I was angry from stuffing all these emotions down.

Showing anger at home was not tolerated. The contradiction was that while anger was modeled as the suitable emotion for men, my father would not tolerate it from me. He could be angry; his friends could be angry. If someone outside his circle showed anger, he took it personally (regardless if it was or wasn't meant that way), and he would escalate and come to rage and fists so quickly that people cowered in fear of what he might do.

I learned that if I responded to my father's anger with anger or took a different position from him I would quickly be shut down, emotionally and physically. I was late coming home one night, and he was standing at the door, feet wide apart, hands on hips, flint eyed: "You're late," he said. I looked nonchalantly at the clock and replied, "Only ten minutes." He shoved me against the wall, his finger jabbing repeatedly in my chest, yelling something I can't comprehend because my head was filled with a thunderous din. My sister and I would joke that he went from zero to asshole in a second.

This episode was repeated countless times in a variety of vignettes, although they diminished in intensity over time, probably because he tired of trying to tame me, and he slowly lost interest. I also became smarter at how to read him to avoid his violence. Nonetheless, my capacity to endure the tension at home and keep a lid on my aggravation slowly waned, and I ran away twice, the second time to join the Marine Corps where I learned about discipline, the team, the mission, and a culture that reinforced a narrow emotional life.

Learning how to live a life of damage control is a long way from joy and satisfaction. Yet this first conscious recognition that fear, shame, and anger resided deep within me was the beginning of emotional literacy for me, and what I learned over time and hard personal work was that there's no way to resolve it through cognitive insight. It became clear that these emotions and feelings lived deep in my tissues, even deeper in my cells, and to build a relationship with my emotional life, it was necessary to build a more intimate relationship with my body. To be aware of these shadows wouldn't necessarily lead to new behaviors and ways of being; it was necessary to unlock the bands of armor that held those patterns in my body and to then move into new practices. This was the beginning of understanding that facing into this history, and how it conditioned me, was intimately linked to a path of awakening. Emotions, in other words, were not separate from an embodied spiritual life. It was time to clean the egg off my beard. I discovered it was a necessary but heavy lift.

The dilemma was that by this time I had invested so much energy into checking my anger, I had constructed a wall that was not easily moved. The tension between managing my emotional self and my yearning for intimacy manifested as coiled ropes of muscular contractions around my chest, diaphragm, and low back. I learned over time, with the guidance of a handful of skilled therapists and bodyworkers, that to get through this it was necessary to release it from my muscles, breath patterns, gestures, and voice, which would also help dissolve the beliefs behind it all. It wasn't enough to understand it or have insight into its origin; it lived in my body as historical somatic patterns that gave little credence to an executive function that explained things. In fact this pattern didn't even acknowledge that there was a somebody with a perspective different from the deep unconscious theme of "We're in charge of keeping you safe, so get out of the way and let us handle this."

The survival patterns had their own agency separate from any sophisticated rational explanations. The hypothalamic-pituitaryadrenal axes that help activate the fight/flight/freeze/dissociate mechanism through the vagus

nerve runs at a speed much faster than the intellect. It quickly became clear to me that it was fruitless to try and will myself into a different state. Cognitive understanding was a first step, but it was not enough to make a change. The healing happened through countless hours of bodywork and paying attention to what rose to the foreground; usually as a generalized unease coating my skin, a recurring tightening around specific areas of my body, a dread associated with a squeezing around my temples. I was learning, at a deeper level, to attend to and honor the sensations that informed my state of being. This was the beginning of looking at myself in a direct, unmediated way.

The relationship with my father was always uneasy, but as I grew into adolescence and he came home every night since he was no longer at sea but stationed at a base near our home, our connection became increasingly contentious. I was rebellious, and he was trying to figure out how to be a father who had undiagnosed PTSD. He never touched me affectionately (this has always been a great shock to my children as I'm definitely a hugger type) but only in an abusive manner, and we shared no bonding activity that many fathers and sons participated in together. In brief, there was nothing we ever did together. I was afraid of him and constantly vigilant around him; he seemed persistently irritated and critical. Tough chemistry.

A phrase he would repeat in a condemning tone when he was displeased was, "What's wrong with you?" Later in life I realized I had internalized the comment, which shaped in me an automatic guilt or shame response in situations in which I had made an error or thought I had or interpreted someone suggesting that I was at fault or incompetent. The phrase "What's wrong with you?" immediately produces a squeezing sensation, the body tightening into a fist. This might not be visible to others, but it's now clearly evident that shame is the prevailing emotion. I want to disappear from others and myself. Or I want to defend myself, asserting that there is nothing wrong with me, and you'd better not dare say there is or I'll . . . become my father. This is the elegance of the soma as it directly and

immediately informs us of the process of our inner life. There's no guessing about it; we only need to feel and then muster the courage to account for the feeling and emotion to own it.

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My father formally disowned me in the summer of 1968 when I appeared on the cover of Life magazine with Catherine, my future wife, and the title, "Young Americans Abroad." The subsequent essay was about the cultural revolution in America and why many young Americans were leaving the country. At the time I was living in a cave on the island of Crete in Greece. I was misquoted in the article and photos were printed without a release form, but the damage was done. We sued Life magazine to no avail. My father flipped out. Everything he had always suspected of me was now confirmed. I was a disgrace; he thought me unfaithful to the American dream he had fought for in two wars. He cut off all contact, walked away if my name was mentioned in his presence, and forbade me to return home. It was devastating, and I spent many years attempting to connect with him as well as many therapeutic hours struggling with the pain of rejection.

At one point I showed up at the house with my recently born son and when my mother answered the door, she sadly shook her head. He had locked himself in the bedroom and refused to come out. I was stunned and deeply saddened he had gone so far as to even turn away from his grandson. This renewed sense of rejection, abandonment, and loss inflamed the excruciating pain in my heart. In the paradoxes of the heart's way, it also ignited feelings of empathy as I recognized the immense pain he must be in to lock himself away from love. At the same time I shored up the boundary around my vulnerability to conceal the shame of again being exiled by my father. The classic archetype of the father-son wound. I have come to forgive him, knowing what his conditioning had been, but at that time there

was no glittering narrative that posited self-awareness as a sublime passage through the swamp and into the garden. It was an ongoing slog, and the guardian at the gate was a reservoir of limitless fury.

Anyone trying to touch that tender spot of isolation and alienation in me would be met with either defensiveness or an all-out brawl. Consequently, my longing for acceptance and acknowledgment went no further than being a chained dog barking at the moon. Was I making any headway or was the task simply to be with the pain of rejection? My years of training kicked in as I masked helplessness and pain with competency and detachment from my feelings. This was the embodied strategy that I had been practicing since I was first trained to adopt the markers of what it means to "be a man." Be strong, never show you're vulnerable, cultivate selfreliance, and never, ever open yourself to be hurt.

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On Mother's Day in 1970, I called home to wish my mother a Happy Mother's Day. I did this with some reservation as she would become anxious talking to me when my father was around. Although I talked to my mother on the phone, and we would meet at coffee shops or parking lots, she never let on that she was in contact with me for fear of his reaction. Essentially I was a nonperson to him.

My father unexpectedly answered the call. Since he rarely talked on the phone and never answered, I was shocked. I hadn't heard his voice in almost a decade, yet I felt his tone enter me and light up that raw, vigilant place. I hesitated. I recovered: "This is Rick, your son. I called to wish Mom a Happy Mother's Day." I held my breath.

“She’s not here.”

“Well, since she’s not there, I’d like to talk to you.”

Click. The phone went dead.

My insides turned to mush. A blanket of numbness settled on me. I stumbled into the next room where my friends were meeting. I was filled with shame and humiliation but tried to keep up a strong front. They looked at me baffled; they wanted to know what’s wrong. I struggled to tell them what happened. Their questions were sensitive and penetrating as they encouraged me to open up. As I emerged out of my anesthetization, I only knew that I was in pain, and I was ashamed that I felt pain. I should be stronger than this, I thought. A man doesn’t complain about being in pain. A man doesn’t let these kinds of things affect him. A man is tough and unemotional when hit.

My friends were skillful, kind, and generous in their care, encouraging me to feel what was occurring, which meant coming back to my body. My fists were clenched, my breath was high, my shoulders were hunched; I was collected in a tight coil.

“I’m pissed,” I said.

They nodded. “It’s okay to be hurt, to be angry,” they said.

I was still struggling, but it registered that I was accepted. I didn't like to be seen as hurt, and yes, I was righteously angry; an anger that I'd been withholding for most of my life except when I could express it in fights or channel it into competition.

They put a large pillow in front of me and encouraged me to express my anger by hitting the pillow. I hit it a few measured times, and then I was in a full unrestrained rage. Unedited, I pounded as hard as I could, yelling and cursing full-throated, spittle flying from my mouth. A deep rage coursed through me; an undifferentiated adrenal dump fed the rage for hours. After some time my friends started to take turns being with me and then slowly drifted off. I finally spent myself and had no more energy to strike, and I knew there was more.

I had hit bottom. Something had been shed, and I lay exposed on barren ground. Loss and abandonment were my world. There was nothing else. I felt unworthy, shamed, and humiliated internally; yet it was only rage that I was able to present. I was floating in a vast protoplasmic sea of indeterminate sensations and images. The shock of this emptiness stretched like an opaque membrane between me and the world. At the same time I was being freed from a long confinement. I was being asked to face what lurked in the shadows that had been long overlooked. I was at the beginning of new terrain on the path.

That night I was visited by a dream that would become an intimate companion to me, relentlessly reminding me of the courage, compassion, and commitment I was being asked to embody on this side of being emotionally literate. I was walking with a group of people on an open plain. White clouds scudded across a bright sky. There was a feeling of camaraderie and fellowship among us, a mood of celebration. Suddenly the

ground sloped downward, and I was alone, walking a narrow deer path through larkspur, lily, wild orchids, and iris. The path entered a dense thicket of cane taller than my head. The air was bracing with the smell of the sea. Sheltered by the overhead boughs I was held as if in a womb, a refuge of safety.

Unexpectedly the path opened to a wide beach, the loam of the trail giving way first to hard shingles, then to pebbles, and finally to white sand. The view expanded as the beach merged into the sea, the sea into the sky, a colorless horizon in the rinsed air. Out to sea a gray-green mass began to mound in the distance. As it rose and steadily moved toward me, it became a mounting wave that blocked out the horizon and then the sky. Terror overtook me as the dark, monolithic wall of water towered overhead. It was suspended for a moment at the height of its crest before it cascaded down. I knew there was no chance of surviving; I would be annihilated when this mass hit me. I attempted to scream, but my voice was frozen. I couldn't cry out for help. Stricken, I sat upright in bed, gasping for breath, paralyzed by dread. I was relieved to be awake but deeply shaken.

With little variation this dream visited me for years as I worked through the trauma of abandonment, rejection, violence, and shame. The door to my unconscious had been breached and what lay inside demanded to see the light of day. A crowd of voices were screaming to be acknowledged and dignified. Although I didn't like it, I knew what I had to do, and I knew it would take time. This commenced another cycle of awakening. As many contemplative disciplines say, you have to pass through the gates of hell before you enter heaven. Or, as my Kiowa friend Michael often said, "You've got to walk through the barnyard."

Once again I was at the threshold of letting go of something and letting go into something. Letting go of an image and interpretation of an identity in which a full emotional life was incongruous to what a man is, and letting go

into the unknown of the world of emotions and needs. I was also to learn that welcoming my emotional life was a part of the spiritual path.

SHINING LIGHT ON THE SHADOW

While I had studied the importance of releasing overly contained emotions to support healing and had sought to integrate it into my growing body-oriented psychotherapy practice along with my own personal work, by 1971, I had arrived at a place in which my understanding of emotional work seemed elementary and performative in regard to the depth of my recently uncovered exile wound. I knew that if I didn't let this opening touch me deeply and move me into new behaviors I would simply remain in my narrow emotional lane of self-reliance, fear of vulnerability, and defensiveness. I knew that without changing my behavior, I would be paralyzed into an ingenuous expression of myself.

I had learned to release my anger through shouting, kicking, and hitting, all of which have cathartic value, but I was now called to go deeper and allow the feelings and internal narratives to be acknowledged, met, and integrated. The questions I was now asked to face were, What were these feelings historically trying to take care of? How is it that they seemed to have their own life cycle independent of me? What was I afraid of? What could I learn from them? It was excruciatingly clear that I needed to shift to the next level of emotional integration if I was to align with my spiritual and psychological aspirations. I was chastised and focused; I was listening for how to step into this next inquiry of the mystery. Stay awake, turn to feeling, I told myself, surely common themes of living the embodied life.

I saw that my spiritual and psychological aspirations were in conflict with each other. In the previous five years I had spent two and a half to three hours every day in a meditation practice and took part in a three-and-a-half-month meditation retreat in India, as well as at least one ten-day meditation retreat every year. I was encouraged by my spiritual teachers not to be entangled in my thoughts and emotions. I was instructed to notice the rising of the thoughts and emotions and then return to the object of concentration. I was told the critical importance of developing nonattachment. In other words, let everything pass and then refocus on the meditation.

Once when attending a seminar lead by polarity therapist Dr. Randolph Stone, two members of our collective began arguing during a break. We were somewhat anxious about how he would respond but he merely said, “It’s just the tattvas.” When I asked him what he meant he explained, “It’s the five foundational elements of Ayurvedic philosophy that make up our existence: earth, air, fire, water, and ether. It’s the same in Traditional Chinese Medicine and in Ayurvedic Medicine. They’re just letting the energy run,” and he mildly waved it off. He was telling us entirely without judgment not to be concerned with all the emotional noise and hubbub as this was something that was typical and happened to us all, and there was no need to get attached to it. His tone implied that while these kinds of emotions were common and emerge out of the same basic ground, we don’t have to be overly concerned about them or get caught up in them. Although this instruction contained a great deal of wisdom, I used it as a way to bypass the fear, rage, and vulnerability that was lurking under the surface. While meditation clearly has great value on a spiritual path, I was using it as a way to protect myself from a deep-seated anxiety.

In addition, I had been seriously training in martial arts and competitive sports since I was nine years old, and this colluded to help me avoid confronting my fear and learn instead how to put it aside when I was asked to compete. Yes, of course, fear arose when I was against a formidable

opponent, or when I was running a significant national or international race, but it was not the time to “process” my emotional response. In fact, it was frowned upon. I heard, “Get over it,” “Stay focused,” “Don’t be such a wimp,” and “Suck it up.”

I have a vast respect and unlimited gratefulness for my spiritual, martial arts, and somatic teachers and the lineages they represent. They are wise, conscious beings who dedicated their lives to teaching wisdom, compassion, and skillful action for the betterment of society. I admire them and what they stand for, but at the time, in my emotional immaturity, I used the philosophy and practices they taught me and as I understood them as a way to avoid the messiness that went along with being in a body among other bodies. Simply put, there is struggle and emotional pain when we live a fully embodied life. I initially moved to the spiritual life hoping for a transcendence that would remove the suffering that I was experiencing. My interpretation of these teachings was my personal emotional Bermuda Triangle into which I would make those emotions and feelings that were intolerable disappear.

I had falsely sought freedom by hiding behind a superficial identification with the world of Spirit. I had locked myself into a belief system that shut me away from a robust, engaged participation in the world. Furthermore, I had closed myself off from anyone outside the circle of my fellow believers who would reflect back to me how my beliefs were blinding me. I had conveniently created a dual reality where the world of Spirit was separate and more valuable than ordinary, everyday living.

In this stage there were many moments of joy, community, and belonging, but I eventually came to an intersection at which I could see that my shadow side had swelled to such a size that it was no longer possible to avoid. This was clearly represented by my unmitigated rage when my father once again turned away from me when he hung up the phone. This moment

was a clear signal that the years of meditation had done little to help me deal with my anger. I was at the crossroads of either maintaining this self-deception or facing how the rigidity of my internal rules had separated me from the world, from others, and from life. As I entered into this exploration, I continued my meditation, aikido, and martial arts practices. It wasn't about stopping my practices; it was about facing the fact that my self-manufactured duality between emotions and Spirit was false and predicated on a cloak of self-protection.

But who was this "self" I was protecting? Does being a fully awakened person mean you are not affected by your emotions? Or does it mean the energy of the emotions can be transformed by practice and choice into something positive? Do I need to go back to the beginning of these automatic emotional reactions? Do they need to be released from the body?

To take this slow descent into my unexamined shadow life I was signing up to do the hard work of becoming more transparent about my fears and anxiety, to be honest about my own needs, and to confront the rules I had internalized about what it meant to be a man. I was being asked to reconceive the idea of a whole life that integrated a spiritual longing, a mental clarity, emotional balance, and physical vitality. While I can easily say now that separating deep spiritual practice from emotions and social and environmental justice creates a false division, at that point in my life it seemed like a puzzle whose pieces I was just starting to fit together.

The robust, sensuous, transient experience of self and the mysterious, sacred, unpredictable, impersonal experience of Spirit both reside in the same body and in the everyday granularity of our lives. They are braided together. When we embody this level of unity there is no "in here" and no "out there." This is not just a noble philosophical concept for seekers to aspire to or the scientific formulations of physics and mathematics proving life's interconnectedness, it's a state of being in which we embody the

living interconnectedness of life. The title of the Hindu mystic Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj's book, I Am That says it all.

My experience has shown me that there are any number of moments throughout the day when, if we are truly quiet and present, the thinking self becomes eclipsed by a larger unity, by a presence that is greater than the rational mind and our conditioned perceptions of our everyday lives. I'm not fully cooked in terms of this state of being, actually far from it, but if I slow down and attend carefully, a new reality becomes available. A reality that is common in its ordinariness and unique in the joy that it makes possible. Whenever I take a moment to find this presence, the Friend, it's always present; it is me who leaves, and it is in our court to continue to bring us back to the now.

During this time of my life, I felt a bit like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz when the wizard tells her that he will send her home to Kansas only when she has brought him the broomstick of the nefarious Wicked Witch of the West. Yes, a bit intimidating. I had to confront my "Wicked Witch" and reclaim my emotional broomstick so that the rich soup of being human, with both feet on the ground in all the messiness while embodying a spiritual and moral vision, can be honored as much as a meditation practice; in fact it is a meditation practice in service of being awake.

THE DESCENT INTO CELLULAR WISDOM

The dream of a gigantic tidal wave racing to consume me signaled an ending, the death of one way of living and a forming of a different way of living. The wave was a literal metaphor, but its power to change me came from a sensate wave that reverberated deep in my cells. It was a living metaphor. It was the magnitude of the felt sensation that reorganized me toward dealing with unfinished business that was unconsciously running me. The terror of being annihilated and the inevitable surrender it called for became the twin tracks leading me into a deep descent into my body; again it called for letting go of something and letting go into something.

In my previous work I had arrived at an understanding of what I was working with but at this level of work—soul work—I was being invited into a deeper level of embodiment, of living the change in a more authentic way. Good fortune led me to a therapist/ guide who was a master of reading energy as a path to healing. I was not exactly a stranger to the life of the body as I had been involved in a wide range of somatic practices, yet my guide introduced me to practices that produced a perspective that was unique and equal measures terrifying and compelling.

I was sitting quietly with my eyes closed, and the guide asked me to bring my attention to the crown of my head. This meant the crown of my head

inside my skull, not on the top of my head. This was uncharted territory; I felt like I was entering into a wilderness area. I was intrigued and felt as if I was being given full permission to step off my usual pathways. At the top of my skull was a darkness that had a brushed velvet surface. My attention moved down the inner depth of my body, down through the inner vertical line, inside me, not on the outside. I was accustomed to moving my attention inward through meditation but not as a descent through the middle of my core.

I answered yes when she asked me if I could feel the inside of the top of my skull; she then suggested that I move my attention to the level of my eyes, then into my throat and told me to nod my head when I was there. I nodded. She suggested that I stay there and make sure I'm truly inhabiting my throat. She asked me what I noticed. I reported that I felt my breath moving through the airway, and I felt warmth and also dryness. She then asked me to move into my upper chest and to nod when I got there.

As I dropped my attention to my mid-chest, I inexplicably found myself thinking about what I was going to do after the session, planning the trip I was taking in a few weeks, and simply wandering off into some random thoughts, and then I realized that I'd skipped over my chest entirely and landed in my stomach. I didn't seem to have access to the area of my heart and lungs. I could pretty well inhabit the other parts of my body, but the chest was qualitatively different, and I was unable to land fully into my heart. I skipped over it and went to another place on my vertical line, back to my throat, jumping over it to my pelvis, ruminating on the past, planning the future, and generally going any place other than my chest. There was a felt hollowness there that I bolted from, or I was suddenly catapulted out of my body as I neared this dark, empty space.

This did not have the agency of conscious choice; there was no apparent volition that I was aware of that avoided this part of my soma. All I know

was that suddenly and inexplicably I was someplace else. It was startling and mysterious. If I touched the area of my heart, or if someone else touched it, I could feel the sensation of the hand. But I was a total beginner at being deep inside my body at the chest level and being with what was there.

The guide slowed me down. She asked me to be present in the moment just before my flight away from my heart. Over time and many sessions, what I began to see was that there was a dark empty hole in the middle of my chest, and as I began to enter into this hole an unnamed fear overtook me, and I bolted away from it. This wasn't a clinical dissociation but something analogous to a reflex that kicks in when danger is present, like the reflex of putting your hand in front of your face when a ball unexpectedly is thrown at your head.

I came to recognize that there was something about this part of me that I'd learned to avoid, a fearful darkness. This initiated a journey of slowly descending into this dark cavity that was in the center of my chest, in the middle of my heart, where the breath joined red blood cells, where oxygen, hemoglobin, and mitosis created life energy within the cells. Part of my fear was that I didn't know what I would find. Even while the adventurous explorer was packed and ready to go, I was uncertain and a feeling of helplessness gripped me.

With guidance I learned how to tolerate the terror; not tolerate as in putting up with but as in simply being with it and feeling the sensation, the texture, the somatic quality of it. In this way I could feel the impulse to exit my experience. To identify with it as a felt, somatic state was much more immediate and operational than intellectually holding it as a psychological insight to unwrap. Directly experiencing the hole itself eliminated any need to question whether this was occurring or not; I could feel it.

I slowly and carefully dropped my attention into my torso until I sensed a subtle streaming, like a school of minnows darting through my chest. A knot of tension rose within me. A contraction in my central line pushed me up and out of myself. I breathed. I relaxed my shoulders. I anchored into my sit bones. Far off I heard the voice of the guide encouraging me to stay present, to relax into the feeling. She acknowledged that I was on the right path. Her voice grounded me; knowing I wasn't alone went a long way to keeping me present. "I'm not alone," I told myself. I rode the oscillations running up and down my vertical line as they expanded and emptied. I let them have their place without being forced out by them. This mystery had a profound common sense, a sensibility of affirmation that lived in the warmth that was slowly galvanizing in my chest. I was building trust and acceptance of the process and the natural intelligence of the body.

The guide offered the image of a rope ladder as a way to lower myself into the hole. Through an embodied imagination I stepped rung by rung into this unknown abyss. By embodied imagination I mean something that is felt, not just a disembodied idea, but also a phenomenon in which attention creates an energy field that stabilizes an image. This stabilized image becomes an experience that creates a context for skillfully moving energy and embodying new behaviors.

On the rope ladder I took a step, stopped, and tested the temperature to see if I could be in this ocean of uncertainty, in this abiding fear without being catapulted out or my attention wandering elsewhere. With each session I became more familiar with this emptiness, with my hesitancy, with this mystery of a vacant, undiscovered room in me. Surprisingly, a shift began to emerge simply from choosing to face the unknown. This felt like a triumph of will, a sensation that lived in my belly center, a place I could easily inhabit, a place of agency and belonging. I learned that to take on what's difficult, whether you succeed or not, exacts its own reward. It was building the muscle of irimi, which means "moving into the heart of the

conflict and understanding that the solution may be in the conflict itself." This can be cultivated through practice, and it can be effective in multiple other areas of our lives where we are called to enter into dark and uncertain terrains.

In the darkness an unexpected pinprick of light appeared. I moved toward it, and as I got closer I saw myself with my father. It was a long-forgotten memory embedded deep in my tissues of him being the officer of the day on a naval ship. I was with him, and he was holding my hand, and the world was no longer dread, but hope. He was in his formal khaki uniform with a .45 Colt sidearm, his military ribbons on his chest, and a band around his arm that said OD, signifying officer of the day.

We were walking through the gray, inner passageways of the ship, and when we passed one of his shipmates he introduced me. I read a hint of pride in him, without affection or warmth, but I felt the care that translated into a belonging for me. I knew that he was extending love to me in the only way he knew how. I was inside his aura, held in his energy field, and he was keeping me safe. I swelled with gratitude, knowing that at some point in time I had had an experience with my father that translated into the feeling of being loved; there was a warmth that moved through me as I attached to his authority on this massive ship on which he commanded respect from all those we encountered. It dawned on me that my father, in the only way that he knew how, loved me, and cared for me. Tears spilled down my face. My chest was opening and softening. I saw that his love had always been there, however twisted at times, and that I was capable of letting his love in, despite our many conflicts. I saw that I could simultaneously hold the contradiction of his care and his violence. My world expanded knowing that I had room inside of me for both his love and his abuse. Inexplicably I was laughing and crying at the same time.

It was as if there was now gravity, an inward anchoring that was a leverage point that allowed a place from which to push forward; a foothold, where before there was only a void, empty of possibilities. I now had a place where I could properly ground myself and populate this feeling to as many parts of my life as possible. I was able to love more fully and to allow love in; to see that both wonder and fear can be present if I allowed the vulnerability of loving fully to take residence in me. I recognized that the path was not eliminating that which was undesirable, but cultivating the presence of space that could contain all the contradictions, paradoxes, and polarities of life. For me this was the process of fully embodying my “self “ with all of its magnificence and its shadows, so I could forget the self and thus experience the abiding interconnectedness of all things.

The image slowly faded, leaving a disk of opaque yellow, the color of melted butter. It was not sparkling or filled with light or particularly meaningful in any way. There was no longer a hole or darkness but a place of solace, of knowing. I could feel my heart; I could feel its rhythm, its pulse, its amiability spreading through my chest. It was a sense of returning to something that had always been there but was now being recovered. It was emotionally complex yet elegant in its simplicity; at once poetic and civil, delightful and harrowing, informing and pleasuring in equal measure. A significant thread had been sewn into the fabric of my being, weaving the self and the sacred together as if they were one cloth. Something profound had changed for me, yet I would soon find out that this was just a beginning.

To say, “I’m now in my heart” can evoke a multitude of metaphorical, literal, and figurative concepts of being more loving, more compassionate, more forgiving, and so forth, but the experience was none of these. What I literally felt was a warmth in my chest, breath filling places that had long been empty of feeling, sensation streaming through my rib cage and into my shoulders and arms, and down into my legs. There was an immeasurable sense of interconnectedness that began to take shape between my thinking and feeling, speaking and actions, and my emotions and intimacy.

My guide counseled me to stay with these energetic states instead of assigning them some sort of meaning. There was no way I had to behave, and I did not need to make meaning out of this experience. I simply needed to feel the wisdom of this new form that was shaping me. This is the somatic path: being informed by an intelligence that is deeper than the rational mind; a sacred trust in the ongoing flow of life, not as an idea but a felt, lived experience. I had buried this part of myself so long ago that there would be no quick answer to what this meant other than the path is built by laying each stone, one by one.

Over time it became apparent that in some indistinct way I was compelled by some larger architecture to speak more truthfully, to embody the primacy of relationship, to step out of myself into the larger world, to recognize the cost of defending my ignorance, to embody the mysterious power of vulnerability, to question why I believed what I believed, to question all those things I inherited from the social conditions of being a white male growing up in America in the ’50s and ’60s. But first I needed to grieve.

GRIEVING

The call arrived in the late afternoon.

I was brushing down my horse Rios after a roping session. He was starting to adjust to the lariat swinging over his head, and I was able to keep my seat more often as I flung the lasso toward the cattle horns nailed to a fence post. Wesley, my nine-year-old daughter, had tied a floppy lavender bow around the horns that made me smile and made Rios skittish. I treated Rios to some grain and released him into the front pasture, feeling happy about what we had done together. A voice called out from the house: “You have a call from George. He says it’s urgent.”

“Jac’s in a coma.”

I’d known Jac for twelve years. We were part of the team that taught the classified six-month Trojan Warrior Project for the Army Special Forces. We had hiked through wilderness areas in Tanzania and practiced aikido together. I was one of his groomsmen at his recent wedding, and I named my youngest son after him. He had become a brother to me. I was looking

forward to the decades ahead of us on a path of adventure, brotherhood, and contribution.

I was stunned; I couldn't make sense of what was being said. It was as if a door had suddenly slammed shut in my face. My chest heaved and contracted and then breath was sucked into my lungs. Without knowing it I had been hunched over, my arms wrapped around my chest, holding my breath. Since my experience of the hole in my chest, I was much more aware of the feelings inside my rib cage. The work now was how to be with that much sensation and the accompanying emotions and images.

When we think of a "heart opening," it's common to associate it with arriving at a destination where cherubic angels ascend and descend against a pastel-tinted background and a celestial choir sings hymns of goodness and serenity. This wasn't the case for me. My previous construction of what it meant to be a man—someone untouched by certain emotions and unassailable dispositions—was replaced by a deluge of uncertain sensations and moods. It was like entering into a dark wood with no clear trail. Where there had been certainty and knowing, there was now unease, tenderness, and a tangle of longing.

At this stage I was focused on staying with the sensations, the temperatures, the vibrations so I wasn't flooded out of myself. Slowly, breath by breath, I was being schooled in how to listen to the message in the energy of the heart. This was a quickening that comes from a somatic opening, resuscitating a dormant state to one of robustness, aliveness, and energy. These feelings are informants as to what is going on inside us.

Now I felt dread. I was afraid, helpless; how could Jac be in a coma? I had just spoken to him a few days ago, and he was his usual upbeat self. Though

I was trying to keep it at bay, I knew I was facing the loss of a dear friend. George told me that he had been fatigued earlier in the day and had lapsed into a coma. He was now in intensive care at the hospital. I sat in meditation and prayed that he was not in pain or suffering. I was adrift in my own confusion and could barely concentrate.

The next call came three hours later.

“Jac’s gone.”

Something grabbed me by the nape of the neck and lifted me a foot above my body. Shock, denial, and then a storm of tears, anger, and shame rolled through me. I sobbed and wailed for hours. At his memorial weeks later, I began crying the moment I saw the postersized photo of him. I was still crying three hours later.

Sorrow.

The grief crumpled me; I folded into myself in sorrow. This was a descent into the depths of the relentless tides of change and loss. Impermanence is a stern master. There was no object in the sorrow, only a limitless expanse of sadness and helplessness. The sharp-edged reality of a loved one gone was a deep cut. My body wanted to crawl into a cave; I wanted to cloister myself in solitude. This is a journey that we can ultimately praise as it delivers us into a deeper understanding of our place in the human family. This is not depression but an expansion of our humanity as we all have our own dose of sorrow to take us there. To spend time in the dark undergrowth of the valley floor becomes the compost out of which we grow. The descent

into a deeper inquiry of meaning and values ripens our humanity, puts shine on our spirits.

Rage.

The grief threw me into a rage, blaming an unfair, arbitrary, capricious, and callous God for snatching a best friend. Rage is large, voluminous, hot, and energizing. Allowing rage to be fully expressed ultimately felt sacred and dignified; its release cleansed my perception into a lucid, penetrating clarity, allowing a precise, diamond-like attention to clearly see through to the truth of things.

Pushing rage down can turn into bitterness and resignation; projecting it onto others is irresponsible and alienating. Rage is a common default when we feel hurt or helpless but letting it skillfully play out sets the next stage for grief to be a healing power. In a moment of unsullied understanding it became clear to me that to surrender to the life of our foundational, essential emotions was to experience the voice of Spirit, not something apart but a part of a greater whole.

Mourning.

I mourned for over a year, but when a friend sent me the passage from Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” I felt not comfort, but hope. Mourning is a ceremony of hope that is driven by the prodigious life force that propels us forward into an unknown future. Mourning reveals hope because it is not a wallowing in sadness or despair but a healing that remembers the past and moves us forward into a new

shape of living. Inevitably it asks us to look at the dark face of despair, but hope is as perennial as the passing of the seasons, as recurrent as the child leaving home for their journey into adulthood, as perpetual as the seas returning water to the sky. It's the cellular knowing that the sun will rise again.

Hope.

Hope is not optimism or a sunny outlook or maintaining a manufactured positive state of mind in dark times. Hope is a state of being that precedes our will and originates even before consciousness. It's an abiding intelligence that French phenomenologist Gabriel Marcel referred to as a "memory of the future." It is the soma, the living body in which this wisdom of hope resides. Hope is not an idea or a plan for the future but a wisdom that is always present and arises effortlessly when our grief takes us to the house of mourning.

Gratitude.

Grief opened the doors of gratitude for the many years that I knew Jac, and bonded and grew with him. In the pain I felt at losing a dear friend and the future I had projected with him, I was inexplicably led to gratitude for the sacred gift of having known him. I learned that whatever our circumstances are, gratitude comes out of the acknowledgment that life is a gift, a gift that we haven't necessarily earned and one that we can be thankful for at any time.

When I asked my grandmother what she prayed for she replied, “I don’t pray for anything. I give thanks for what I have. I give thanks for the miracle of life.” When I asked the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast what his focus was as a Christian monk he replied, “Gratefulness is my path. When I’m grateful I know in my heart that I belong, and when I acknowledge and say yes to that belonging, the feeling is the essence of love.” He embodied this sentiment as he spoke to the twenty-five Green Berets of the Trojan Warrior Project, and it deeply moved them. When he asked if they understood what he meant, some replied choking back tears and some with tears rolling down their cheeks about how grateful they were for their families, their comrades in arms, the opportunity to serve, their connection to their faith and God. Meister Eckhart said, “If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is ‘thank you,’ that would suffice.”

In the over-two-and-half decades since Jac was suddenly snatched from this life, I’ve had numerous moments that have returned me to the sacred power of grief. A parent passing, a young man sentenced to prison, colleagues, students, and dear friends who have died, often senselessly. And grief can also appear as a companion to new beginnings, such as my last child completing college and going off into the world and a daughter beginning her own family. Yes, of course these events have been joyous and celebratory as well, but gone is gone, and whether it’s a life, an identity, or a child moving away there is ending, loss, completion, and renewal and with it the opportunity to be informed by the deep, elemental emotions that travel with grief.

Wonder.

In each encounter with loss, grief placed me deeper into the experience of wonder, reminding me that there is much that is out of my control, there is little that I truly know, and that the richness of life begins with curiosity, seeing with the innocent eyes of the child. Aristotle says philosophy begins

with wonder, which eventually leads to the divine power of the sacred. If we allow ourselves to be fully touched by grief, wonder will open us to the startling realization that our rational mind has little leverage in explaining how any of this—including you, me, and anyone else—exists or why it exists.

After Jac died I dreamt of him often and saw him everywhere—in the light caught on the branches of the apple trees, the sun cresting the hill, the turning of a phrase, the shine in a child's eyes, the shadows on the back pasture during a full moon. He was gone. He was everywhere. The wonder of it was mysterious; he was close by, his presence living in everything, and he was gone.

When my friend and aikido sempai (senior to me) Terry Dobson suddenly passed into a coma after a night teaching, I would sit with him at his hospital bed and gaze into his eyes, which remained open. The physicians said he was brain dead, attached to a breathing apparatus, inert, yet the familiarity of being with Terry remained. I felt we were communicating at a level that was far deeper than scientific analysis, deeper than anything my knowing could manufacture. The grief I felt at his passing was surpassed by the wonder and awe of the depth of connection I felt when I sat with him in silence. I had the experience that he was radically near, and he was profoundly far away. The doctors politely scoffed at my musings, yet I knew that the power of grief nudged me into an eye-to-eye meeting with the sacred. Medically we may be declared dead, but consciousness is measured in terms of the mystery.

Again I experienced the abiding knowledge that our emotional lives and the sacred are intimately laced together, and that grief is the portal for so many of our other emotions. There is no separation between these deepest feelings and our spiritual depth. There is a continuum of embodying Spirit while we are fully in the everyday play of being in the world. As Saint

Augustine said, “My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me.”

Our emotions, as well as the energy of Spirit, live in the coursing of our blood, the rhythm of our heart, the blush in our cheeks, the clenching of our fists, the streaming of life running through our legs, the longing for love in our chest. Our emotions are sacred, and they become the glue of our collective humanity. Our emotions, the feeling of life animating us, and the presence of Spirit are all linked by the sacred pulse toward unity and aliveness. Like each rotation of the kaleidoscope’s tube there is a different configuration, yet the same colors are always present. So it seems with our emotional life: each emotion is singular in its expression and at the same time intertwined with other emotions, flowing from the oneness of the sacred mystery.

Then there is the larger grief, sobering and seemingly unsolvable, that can be respectably integrated into our path. This is the knowledge carried deep in our cells that informs us that at some point death awaits us after our short pilgrimage on this Earth walk. We, the human animal, know that we know, and we cannot escape knowing that the personality we call “I” or “me” will at some future time no longer exist. The knowledge that everything and everybody we love and cherish will also end confounds and enlivens us in equal measure.

As I write this I am devastatingly aware that north of me a city of almost two hundred thousand people is being consumed by flames and the death toll of humans, dogs, cats, horses, chickens, and cattle is quickly rising. In addition, large tracts of land are being decimated. The smoke is so dense I cannot see the calves in the front pasture less than a hundred yards away. The burned embers that blow on the land remind me how close I am to having all this disappear in flames.

This knowledge of our own certain death can turn us toward an existential despair, or it can be a powerful generator of heartfelt action and commitment to the unfolding of our astonishing lives.

This singular human dilemma is resolvable by living fully in this moment, and in this moment, and in this moment with a robust and sincere obligation to life in its many facets. It's as if everything and everyone around us, including our own lives, is on loan. We adopt them for a small passage of time, or is it they adopt us? Even when we name things it gives us a false sense of ownership, as if by distinguishing our experience in language, we can contain the feelings and narratives in a bubble of durability. Yet under close scrutiny we soon see that this sense of ownership generated by naming has no authority and has but a brief existence in our constructing the dual realities of us and them, good and bad, worthy and useless, and so on. When the loan comes due we are left with empty hands, a growing bank of memories, the realization of unrelenting change and loss, and the reflection of our own desire to act as if there might be a string of moments that form a road that we can stand on that is fixed and unchanging. This reaching for a ground of certainty seems common, though nothing around us supports it.

The sober truth of impermanence learned through my experiences at Dog Creek and with the calving operation imprinted in me an inescapable fact of human existence from which nothing escapes. Change, or impermanence, was one of the Buddha's three basic marks of existence. His insight was that clinging to permanence, believing as if our identity, looks, health, roles, relationships were permanent and unchanging, is the cause of suffering. All religions have devised ways to come to terms with death, but it's unmistakable that what begins will end.

Death—the big change—is a spiritual disposition; it can help us focus on our aliveness right here, right now. While impermanence can be overwhelming in what it means for our lifespan and the lives of our loved ones, it also offers an opportunity to pause and celebrate life in this very moment, as it has not yet been taken from us. All moments tell us that we are alive right now, right here, as the unfolding of life becomes holy and sacred. The small joys of the heaving chest after exertion, the streaming of energy when something that was suppressed surges free, and the warmth in our heart when we recognize love is the other side of vulnerability are all guides that call us to be present and grateful for what this moment brings. Everything will eventually be taken from us—our health, our loved ones, our money, our looks, our very lives—but right now we can celebrate that what is here has not yet be taken. As the poet Jeff Foster says, “Loss has already transformed your life into an altar.”

Many earnest minds have carefully investigated the insight of impermanence, and the solution they arrived at was nonattachment; that is, to see and accept the universal truth that all is changing and nothing is permanent. We are told that if we allow this insight to penetrate deeply into us, our compulsions to defend and cling, to reject and push away, and to harm other life forms can dissolve in the wisdom that all is change, and therefore every moment is sacred, and all of those who are still with us holy.

I tried this; it didn’t work. While the truth of impermanence is undeniable, I’d often see myself using the concept as a way of avoidance, of ducking difficult situations and a way to appear above the fray and fool myself into thinking that my faux detachment was a spiritual virtue by saying, “It’s going to change anyway, why get worked up over it?” When I saw others feign detachment I could see how it reflected a part of myself. In this way I saw that I was not embodying detachment but using it as a ploy to dodge pain and suffering.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist tulku and abbot at the famed Surmang Monastery, suggested that intimacy with impermanence enriches our living. His presence, along with a lifetime of practice, communicated a living truth, not just a good idea, and my world changed in that moment. The very notion of intimacy with impermanence radically shifted my detached, academic, arms-length distance to change to the possibility that an intimate relationship with loss would amplify my affection for life.

I eventually found that when I anchored into the deep truth of the foundational ground of impermanence, a vast energetic field opened, and I related to myself and others with compassion, generosity, and kindness. If I remembered that those I was critical of or irritated with would face death, as I would, I immediately had space for who they were. My strongest resource now is to be with the discomfort when I think of my death and the death of my loved ones, opening to the indisputable truth that one day we will all be taken, and we need to cherish each other now. I believe that our practices develop the confidence to directly face into the indestructibility of impermanence. On good days, it fills me with love.

While the notion of intimacy with impermanence makes sense to me, another experience emerges that puts a living ground on this principle. A somatic reality reveals that by embodying our aliveness we are able to have a direct experience of our interconnectedness to all of life. This opens us to the responsibility we have for the preciousness of the time we have together on this extraordinary planet. We can think of ourselves as having an obligation to the shared moments with others and the environment. We can fully embrace that impermanence, loss, change, and death do not create suffering but paradoxically increase our astonishment at being alive. By affirming this aspect of life that I have called the “capital ‘G’ Grief,” we open our hearts to the utter mystery of being alive in this breath, with the acorns falling from the oaks and the stars burning in the night sky, being consumed by wonder and awe.

THE ELEGANCE OF THE SOMA

The early Greek word for body was soma. Soma referred to the living body in its wholeness, meaning it was the human form where thinking, feeling, acting, sensing, and emotions resided. From this perspective, we don’t have separate buckets for the mind, body, and spirit, but there is the human body, or soma, in which a subject, a self, an “I” is present in our posture, behaviors, gestures, tones of voice, stances toward life, and so forth. The body isn’t simply an object or a tool, as I first thought of it, but the shape of our aliveness. Our actions, emotions, and moods are not led by a disembodied mind but by the inherent wisdom of our soma. In this view we don’t have bodies, we are bodies.

This was first revealed to me when I became aware that my attitude, attention, and intent played an integral part in how I performed in sports or martial arts. Without being able to readily articulate it at the time, I sensed that the anxiety I felt at the beginning of a competition could defeat me if I didn’t learn how to befriend it. My breath would rise to my upper chest when I was nervous, and this would negatively affect my efforts. I noticed that when I felt intimidated by a competitor there was a stiffening in my low back that diluted my efforts. What I began to understand was that the attitude in which I approached a training session, or a competition, would affect the outcome, either positively or negatively. In addition I began to see that my attitude or mood was not a mental phenomenon but a sensation that had residence in my muscles, breath, gestures, tone of voice, and the way I

moved. This was a first glimpse into a state where there was no division between a “me” and my body and that my soma could directly inform me about my emotional states, which reflected how I perceived the world. This allowed me to make choices and take actions that weren’t previously available to me.

It became clear that regardless of how hard I trained, if I wasn’t concentrating, breathing rhythmically, keeping the goal in mind, and in a state of dynamic relaxation, I wouldn’t be at my best. I was constantly told to relax, but no one could tell me how to do it or demonstrate it. I was instructed to “you know, just relax.” My only models were adults saying they were going to relax and then sitting on a couch drinking a beer after work. I knew the coaches didn’t mean this, but they didn’t offer anything else. “Just relax” was a meaningless bromide.

Principles such as relaxation or focus were presented as important concepts but very little was said on how to make them operational. It was as if they were something apart from what was inherent in me. Over time I learned these principles were a fundamental ground for human potential, and that they were, in fact, at the center of not only high-performing athletics but of a fulfilling life. While I had no words at this point to distinguish this insight, it was the beginning of my understanding of the mind/body unity, and I knew that this is what I longed for.

There weren’t many I could talk to about this, but it had captured me as an essential aspect of self-knowing. While these principles positively affected my athletic ambitions, they also began to subtly show up outside the playing fields and dojos. Before taking tests at school I would take a deep breath and consciously drop my shoulders; before speaking in a seminar I would drop my attention to my belly center; and when I stretched before a training I would bring my attention to relaxing the knot in my low back instead of just going through the motions. My body was still an instrument

to serve my desires, but I was slowly shifting from being the boss to being a partner. It was dawning on me that the body had an intelligence that was not the property of the intellect. This intelligence was mysterious in its origins and at the same time very practical.

I remembered a moment when Sensei Hirata, my judo teacher, would admonish me, “Don’t think so much; relax and let your hips do the technique,” and although I didn’t know what these things meant, I began to pay attention to my hips instead of trying to execute the throw correctly, and my technique began to improve. I saw that throughout my life I was given nudges and teachings that wouldn’t make sense to me until years, even decades later. I’m reminded to attend to what is being revealed in this moment, however difficult it may be to let in, as it may be the next stepping stone on the path.

This new awareness helped me to learn how to manage external pressures and inner conflicts. I saw that relaxation was the result of organizing myself bodily, and the way I did that had to do with where I placed my attention, how I focused it, and how I centered in my intent, as well as being aware of when I was slipping into spurious or negative thoughts, and then bringing my attention back to the clear air of the present moment. Later I saw that this revealed that energy, or life, follows attention; wherever we put our attention is where energy will come to the foreground of our awareness. Ultimately, our ancestral intuition confirms the technology of neuroscience.

This perspective became shockingly apparent a few years after completing my track career. I was going through twelve sessions of Rolfing as part of my training as a somatic therapist. Rolfing, named after Ida Rolf, is a form of deep-tissue bodywork that affects the neuromuscular system so the body can become more balanced and flexible. The session on the backs of the legs was especially painful for me, since I had severely pulled my hamstring in my left leg the last year I competed. As my Rolfer extended

his fingers and knuckles deep into my leg an image appeared of me in my USA uniform that I wore in the pre-Olympic meet in Mexico City. I was astonished that a biographical image was actually stored in my muscles. It was a fully graphic memory that was not initiated from a cognitive recollection but from literally touching scar tissue deep in my muscles. It was as though a painful incident years in the past, a torn hamstring muscle, was now fully alive and present in the moment, not by a mental process of recalling but by surfacing a subterranean memory through touch and feeling. It was as if the bodywork was a soma-archeological dig that uncovered a moment of history that I had safely compartmentalized.

The impact of directly experiencing that our past is stored in our muscles, organs, and cells, not merely as a philosophical concept but as a living reality, opened an entire new world to me. The notion that our history influences who we are in the present was familiar to me through my studies in philosophy and psychology, but the fact that it is living in our tissues was earth shaking. I was to find out that not only physical injuries take residence in our bodies but emotional and mental trauma do as well. Sequestering this memory in a remote corner of myself was not a conscious volitional act but a way to take care of something that I found out later was my safety and dignity. It showed that there's an inherent bodily wisdom that can affect our behaviors, both positively and negatively, in the present moment, as in this moment as I write this and right now as you're reading it.

What was equally or even more profound was that it was an image of me from the waist up! I was a sprinter who didn't inhabit his legs. I had legs, of course, but what I knew when that image appeared was that I primarily ran from will and determination and not from fully embodying the lower half of my body. My legs had a secondary role in the act of running. To some this will sound incredible; to others it will make perfect sense. At the moment it was both for me; perfectly reasonable and at the same time a moment of profound mystery. Yes, of course my legs were churning; I had fast muscle twitch, cardiovascular stamina, and good form, but throughout all of my days of running, I was never actually living in or in touch with my legs.

I wasn’t sure what to do with this except to figure out where else I wasn’t living and determine the cost of numbing myself. I also looked at my clients with these new eyes to see where they had barricaded themselves from life, discovered what it meant to heal myself and others by working through the body, and learned how to deepen my compassion for others by seeing the pain and suffering locked in their somas.

For many today, these insights and experiences may seem pedestrian and commonplace. The advances in neuroscience now ground the reality of the connection between mind and body, and how we can manage stress and tension through somatic practices. Since science is one of our gods, and this god says it’s so, then it must be so, which therefore confirms the reality of the mind/body interface that our ancestors and many others in the preindustrial world have known for a millennium. But to many in the ’60s and ’70s much of this sounded like witchcraft. I’m honored to have had teachers and friends who taught me and supported me in this quest, and also helped me use it as a doorway into the world of Spirit.

MOVING THE ENERGY

As a young boy, when my grandmother, Baba, asked me to massage her tired feet and legs while thinking positive thoughts and visualizing the Rosicrucian cross, it made no sense to me at all, but trust, imagination, and love directed me toward the power of presence and what it meant to be a body worker, a healer. As often happens in the mysterious, intricate weaving of our lives, two decades later Dr. Randolph Stone, the founder of Polarity Therapy and a healer in the most pragmatic and sacred sense of the word, took my hands, stared at them, and said, “You’ll be good at this work.”

It was 1971. I had been living in India studying meditation, and he had taken me on as a student of his powerful method of healing. At first it seemed inconvenient to be called over at all hours, as I was there to study meditation, not to follow Dr. Stone on his rounds. And although I was flattered by his attention, I had no real drive at that time to learn Polarity Therapy. Yet his presence invoked a deep curiosity and fascination in me. While he used countless techniques to inform his healing work, it was his way of being that energized what he did. Everyone that he treated went away deeply affected by his healing touch, compassion, and kindness. Even if their symptoms were still present, they all seemed more joyful and grateful, as if something was healed in them. He treated my wife, Catherine, for migraine headaches and then taught me how to do it, prompting me to work on her and then to work on the other Western guests as well.

He would call me to his clinic at all hours to observe him with clients, assist him, travel with him when he would go to villages to work on the sick and maimed, and finally, to work on him. A week before I departed, he called me to his clinic and said that his shoulder was bothering him and requested that I work on him. As I began to work on the points and techniques that he had taught me over the months, he began instructing me about my quality of touch and how to use my body and energy to do the work. Although this seems naïve now it wasn't until that moment that I fully realized that he had been preparing me to do his work. The thin, but direct thread between my grandmother directing me as I worked on her legs and the transmission from Dr. Stone was a like a talisman that I carry in my soul to this day, acting as a reminder of my obligation to pass on the power of touch.

Dr. Stone would spend six months of the year in India and six months traveling the world, working on those that no one else could help. His attendant was his niece, Louise Hilger, who called him Uncle, a name that we adopted over time as our familiarity and affection for him grew. When he traveled to the West Coast and Hawaii, he would stop and stay with Robert, and Alyssa, our partners in the Lomi School, Catherine, and me.

Up to this time, he had taught Polarity Therapy to a small group of chiropractors and osteopaths in small rooms with folding chairs, fluorescent lights, and venetian blinds pulled down. When he first visited us in California we gathered over thirty people who were anxious to learn from him after hearing us speak about his mastery. This was in the early seventies and although there were a number of health and medical professionals present, the crowd was very much made up of the counterculture of the time, and everyone was lounging at the pool in various stages of undress. Robert, Alyssa, Catherine, and I huddled together, anxious about whether or not Dr. Stone would be offended by what he saw and if we should do anything about it. At this point we had only seen him in India, where he was a highly respected member of the spiritual community,

and he always had a formal, Old World demeanor. I had never heard him speak of anything other than God or Polarity Therapy. When he did comment on the world it was always with a reference to the divine or the healing power of polarity energies.

Wearing his trademark light gray suit over a white shirt, he stopped and looked solemnly at the scene of naked bodies sunning and swimming in the late spring warmth while we held our breath, and then he exclaimed in his deep resonant voice, “Look how beautiful it is! It’s like the Garden of Eden, all the healthy bodies, and so free!” He then turned without another word and went into the large room where the seminar was to be held. We didn’t know whether to be shocked or relieved, but his spontaneity and consistency of a lifeaffirming view of the world became familiar over the years.

Once when I picked him up at the airport in Kauai, Hawaii (I was often his handler/companion on his visits), I told him that I had been surfing at a nearby beach and asked if he would like to stop and see it. He nodded, and I pulled into a sandy parking area. He immediately walked wordlessly to the beach in his suit and tieless white shirt, stopped on a small rise above the water, and looked quietly out. Then he moved his hand in a wide arc, up and down toward the waves, describing something unseen in the trade winds and said, “It’s the waters, the healing waters. You have to move the energy. You have to let the energy flow.” Then he stripped off his jacket, then his shoes and socks, and then his pants, all the way down to his baggy boxer shorts and walked purposefully down the slope to the beach. My first concern was what to do with his jacket. Did I hold it? Did I take it back to the car? What did I do to keep it clean and without creases? Then I was worried about him being only in his underwear on this public beach. He was in his early eighties at the time and in remarkably good shape, yet he did not easily fit into any normal image of someone on a surfing beach in the North Shore of Kauai.

When I realized he wasn't going to stop at the water's edge, panic crept in. The last thing I heard before he dove in was, "It's the healing waters; it's the energy of life!" I was frozen in place. Then he didn't just come up to the surface and walk back to the beach but began to swim out to sea, going under the breakers, doing the overhand stroke out to the horizon! In a frenzy I kicked off my sandals, threw down my shirt, and ran after him, diving into the surf and beginning to swim toward him. He was steadily heading out to sea and I was barely keeping up with his steady overhand crawl to the horizon.

All of my queries were left unanswered: "How are you doing, Uncle? Do you think we should go back now? I think this might be far enough, Uncle." He just kept swimming effortlessly, while I was struggling with my breath and composure. Then he stopped. Treading water and looking around, he turned to the shore and at the same tempo swam back. When we arrived at the beach, I was breathless and relieved; he was calm, silently looking out to sea. "The healing waters!" he exclaimed. "You've got to move the energy. You have to let the energy flow," he said as his thick fingers, spread wide, described a continuous circle in front of him as if massaging the air.

In some ways he was like a dog, spontaneously walking away at meals or when he was teaching or in conversation. Sometimes during his classes he would abruptly stop and leave the room. No word, no explanation; simply turning and walking out. After a few minutes he would return without explaining his disappearance and go back to exactly where he left off in his talk. Later we realized he was merely going to the bathroom, and it was his custom to take care of his business when nature called. It never felt disrespectful, but he moved to his own song. His level of spontaneity and autonomy was both refreshing and baffling.

Up to this point I'd never seen any adult act in this socially unedited way; especially someone at his level of education and mastery. His sense of

freedom was refreshing and apparent; he operated on a plane that had no other comparison other than what was unfolding moment by moment. Yet his healing work was incomparable. What I saw him do was nothing less than miraculous: quadriplegics would move their limbs, paraplegics would stand, and frozen fingers would open and close after decades of incapacity.

The space between those twenty-some years from my grandmother teaching me how to touch and feel and Dr. Stone describing invisible currents in the air as they declared life in its most essential form plaited together my fascination with presence, embodiment, and the mystery. Dr. Stone asked Robert and me if we would accept the legacy of Polarity Therapy when he retired. We said no, as we were focused on the importance of the emotional life in healing as well, and Dr. Stone's work focused primarily on healing physical ailments (although he profoundly touched others emotionally).

I had the immense honor of studying intensely with Dr. Stone for five years. On his travels he would always visit us and stay for a while to teach a seminar or two, give us private instructions, or work on us, and we would observe him as he worked on private clients. He was incredibly generous in sharing his work with us at all hours, whenever we asked. I asked him once how he learned all this and he replied, "I stay up late." I interpreted this to mean that his meditation practice was a primary source of his inspiration.

It was around this same time that I was introduced to aikido, the way of being in harmony with universal energy. The energy work of Dr. Stone operated in tandem with many concepts of aikido. Although aikido functions in an entirely different context than a healing modality, both systems revealed how to let the energy flow while engaged in everyday life.

AIKIDO: THE WAY OF HARMONY WITH UNIVERSAL ENERGY

I was twenty-six when I first saw the photo, and I was mesmerized. “That’s it!” I thought. A bearded, elderly Japanese man in a white gi and a black hakama, holding a wooden sword, walking through a forest. Simple, timeless, potent; an ancient archetypal tableau that mysteriously opened me to a part of myself that until this moment I didn’t know existed. My heart and vision expanded as if something within me was liberated that had long been held separate, like a missing vertebrae suddenly recovering its place. What I saw in that photo reflected a magnetizing presence that had not yet matured in me. This solitary figure on a forest path emanated a sense of selfpossession, incontestable as it arose from a source within him; an imperturbable calm coupled with a warrior’s presence fit to engage with life. This was the precise impression I had when I first met Maharaj, my spiritual teacher. I’m not claiming there was something magical or fantastical about the photograph other than it profoundly and inexplicably affected me. I only knew I had to meet this person. But this was not meant to be.

The photo was of Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido. Ueshiba, who is often referred to as O Sensei, or Great Teacher, was a national living treasure of Japan for his martial arts innovation and mastery. In his years as a martial artist his power was known to be unparalleled; those he defeated felt dignified by their loss, and many stayed to study with him. In addition,

throughout his life O Sensei had a number of awakenings that he described as becoming one with the Universe. This, I believe, is what led him to call his art aikido, “the way of harmony with universal energy.” I can only imagine the skepticism the highly trained fighters and warriors of Japan (and the world) felt when they heard this and challenged him to prove his art of harmony on the mat. He was victorious in these challenges, and a number of his challengers became teachers of the art, helping spread aikido throughout the world.

O Sensei died two years before I saw the photo, yet in his image I recognized the same kind of grace that Maharaj radiated. A grace that is arrived at when one pushes oneself into the precipice of annihilation and then walks away uncompromised, erect, and still. This awakened in me the dignity of refusing to comply with the limitations of what we inherit, whether from the social conditions, cultural norms, or spiritual lineages that permeate our lives. While we’re indebted and grateful to those who have built the path that we travel, we are equally obligated as those that follow to stay open to how the path evolves and changes. It’s critical to remember that what we may think of as being permanent will be carved by time and history and error; while starlight may appear fixed, it’s actually constantly replenishing itself. O Sensei and Maharaj themselves claimed that they were constantly learning, adapting, and evolving.

This notion of opening to the life energy that moves through us as a source of spiritual wisdom and skillful action in our daily lives was completely compelling to me, and I began training in a remote area of Kauai, in the Hawaiian Islands. When I entered the rusty Quonset hut that was the dojo, I felt the same mix of emotions I had experienced when I began judo fifteen years earlier: an indiscriminate anxiety about being a beginner in a new environment with strangers but also a coming home, a sense of belonging that promised both comfort and challenge. But what was unique in this instance was that while the practice was vigorous and demanding, there was no competition between partners. In the dojos and playing fields, I was accustomed to a competitive edge that was always present. Here I saw

cooperation instead of fighting and dominance. It was as if the people practicing were doing the Tao Te Ching, not just talking about it or analyzing it. Their bodies were forming and shaping in the principles of wisdom that were taught in that ancient text.

I was converted. It was as if I had been transported to a distant planet with a completely different etiquette of how to settle conflicts. There wasn't a place for a winner or loser in this dojo. I could tell, even at my beginning stage of practice, that they were listening for a higher order of resonance, an inclusive accord to a principle of collective unity. I was hooked, and three nights a week at the end of the day I drove the length of the island to train. My colleagues and friends who were enjoying the beautiful Hawaiian sunsets on the North Shore thought I had lost my mind. In a way I had; such is the draw of love.

For two years, I practiced meditation and trained in aikido seven days a week. I was up before dawn to sit in meditation for two and half hours, and I trained in aikido in the evenings and on weekends for two plus hours. I also started a body-centered therapy practice. My life revolved around these disciplines, and I approached them with the same competitive intent that I had refined in sports and competitive martial arts: if I trained harder, faster, stronger, longer, and with more effort, I would win at becoming a better, high functioning, successful, enlightened person. I thought that through effort and hard work I would defeat and win over the obstructions that kept me from attaining my goal.

It was as if this vision of enlightenment was a trophy to win after triumphing over all obstacles, inner and outer. I was discreetly strengthening my ego while attempting to cultivate wisdom; a complicated, imprecise chemistry. Yes, I was spiritually motivated, and I was simply reenacting the training of the previous fifteen years of my life, which was the norm for a white Western male of my era to achieve success.

Nonetheless, my sincere desire to connect to Source was genuine. After decades and what seemed like truckloads of practice, I concluded that what I was searching for was already always present, and I needed only to relax into it. Easier said than done. It's a fatigued homily, but to truly relax is the work of a saint.

It was during this stage that a memory of Sensei Hirata, my judo teacher, came back to me, as if the significance of his teachings from decades earlier had ripened, burst open, and fallen into my lap at this opportune time. After winning my division at a regional tournament I showed Sensei Hirata my medal with the frieze of two judo players on faux gold plating. He put his thick slab of a hand on my shoulder, held my gaze, and asked, "What did you win?" When I held up the medal again he persisted, "What did you win?" with a pronounced emphasis on you. He looked at me for what I remember as a very long time, allowing the question to remain with me to this day. I believe that this was the very beginning, however subtle, of drawing a distinction between external competition and self-knowing.

What is it that I win by defeating an opponent? What does winning have to do with self-realization, a fulfilling life, or lifting the veils of perception? And now, at this current stage of my life I ask, who is this "I" that asks these questions? And I remember Mary Oliver's counsel, "You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert. . . . You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

Sitting meditation made sense to me as a path of awakening, but practicing martial arts as a spiritual path was a mystery. Up to this point in my late twenties martial arts were either competitive sports or combative fighting skills that were reinforced by teaching hand-to-hand combat in the Marine Corps.

I was intrigued that early in his life O Sensei had a predilection for both the martial arts and spirituality. He followed both of these paths by studying with the masters of the combative arts as well as engaging in spiritual studies in Shinto, Buddhist, and Omoto lineages. He went through a number of stages in his evolution yet what was always consistent throughout his life were the martial arts and his relationship with the divine. It was this combination of warrior and spiritual seeker that captured me. With my background in sports and the martial arts and an interest in meditation, this narrative instantly clicked.

While a number of the masters of the fighting arts in the East evolved a spiritual perspective in their later years, O Sensei was singular in his development of a martial art that he explicitly declared a spiritual path; a way of embodying universal principles. Again, what was so remarkable was that he demonstrated these principles on the mat rather than simply expounding intellectual concepts behind a lectern or from a sitting cushion. When he was attacked he neutralized the aggression of the attack and not the attacker.

There are numerous sacred dances and sacred movement rituals that are spiritual in nature, but aikido was the first effective martial art to be practiced in this manner. O Sensei's claim that aikido was also a spiritual path is one of the most profound and ambitious declarations of the twentieth century. In one of his moments of awakening he declared his experience as being "One with the Universe." Throughout history this phrase has been spoken in innumerable languages and cultures by mystics who were monks or hermits but not by martial artists or warriors. O Sensei also repeatedly said that at the heart of the warrior is a loving center, echoing the words of the sixteenth-century philosopher and soldier Sir Francis Bacon, "I know not how but martial men are given to love."

But what exactly did O Sensei mean when he said that aikido was a spiritual path? Since he was a young man he had pursued spiritual endeavors along with his martial aspirations, so did it require a martial art to have the kinds of awakenings he had? There's nothing esoteric about the techniques of aikido. Even when his techniques evolved and changed over the years there was no explanation of whether the "new" moves were more likely to harmonize with universal energy than the previous ones. He clearly had a power that was unique and remarkable, and he said that he received this power from the Universe, or the gods, but he never left a canon about what the practices were that would cultivate that quality of power. His students, those that felt his energy, were consistently and deeply touched by his power and presence, which was described in as many different ways as there were speakers. What he emphasized was the importance of sincere aikido training to evolve and purify oneself, to maintain a positive outlook, in addition to offering the wisdom of Shintoism, and the other paths he studied. Would his moments of enlightenment have occurred then if he was doing flower arranging or calligraphy? I wonder about this. But most of all I'm deeply grateful for being led to the paths of sitting meditation and aikido, two sides to the same source.

I was introduced to a practice called the "unbendable arm" in my first aikido dojo in Kauai. It was a humid Saturday morning class, and I was impatient to move forward with the rigorous physicality of throwing and falling. Instead I was instructed to put my right foot forward and extend my right arm forward. "Let your ki flow from your center out your arm, through your fingertips, to the edges of the Universe," the sensei instructed. At that point my well-muscled partner pushes back firmly on my arm. It doesn't budge. He then stands to my right side and tries to bend my arm by pushing down on my elbow joint and pushing up on my wrist. My arm is unbendable, steady, solid . . . and relaxed! I had never done this before, and I'm astonished at what I could do, and that it seemed so common, as if what had happened was as typical as the afternoon trade winds.

We changed roles. I was doubly astonished at how relaxed my partner's arm felt when I tried to bend his arm, especially since his obvious physical strength was not at play. When we bowed to each other as we completed, I glanced at him to see if he was as amazed as I was, but he was nonchalant as if nothing special had happened. My eyes were as huge as saucers. I felt that I was just given the secret to some hidden ancient treasure, and I was amazed at my unexpected, great fortune. The dojo radiated an indeterminate brightness, the light had a weight to it as if my extension into the quantum field generated a new way of seeing.

A mighty seed was planted deep in my soul that morning. I was aware that a principle of universal energy had just been revealed to me, and it was nearby and available. My energetic field had expanded; there was a practical sense of solidity and at the same time an ineffable spaciousness. Doing this for the very first time I was amazed that I was successful. The teacher walked us through the steps, I followed, and my life jumped an octave. There was never a doubt that I did it "correctly" because my partner was unable to move my arm. It was so simple, so easy, and I was given the map to return to it.

How did that happen? Was that my mind or my body? Or was it both? Where did that power come from? Was it always present, and I had only to be introduced to it? What did it mean to imagine extending to the edges of the Universe? It was effortless to hold my position, even enjoyable to be tested that way in the sense that it seemed to compliment my relationship with the pusher, creating a quality of mutuality even though he was pushing against me. I could feel him listening to me, me listening to him, and me feeling myself. It was the opposite of an adversarial relationship, even though he was using his full strength to overcome me, to collapse my arm. Or was it a third, more powerful force that occurs when we consciously move our energy through our bodies? This asks the question, Is it us who is controlling the energy? I don't think so. I think we are instead consciously entering into an energetic state that is always present, unborn, and undying.

It’s evident that the answers to these questions live in the somatic qualities of an embodied imagination, a relaxed body, and an openness to a larger field of energy and awareness; qualities that are an innate part of our nature. In other words they reside in the soma as an emergent, living experience. After practicing this in various forms and modalities for half a century, I’ve found that it’s an experience that resides both in the soma and in the world simultaneously. In other words our inner life and the world at large are one.

It’s not necessary to have a partner to practice this expanded energetic awareness, but partners add richness to the practice. They reflect when we’re triggered by our conditioned reactions and try to muscle through conflict, and they reflect when we return to a connected, centered place. A primary value of aikido is that it’s a partner practice. This allows us to be revealed in a no-nonsense way since it will be obvious when we’re trying to force a technique, and when we’re in the flow of energy. Your partner is a part of the cosmos, so training with them is a way to have a somatic conversation with the Universe.

The most important perception that was embedded in me was that Spirit is energy. Spirit is the lived, felt, tangible energy of life in both the granular and cosmic domains. It’s not simply a theory, or a concept, or the next big idea; it’s a living experience. Spirit is alive, pulsating, seeking to be known. Spirit is something that we can feel. This small seed began to grow immediately in me. O Sensei didn’t call his art Ai-muscle-do, or Ai-technique-do, he called it Ai-ki-do. Suddenly aikido became more than a title or a designation; it became an experience I could feel, an energy I could be informed by, and be formed by. While aikido is a practical, defensive martial art, it’s also a path that opens the doors of vitality, perception, insight, and a felt relationship to Spirit. O Sensei said we could understand aikido in three domains: the manifest, the hidden, and the divine. It’s a doorway to directly experience Source energy. This simple

exercise called the unbendable arm opened me to think of ki as Spirit. Ki as the divine element, the organizing principle of the Universe.

This inquiry into the mystery of the divine has been lifelong, and as I change through time and practice it continues to show me its innumerable faces. The experience of contacting the animating principle of universal energy, through the simple exercise of the unbendable arm, has been useful to me in O Sensei's distinctions of the manifest, hidden, and divine. While I use this example it can be applied to sitting meditation, walking, running, performing a solo form, breathing . . . whatever you choose.

The manifest is the observable stance of standing and extending one arm in front of yourself. The hidden is what principles you may be intending in the practice, such as relaxation, blending with your partner, opening to a greater power, and so forth. The divine is surrendering to the energy that moves through the form, to become one with this universal energy, and letting it be the guide rather than the "I" guiding.

Consider these domains similar to the Russian Matryoshka nesting dolls that fit inside of each other while maintaining their own size and shape. They're all present even as one of them comes to the foreground. Each state living within the whole. There's form; there's the inner life of intent and attention; there's the greater field of awareness and energy that organizes and animates us. The stages that unfolded for me on my aiki path are my interpretations and not necessarily representative of aikido as a whole. As in many disciplines aikido has many interpretations.

In the domain of the divine we move through three states: First, we organize ourselves to allow energy, or ki, to move freely through us. In other words, the "I" is very present and active in organizing this relationship with the

vital force. The “I” is the author of this state of being. Second, we go a step beyond the “I” being solely in charge. After feeling a certain comfort with the form, “I” can now allow awareness to expand into the greater field. We understand there’s a universal energy that’s always present, and the “I” is consciously joining that energy. There’s a sense of collaboration with something larger than the “I” identity, although the “I” is still active. And third, the “I” has been eclipsed into the greater field. The “I” is one with the vast field of universal energy. We’re not separate from the technique but one with it. In aikido this is called takemusu aiki. It’s when the technique is spontaneously created in the moment to meet the attacker (or whatever situation is presented) effortlessly, skillfully, and creatively. The conditioned, conceptual mind is no longer present. We are the greater flow of energy. In various traditions this oneness has been called harmony, love, nonduality, satori, the Tao, or the Source.

This was a turning point for me in that I saw that every circumstance, event, relationship, and moment is an opportunity to walk the path, to contact Spirit, to join Source. This realization, which was encouraged by my teachers, was in its infant form at the time, but it’s a lifelong road that I’m still walking, and it’s still working me. As the thirteenth-century Persian mystic Jalaluddin Rumi said, “While your hands are in your work, your heart’s with God.”

THE PROTECTOR OF SPIRIT

An event in my more recent past that granted me direct access to Spirit and shunted me into unexpected healing and transformation began with a startling encounter with the wild. In the moment it seemed to provide no solutions to anything, just a reminder to go with the mystery of it all.

It's President's Day weekend. After my meditation practice I go out to the deck in the morning fog to soak in the hot tub. Everything about is quiet; settling in the steaming water I close my eyes, rest my head back, feeling my hair enlivened by the wind. In the silence and deep relaxation it's as though this is an extension of my meditation. After a few moments I'm shocked out of my reverie by a searing pain on the crown of my head.

I've been attacked!

I immediately get to my feet looking for the attacker and all I see is red, everywhere red. I am fully disoriented. Red fills my eyes, red is flowing down my body, red is coloring the water. Blood is pouring down from the top of my head. Through the red haze I see a very large black cat staring up at me. A spontaneous roar erupts out of me, my hands balled into fists, and

I leap out of the hot tub prepared to take the life out of this very large feral cat. I am at war. There is no thought, only the reflex of fighting for my life. I blink the blood away and the cat is gone. I press against the flow of blood to slow it down. The dawn light brings the coastal hills into focus. From a deep peace I have been catapulted into a new unknown.

At the emergency room I was a curiosity among the staff: “You say a feral cat jumped on your head and clawed you to the bone?” It occurred to me that they were considering calling the police as this sounded a bit shady. “Maybe he was in a fight or . . .” I imagined them thinking. Stitches wouldn’t work because of the depth of the cut I was told, so the doctor suggested staples, which I said no to because I’d have to return to have them taken out. So I told him about seeing medics in Afghanistan using glue in the field for battle wounds. Glue it was, and after a lengthy discussion about a rabies shot, I asked him that if it was him, or one of his children, what would he advise. “No rabies shot,” he answered, and I walked out with the mystery growing larger.

Two days later I was going to step outside to watch the waxing moon clear the oak trees. At the edge of the deck was the same very large, black, feral cat. Despite my sudden appearance, he was still, unmoving, staring directly at me, unlike the other feral cats on the ranch who fled at the slightest sound. I froze halfway out the door, unsure. For a long moment we locked into each other, sharing the same energetic field, sensing each other. Unconsciously I reverted to a man-over-nature posture and stepped loudly onto the deck, stamped my boots, and waved my arms, shouting “Get out!” Without hesitation he lunged toward me. Seconds later I was in the house with the door slammed shut. An electric charge ran through me; I looked out the window and he was gone.

I was alone and hiding in my own house. Yes, literally in my own house, my place of residence, but what was happening in my house of being, in my

house of belonging? What did safety mean to me at this point in my life and who was this foreboding visitor who was holding up a mirror to me? Did I need to face the reflex of my macho stance that I assumed would scare him off, to face my embarrassment about being afraid? Yes, but the central question was, What was being asked of me by this fierce being? Was this the wild that was calling, actually demanding, that I bow into its mysteries, to heed the summons to reconnect to the wild that exists in my soul and in the soul of world itself? How did I decipher the terms of the wild? Gary Snyder said that wildness "is perennially within us, dormant as a hard-shelled seed, awaiting the fire or flood that awakes it again." Was the cat the fire or flood that awakens me? I might have been overthinking all of this, but I trusted the questions as they emerged from an energetic river rushing through me.

I shared this incident with a number of friends who either seemed as dumbfounded as me or offered that my hair had probably resembled a bird's nest or a gopher, and it looked like lunch to the cat. I was looking for something other than sensible thinking; intuitively it seemed that this incident had roots in a metaphysical dimension inviting me to open and let go. My central question, which is a question I live by daily regardless of circumstances, remained: What is the mystery, or Spirit, asking of me?

Two weeks later I met with Arkan Lushwala at a ceremonial lodge he was leading on indigenous wisdom. Arkan is from the Peruvian Andes where he apprenticed and trained with his elders for decades to learn the way of the shaman. He was also accepted into the Lakota Sioux lineage of healers and medicine people.

When I met Arkan in 2009 in New Mexico, he was facilitating ceremonies for the healing of the earth. His teachers had asked him to go north to find people who would participate in ritual fire ceremonies to help humans come back to balance with the planet. At that time I recognized that his humility,

authenticity, integrity, and power came from years of rigorous practice and challenging trials. It was clear why his teachers and mentors had chosen him to help fulfill what Spirit had asked of them. I told him I was on board for his mission, and he accepted me, and a number of others, and we began a training to understand the history of the ceremonies, how to conduct them, how the elders saw our present condition, and how to facilitate healing the earth. I know Arkan as a teacher, a guide, a friend, and a fellow traveler on the path of life.

At the end of the ceremony I asked Arkan if he would give me a perspective on an unusual incident that had just occurred to me. He nodded, and as I told the story of the black cat he listened in his careful, deep way, showing no affect except for a steady presence.

When I finished we sat in silence for a bit and then he asked, “You say he drew blood?”

“Yes, a three inch tear that cut to my skull.”

“I’m envious,” he said.

I was dumbfounded. My thoughts accelerated, looking for a category to understand what that meant. There wasn’t one. Arkan read my bewilderment and told me that his people maintained that any contact with a wild animal was a sacred encounter, a powerful blessing, a moment of divinity, as they’re the essence of Spirit. Furthermore, if they draw blood, or even kill you, it carries an even more powerful spiritual energy. He told me of the time when he was in the presence of a black panther in the Amazon

jungle. The panther had just stared at him, but Arkan had been deeply touched by the encounter. It lived in him from that moment on, and hearing of my encounter had brought back the memory even more strongly.

He told me that his people hold that the black panther is the Protector of Spirit, and I was very fortunate to have had this black cat draw blood. I deeply trusted Arkan, and I was moved by what he said, but I felt the vast space between our worlds. He told me of a way of seeing that was deeply embodied in him, and while it resonated in me, I knew I was looking through an entirely different cultural lens. What he said didn't make me feel special or exceptional, and he was not implying that I should. He was simply describing the world he lived in and for reasons beyond me, I was invited to share that world with him.

A few days later Arkan took me aside and invited me to the sun dance ceremony that would take place later that summer. He said that Spirit told him that I should be there because of my encounter with the black cat. I was openly shocked and deeply honored. I understood that I was being invited as a guest but at the same time, as a white male with no native ancestry, I felt cautious about attending such a sacred ceremony. Arkan nodded, acknowledging my respect and sincerity and saying he understood, but he emphasized that it was Spirit that had made the invitation, which was the most important thing. He also confirmed that the elders in both his Andean and Lakota lineage fully supported the participation of nonindigenous people, which settled me and made me more comfortable about attending the ceremony.

As the ceremony formally began, Arkan instructed me to sit with the drummers in a shaded area until he came back to tell me what's next. I was mildly confused by the phrase "what's next." I thought of myself primarily as a visitor there to support in whatever way I could, but his tone intimated that there would be something else. While I had a momentary spike of

nervousness, I put it out of mind, becoming absorbed in the sun dancers and the hypnotic drumming and singing.

On the morning of the last day, Arkan told me I would join the dancers around the central pole. When I asked him what I should do, he told me that he would tell me when the time came, but that until then I should just “be with the drummers.” Answering my question of what to “do” by telling me how to “be” was commensurate with Arkan’s deep commitment to listening to Spirit for guidance; an ethos deeply embodied in him through the culture of his shamanistic tradition. While I trusted the sacred space that was created, and I trusted how Arkan was being guided by Spirit, I was also anxious about wanting to be skillful and appropriate in what was asked of me. At the drumming circle I dropped my breath, felt the earth under my feet, and surrendered to the songs and to the infinite vastness of the sky overhead. I was uncertain. I was present.

The drumming and singing stopped, and Arkan called me into the ceremonial space. The dancers made a circle around me, and the space reverberated with the energy of the previous three days. Speaking to the group he said that I was a warrior, and he didn’t know what I had done in the past but all of it was forgiven. These words were like arrows of kindness that went directly to my heart, and tears immediately began to roll down my face. This was totally unexpected. I was here as a guest one moment, and then suddenly I was a participant, mysteriously taken over by an emotion that had an agency apart from any personal intent. I had no sense whatsoever that these feelings had been so close, and as the tears fell I could see their small marks spotting the red soil as if laying a trail forward, a map leading me into Wu Daozi’s cave.

Yes, letting go into the unknown; yes, letting go of who I thought I was. The three days of continual drumming, chanting, praying, and supporting the dancers, along with the lodge, the heat, and the thunderstorms had

changed my internal atmosphere. Arkan's words were like an incantation that broke a spell that had been shielding my heart. Long withheld tears of relief poured out of me.

Arkan told the group that I had already given my blood, and I wouldn't be pierced, but I would be healed and forgiven. He took me to the center pole and laid me face down, the crown of my head touching the trunk. Instantly my crying turned to uncontrollable sobs, and then a wailing spontaneously burst out of me. The ancient songs calling the ancestors, the drums playing a single heartbeat, the gourd rattles urging what was hidden to come forward. An eagle feather was swept down my back, initiating a trembling throughout my entire body. This became a powerful cascade of energy up and down my spine. As my entire body began to undulate, the crown of my head started to knock heavily against the pole, loosening something deep within me. As the cadence of the convulsing increased, the call and response between the drummers and Arkan became an ancient summons. I couldn't tell if I was leaving my body, going deeper into my body, or dissipating into the heat and dust. I felt focused, and at the same time I sensed the presence of an emergent circumferential awareness.

Suddenly the drumming and singing stopped; my body became still. I felt many hands on my back and legs, gently, lovingly caressing me. There was no effort on my part to earn this deep care; I was being loved unconditionally, and my task was to let it in. Each touch was a simultaneous moment of filling and emptying, a graceful reminder to let go—simply let go, with no attempting, no considerations, no thinking about right and wrong; just letting go to the waves of care pouring over me.

Unexpectedly it came to me that what had just happened was a further healing with my father. Our estrangement had lasted over fifty years, and I'd done a truckload of work on it, but I hadn't come to this ceremony with any intent at all of healing my relationship with my father. In fact, my only

intent was to be present to what was to occur. As random as it seemed, this was what occurred, and I had no rational understanding of why this would be so. But something had dropped off, and something had mended together around my father's painful rejection. The steely resignation that usually arose when he was evoked was not present; instead there was an empathy for the pain he must have been in to sustain that level of censure for so long. In the moment I no longer felt shame or rage; only an open heartedness toward myself and him. The mystery didn't solve the contradictions that lived between the absolute and the relative, but it held the heart open so everything could have residence in its luminosity.

From what sounded like a long distance away I heard Arkan telling me to stand. I slowly came to my feet. The air seemed rinsed, everything in distinct outline. The distant Starvation Peak seemed nearby, as if I could reach out and touch it. Arkan held my arm and said, "Take this and dance." It felt like an eternity for the meaning of his words to reach me. I took the large eagle feather from him and asked him what he meant.

He said, "I'll tell the drummers to play the warrior's song, and you dance with this eagle feather."

"What dance?" I asked.

"Your dance. You know how to do the warrior's dance."

He led me toward the drummers, gave them the instructions, and walked away.

There was a brief rising of doubt in me, and then a settling back into myself. Looking back I can see that this was another moment of letting go. I was in a different culture with different traditions and customs, and I was being asked to participate in a ceremony that was entirely foreign to me, yet self-consciousness, negative selfjudgments, or doubts were absent.

I stood for a moment and let the drumming and singing penetrate me, then the dance danced me. I can't explain what I did or what I looked like, only that I was consumed not only by the dance, drumming, and singing but also by the red earth, the blazing sun, the shimmering cottonwoods, the cloud fortresses congregating overhead; all was one. I was everywhere and nowhere. I danced for an indeterminate time until the drumming stopped. I stood still until Arkan came over and asked me to assist him in attaching the barbs to the dancer's bodies. The feeling of unity and openness stayed with me, long after the dancers had completed their final rounds of the Sun Dance.

Later that night, as I was looking back at the black cat "attack" that had precipitated the events of the day, I remembered a black cat named Midnight who moved to the ranch with me twentytwo years earlier. He was a hunter who roamed the land hunting gophers, voles, birds, and all matter of life. At other times he would be still as a stone, peering into the earth and hearing something outside my decibel range. Over time he began to wander longer and further, and then he just stayed away, impervious to my calls. Periodically I'd see him, then it was occasionally, then just now and then, but he never really came back.

Over the decades I would spot what may have been his offspring, stalking mice in the barn, tracking something under the gum trees, or crossing the fields. Was it his great-grandson who blessed me with his claws that foggy morning? Was this the protector of spirit working through Midnight's family line that was destined to draw my blood, driven by a cellular call to

deliver me to this moment in the mesas of northern New Mexico, to be initiated into a mystery that is yet to be deciphered?

What I know for sure is that this strange lineage of events brought healing, community, ceremony, guidance, and Spirit closer to me. It allowed me to see, once again, that transformation always requires a letting go of something, and a letting go into something. There is a deep knowing that the art of our life will be at its best when we paint ourselves into a cave and let the painting speak. One way I express my gratefulness for this gift is by stopping whatever I'm doing when I see a black cat at the ranch and bow to it.

But transformation doesn't mean moving from the uncomfortable to the comfortable, as we understand that our scrapes and bruises are the bedrock for the path of awakening. Navigating terra incognita certainly isn't always an easy passage. Surrender is paramount, as is the reforming into a new way of living, as we cross the unbounded space to a robust embodied life. This requires the fierce heart of a warrior, as many demons live hidden in ambush.

This passage also reveals the soma's capacity to hold the seeming paradoxes of uncertainty and discipline, structure and spontaneity, trust and discernment, and vulnerability and courage. To learn to blend with the changes in life as we shift identities takes more than the skill of a craftsman; it takes the daring, fresh eyes of an artist. But with time, practice, and right guidance, what began to capture my attention was not only the forming, unforming, and reforming of a life, but the spaces in between. The unexplored and often terrifying space of the unbounded domain holds the promise of a ground of being that is unconditioned and extraordinarily spacious.

As I attended more closely to what opened after the ceremonial letting go and before the new shape emerged, I glimpsed a dynamic, vibrant energy that was vast and radiant. It was empty. It was full. It was a bright, pulsating spaciousness. Who I knew myself to be me and how I knew myself to be was eclipsed by this greater field of an unbounded, luminous awareness. Now, at seventy-seven years of age, when I ask myself when this awareness began, my answer is that it has always been here; I can't remember a beginning. When I ask myself whether this awareness actually began with a childhood earache, I am no longer certain. The answer that comes to me now is that this awareness has always been here. And when I ask myself if this awareness has ever ended, the answer is that it has not. It is without beginning and without end.

What is the possibility of embodying this mystery that lives outside of our interpretation of time? What is necessary to equip ourselves to recognize the sacred that is formless? Is this what T. S. Eliot was referring to when he wrote in the Four Quartets of something that is "half-heard, in the stillness. Between two waves of the sea"?

THE SENSATION OF LONGING

It was the first full moon of December and in the fading light we began the aikido classes. A red fox sat in silhouette, still and noble against the deepening sky, confident of all that may be asked of it. As though it felt our attention, it trotted the ridgeline northwest in crepuscular time. Overhead in the night sky Saturn trailed Jupiter in readiness for their inevitable conjunction at the end of the month.

Since the outbreak of Covid-19, we'd continued our training virtually as well as outside in what we called the field dojo. Working mostly with weapons, bokken and jos, maintaining proper distance with masks, and in the deepening cold wearing vests, scarves, gloves, and wool caps, we'd been training on uneven ground and in compromised light, building new skills. We'd also created a stronger collective bond through the prior eight months as we'd practiced through triple digit heat, fires, smoke, the ever present threat of Covid, and the grief of losing a dojo member. We'd also enlarged our aiki sangha community with evening birdsong, owls, kestrels, prevailing winds, trees, stones, coyotes, cows, sheep, deer, dogs, bats, skunks, cats, and the wheeling constellations, all divine contributors. Before we bowed into the kamiza, we welcomed all that life, allowing ourselves to be touched by it, and in that moment a chorus of coyotes rose from down in the valley. It was a distinct primordial sound that alerted us while it soothed. The night's training was robust and energetic as their singing intermittently joined and informed us.

Hours later I was awakened by their calling. I immediately sat up, a charge rising up through my skin and the hair on my arms in response to their ancient howls. They were much closer than they had been earlier, and a response to their yelps came from the other end of the valley. I stepped outside as if commanded by their call and response and walked to the field in the full moonlight. I stopped in the orchard and listened; the silence was so deep it was as if the Universe itself had also stopped, waiting expectantly for what was to come.

Then, as if the coyotes themselves were nesting against my ear, their primal cries, majestic and grave, broke the quiet, igniting something in me I could only call a longing; a pull reverberating deep in the cave of my heart. I felt compelled to join them, and when I tried to replicate their yelps, I felt foolish and inauthentic as if co-opting something not native to me. Yet I knew there was a sound in me that wanted to come to life. I waited and listened to their next chorus then I followed with, “Heyyaah!”

The night swallowed the sound. The silence was deafening, and my lungs filled with the cool air. I extended my arms and raised my eyes to the night sky and without thinking I shouted, “Hellooo . . . I’m Heeere!” The familiar, indistinct feeling of longing rose in me, paradoxically filling me and calling to be filled. Mr. Coyote, the trickster, reminded me of the formidable archetypal energy of the longing that has been with me since I had remembering, the longing that has many names, but what was present at that time was what Georgia O’Keeffe called the “faraway nearby.”

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I believe that many have experiences like the ones I've described, but they may bury them because they're outside the norm, or they may threaten a status quo that is jeopardized by seeking and exploration so they should be left unattended, or they are simply not recognized for what they are: windows into realities that are apart from the inherited materialistic conventions of things being more important than people or nature. While some of the incidents I've described may seem dramatic, they can also take the everyday form of a warm embrace from a loved one, a moment of awe in nature, an intimate contact with an animal, the rapture of music, the fresh smell of petrichor, and the luminous space that opens when we don't react to the clutter of thinking that permeates our waking lives. If we are awake to these experiences they can become stepping stones to spiritual maturation.

Those events of mystery and awakening permeated me like some ancient dye and became treasured companions, sometimes close as if a lens on my eyes, and at other times remote, almost as if they were never there. But however their intimacy was measured I would find no leave of their mark. When they occurred it was as if a door opened within me, and I was pulled toward it. What became a through line, perhaps even more significant than the experiences themselves, was the persistent sensation I can only call a longing whose melody pulled me further down the path.

Just as Abu Ghalib, the nineteenth-century Sufi poet wrote:

If you want to know the miracle, how wind can polish a mirror,

Look: the shining glass grows green in spring.

It's the rose's unfolding Ghalib, that creates the desire to see—

Ghalib reflects on the longing that drives us toward the experience of interdependence and interconnectedness, clarity, and peace that is the ground of our being. This longing leads us to our birthright as embodied spiritual beings and the unfolding "that creates the desire to see."

My grandmother naming Spirit held the promise of possibility, an overarching, inclusive view of life. I was captivated when she spoke of this inexplicable force in her soft, penetrating voice. At an early age her presence and her words framed the journey of what having a human birth meant. The events at Dog Creek, the pain of an ear ache, the birth of an orphaned calf, or out-of-body experiences didn't necessarily nudge me out of everyday routines but rather confirmed that there is something adjacent to the predictable lanes of daily life. It pointed to a mystery that lives in the simplicity of breath, an inner sightedness, a cellular knowing of the sacredness of life. Longing eclipses the striving for social accomplishment, superficial forms of belonging, or a competitive consumerism. All those things that define material success are distant when there is a spiritual longing.

These events were a promise of more. I couldn't say more of what, but simply more. This was sufficient to invoke a visceral sense of spaciousness, a magnification that life is more than what we inherit, and an undeniable felt impulse to follow the heart's knowing. This more isn't based on what we have or do, but in being. Longing for more is measured in the pulse of the heart's desire toward oneness, not in the accumulation of things, or climbing the next peak.

Of the countless people who have shared their deepest reflections and intimacies with me for over half a century as a teacher, therapist, and coach there's an inevitable moment when they will disclose a time or experience similar to what I have described. They describe an event, sometimes guided by a wise elder, a luminous instant in nature, a catastrophe, an experience with psychedelics or plant medicine, a crushing trauma, the feeling of being in the flow in sports, or any opening that ignites an intrinsic longing that flows outward from the self to an unbounded vastness. This quality of longing is a bodily experience; it's a felt sensation connecting us to the life energy that animates us and is beyond rational comprehension.

For me this longing for More is a form of capture. We're captured by a view, by a compelling magnetism of life, by something embryonic in the depth of our DNA, or soul if you like, waiting patiently to be illumined, to be lit up. I think of phosphenes, those illuminating patterns that flare and flicker against the back of our eyelids. The miniscule designs shaped by the intrinsic electrical charges the retina generates while at rest reveals a life deep within us that longs to emerge out of the darkness and into form.

These are equivalent to the shapes that emerged from the concussions I had after being kicked in the head in capoeira, falling on my head in a biking accident, or sliding headfirst into a knee during a rugby match. In the hollow dullness of the moment, while on my hands and knees with my eyes closed, unable to stand, I was pulled toward the tiny swirls of light migrating across the inner darkness as if a boundless and unexplored cosmos were tucked close to my heart, motivated to merge with a larger landscape. This ended only when I threw up or momentarily lost consciousness.

This was the experience of light in the absence of light. It's as if we are coded to embody the wisdom of something vast, yet available, granular, and precise. A single cell, smaller than the eye can see, even smaller than we

can imagine, divides and propagates, atoms whirl, molecules spool, proteins rope together, chromatin stitches into chromosomes, and DNA spirals around a sugar-phosphate backbone to create the architecture of a body that travels a path toward awakening. Our brain encased in darkness builds a world of light; a momentum among our six trillion cells emerges that yearns to experience its place in the Universe. Are we like the terns, godwits, and phalaropes that migrate immense distances, as do salmon in spawning season or buffalo heaving across the great plains, all navigating by an ancient map written in their hearts? A longing for the more, for greater, in this moment is residing in our souls.

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Logan, my youngest grandson, stood about mid-thigh to me. I was in conversation with Django, his dad, but I could feel him tugging on my pants leg. I reached down and tousled his hair but keep talking. He took my hand and tugged at it. I twirled him absently while I continued the conversation. He grabbed my hand with both of his and tried to pull himself up. I finally looked down in exasperation, “What, Logan?” He was on his toes, reaching up with both hands, arms fully extended, his glistening eyes locking into mine, and he said, “Uppy.” It was like a light piercing my heart. “Uppy,” he repeated as I stooped down, placing my hands under his arms. This was the ancient gesture of longing: arms, eyes, voice, hands, breath, and heart reaching up and out toward the Universe, calling in that next order of significance. All of my children embodied this shape with me at some point and then my grandchildren, and I’ve consistently seen children across five continents embody this form of reaching out for the mystery, for love, for contact, for more.

There is a genesis moment when this sacred longing is a felt, sensate spark that opens our heart to a world more spacious than our current reality. This

moment of somatic awakening is often articulated as one of the following: “I now see I can inhabit myself and the world more fully by feeling.” “I recognize I have an emotional life that can inform and enrich me.” “There is an energy, a certain power, that I can organize toward a life-affirming purpose.” “There is something beyond my personality that is wise, compassionate, and self-generating.” “If I shift my perception I see the situation in a more life-affirming way.” I suspect that these moments occur all the time in the language of feeling. This awakening radiates light from within us, as well as opening our eyes to the light in the world.

Is it the fabric of longing itself that is the path of awakening? Or is longing the mystery itself, ceaselessly guiding us toward the deeper pools and the endless sky? Is it possible that mitosis, the slow-burning fire in our cells, is longing that is patiently waiting to be fanned into the flame of wisdom, love, or oneness? Is the purpose of this sensation of longing to mature into a service to life? Or is the goal of longing, longing itself ? Perhaps the question that lands directly on the center of the issue is the one that Meno asked: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?”

Does longing imply something missing or absent? If so, then what is absent? Or is it the presence of absence that draws us? What is it that wants to be filled and with what? Or do we want to be filled by this luminous emptiness? How do we know that this longing is more than simply an array of our social conditioning? Is it like the seemingly unconditioned knowing that the coastal foothills rather than the Rockies are home? Or is it like the summer thermal winds that are drawn eastward by the heat vacuum in the San Joaquin Valley, or for some, the longing of the boundless lake of solace. “These yearnings, why are they?” Walt Whitman asks.

The Greek word nostalgia derives from the root nostos meaning “return home” and algia meaning “suffering.” Nostalgia then is “the suffering

caused by a longing to return home." Since the sixteenth century, this emotion has been documented in the medical sphere as a malady suffered by those who have left their homeland seeking jobs, fighting wars, or becoming immigrant servants. But in the esoteric sense it refers to a spiritual longing, what the Portuguese call saudade. The Romanians use the term dor, the Spanish mal de corazón, and the Welsh hiraeth. But in the East it's explicitly considered a spiritual condition. Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, calls this longing, fariq, "homesickness."

The poetry and songs of Sufis are filled with magnificent verse about the pain the soul experiences being separated from the Beloved. This homesickness is not a sentimental desire but a deeply felt longing to find union with the Creator. Jalaluddin Rumi, the thirteenth-century poet and mystic, said that it is "a burning, burning, burning" that one feels in the heart. In his first sutra, the Dhammacakkappavattana, Siddhartha says, "separation from the beloved is dukkha (suffering)."

Longing reveals many contradictions in its deepest seat of wisdom. There is intelligence in our contradictions, and a somatic reality helps us hold the many contradictions of life. This longing is not a hankering for a candy bar or the newest fad but a spiritual flame in our inherent, unconditioned nature. The seventh-century hermit monk Abba Isaac of Syria, who was the alleged inspiration for Dostoevsky's Father Zosima, reminds us that this longing is not only a private affair set aside from the world when he said that God "will be all that we think about, all our living, all that we talk about, our very breath." Individual wakening is not a point of arrival.

Is the evolutionary impulse in humans ignited by a mysterious pull deep within us that is an affirmation of life, kindled by love and oneness? Is surrendering to the deep melodies of our hearts the path of fulfilling our life's purpose? The dream of every cell is to become two. Will our longing surely lead us into the vast unknown, into a mystery yet to be cleaved? Or is

it our longing that has us embrace the sacred that lives in very breath? Longing, in Rumi's words, "is the core of mystery."

My experiences fueled an even deeper longing in me. They offered a glimpse of a state that was beyond concepts and beliefs, that was an unconditioned, felt experience of life. There was More. In no way am I saying I would recommend the pain and discomfort that these experiences generated, but I would absolutely sign up for the shift in feeling and perception again. These experiences fully captured my curiosity, producing the inherent promise of embodying a goodness and well-being that is our birthright. It became increasingly clear that this was not going to occur by rationally constructing any kind of logical plan but by being more receptive. I longed for a way to return to an authentic original essence, a ground in which the divide between the longing and the longed for, the perceiver and the perceived, disappeared.

Similar to Meno, Martin Buber refers to this mystery when he says, "Whoever goes forth to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of world, finds him whom one cannot seek." For Buber the longing of the You, the Friend, much like the Sufis, is a close presence that we can always turn to for intimacy and succor. He further says, "When something does emerge from among other things, something living, and becomes a being for me . . . it is for me nothing but You!" Is what we long for so close that we miss it? Soto Buddhism says we are already the Buddha. Or like the Tin Man, the Lion, and the Scarecrow in The Wizard of Oz, do we already embody the virtues we seek but are blind to them?

In the beginning, longing manifests as both an inner and outer journey. In a more mature stage the duality of inside and outside is revealed as an artificial divide. Quantum physics implicates an organizing principle that all is unified, radiant, and unbounded, or as Padmasambhava stated eleven centuries before: "All phenomena are, in essence, the magical display of

mind.” Both point to a foundational underpinning beyond the grasp of the objective rational mind that’s the object, or Beloved, of our longing.

Longing has a direction. Similar to the starling’s murmuration, longing is an ancient forming and reforming of the heart’s journey to fulfilling its potential and purpose. Longing is a living process that flows out and collects in, a primordial tide gathering life and extending life, breath filling and structuring us, breath emptying and dissolving us. We breathe the world in translating it for safety, belonging, love, and dignity. We breathe the world out, joining the tumult and sacredness of life. Longing can be found in the chest as a warmth, an expanding sensation that fills us while it pulls us out of our self. Longing is embedded in our DNA as a homing device that returns us to that which is original in us, an unconditioned reality that is our true nature; a response to that deep inner voice telling us that there is more than this personality, this character, this role; or the culture demanding us how to live. In the deep inbreath the ribs swell, expanding our shape. There’s a sweet ache, a rhythmic pulse that forms in our heart and then flows outward. We are pulled simultaneously out into the world and into the interior. We follow a call to oneness.

On the path of embodying Spirit we are asked to live in the particulars of life while being informed by the mystery. Yet the primal impulse for Spirit to be embodied swims upstream against a social construction that happened centuries ago when René Descartes and his fellow philosophers in the seventeenth century searched for a way to right the savagery that existed in a time of interminable war, religious persecution, and a social order based on superstition, belief, and magic. Descartes was certain that he could alleviate this chaos by providing certainty through rational means. Though wellmeaning in his search for an antidote to the breakdowns of his time, this was the beginning of separating the mystery, and thus Spirit, from the life of the body. Reason ruled over sensing and feeling; intuition, emotions, and wisdom took a back seat to logic and conceptual thinking.

This notion of a deep longing for that which is beyond the singular “I” is not simply an intellectual concept, a fascinating idea, a desire, a curiosity, or a hope but originates from the very center of our being. Longing is felt in the tissues, and longing brings life to the tissues. It’s the song of life reckoning with the original, unconditioned essence that lives within us.

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What I see as I harvest the fava beans from the winter garden are spiraled shoots supporting cupped magenta petals, bumpy thickfingered pods, and the nitrogen-rich leaves. What cannot be seen is a calloused rough-veined taproot drawing nutrients upward by penetrating deep into the earth. Accordingly, our longing reaches upward to the sun, to the light, to the vibrancy of space, shaping into the celebration of new life, as well as plunging its powerful taproot unseen into the depth and wisdom of the earth. Longing doesn’t originate from the thinking self but from a dynamic current of energy that is local to tissue, blood, and the heart’s song, as well as something vast: the light of the moon coating the fruit trees or a tropospheric wind riffling the oaks.

I stepped out onto my deck, and the cool night air surrounded me. The cows stirred in the back pasture. A barn owl in the pines exchanged hoots with an owl on the dojo roof. The moon was whittled down to a bleached bone scimitar, a meteorite arced lightyears away, extinguishing itself in the night sky, a satellite voyaged steadily overhead. Upward into the immeasurable darkness my arms rose with my gaze, my chest expanding, my mouth opening as if to drink the fathomless night sky. Then inexplicably the image of Logan reaching up appeared. I smiled. “Uppy,” I say as I reach up with my entire being while the Pleiades wheel in the infinite.

Longing is path, path is longing. If one stays on this journey long enough, they become one. There is no outward and no inward, no path separate from longing and no longing apart from path. We heed not to collapse desire and longing if we don’t want to be lost on a dark endless plain of grasping and rejecting. Desire wants a piece of the world; longing reaches for the world itself, even in all its peril and transience. The journey cannot be completed by parsing the parts together, but only by reaching toward the whole. Not a teleological end, but an ever-evolving landscape reborn, dying, and reborn again and again. As Rainer Maria Rilke advised when speaking in the voice of God, “You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me.”

MAYBE IT'S WORKING

As I complete my morning meditation a memory of my spiritual teacher inexplicably appears. A student asked him, "Maharaj, you do so much for all of us for which we are very grateful. What is it that we can do for you?" Without pause he answered, "Just do your meditation. That's all I ask. Do your meditation practice with love and devotion." This unexpected memory fills me with awe and reverence. I'm deeply touched, as I've always been, by his unreserved generosity and unconditional loving kindness. My partner collects me, and we walk to the dojo for a meeting, and this feeling of warmth and reverence stays with me. The gardens and trees vibrate with an exceptional aliveness this morning; everything is radiating energy and vitality. I feel as though I'm walking in a bubble of expansive well-being. My partner reminds me that many present today are here for the first time, and I might consider giving a brief history of the dojo before we start.

As I begin to tell the story of the dojo I have this indistinct feeling that I am what I'm describing. I look up to the redwood ceiling and talk about it being heart redwood and suddenly, but effortlessly, I become the ceiling. I become the energy and history emanating from it; its color, its shape, its weathering, and the work that had been done on it are not apart from me. There's no separation; there is no me talking. There is simply a clear web of connection that is all-encompassing, a weightless spaciousness unifying everything. The usual boundaries that informed me where I was, and how I identified myself, had dissolved. Now there were no markers where I began

and where I ended. I was no longer a solid separate individual but intimately connected with everything around me.

The same thing happens as I talk about my aikido teacher's calligraphy on the walls until I feel a touch on my arm. My friend and partner, Staci, leans into me and says, "Did you smoke something before you came in?" She looks quizzical, maybe a bit worried, "Did you take any drugs?" As I look into her face a deep love overtakes me. My rib cage blossoms. There is no me, there is no her; I'm one with all that is, one with her, one with the entire Universe. The Universe exists within me and simultaneously it pervades everything. At the time there was only this expanded heart feeling of pure connectedness without an "I" present.

Staci suggests that we go outside with a few experienced students, one being a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine, another an EMT, to see what's going on with me. While I was being "examined," I only felt a love and harmony in this large field of oneness. Another colleague joins us and says she just wants to be with me because of what was coming off me. The consensus is that I should go to the emergency room since I was slurring and unsteady on my feet. I say I'm fine, which is a gross understatement since I feel the most unburdened, loving, and peaceful that I ever have, but when they all insist I easily go with it. Normally I would have staunchly defended my position, especially considering an ER visit, but in this state a greater intelligence spoke through me as it was obvious to move with the flow. In reflection this alone says loads about where I was in terms of being untethered to my usual character.

This state lasted for some time in the emergency room, and then I slowly felt myself solidifying into my known, historical body and personality. The people who were with me say they could see me reforming into the Richard to which they were accustomed. The examination in the emergency room, along with two other examinations the following days by neurologists,

revealed no signs of a stroke. By my descriptions of what happened and the observations of others who were present, the diagnosis was a transient ischemic attack (TIA). This is a temporary blockage of blood flow to the brain that leaves no lasting damage, making it difficult to diagnose as it doesn't show up in scanning technology. I take this seriously but what seemed to catch the attention of all the physicians was that I had no pain, no fear, no anxiety, no need to return to "normal," only a blissful, peaceful, state of pervasive harmony, which I relished. This appeared new to them in their experience of the condition. All my other medical indicators were healthy, and they encouraged me to keep doing what I was doing.

In my last interview with an esteemed neurologist I went into more detail about my meditation and aikido practice, which seemed to interest him. After a lengthy and stimulating conversation about my health, the brain, TIAs, consciousness, and meditation, I asked him what he concluded. He thought for a moment then made a gesture of "who knows?" with his hands turned up, and said, "Maybe your meditation is working." There was a sweet poignancy in his indicating he didn't know, which I didn't know what to do with, especially because of his elevated position in the medical field. But ultimately that was okay with me, as it had the effect of validating the integrity of living in the mystery.

I don't consider myself exceptional because of this experience; nor do I feel complete or that I've reached some final insight into the meaning of life or knowledge of what makes the Universe do what it does. The moments of clarity and expansiveness actually make it seem all the more mystifying. I've wandered to the edge of my understanding enough times to trust that it's the step into not knowing that feeds my longing. Considering the haste that is this world makes it remarkable to grasp what abides in it.

Finally, perhaps, in the state of not knowing, the authentic acknowledgment of having no answers to the big questions life throws at us or if we'll even

wake up the next morning, we bump into the utter uncertainty of it all. In this uncertainty there is a vulnerability that evokes another level of inquiry. Is it possible that embodied contemplative disciplines stabilize our uncertainty until we're no longer satisfied by a world that relies on concepts, symbols, and fixed, ideological judgments, and we accept uncertainty and mystery as path?

When I consider the moments of awakening that historical figures such as the Buddha experienced, I think of what the quantum physicist Niels Bohr allegedly said about quantum mechanics, "Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it." Can we say the same about touching the mystery? That if we're not shocked by it, we haven't understood it? In a somatic reality we accept that shock, the visceral, vivid experience of waking up, can lead to understanding. Conversely we can say that understanding on its own doesn't part the curtains to actually experiencing a new reality. And as the man said, perhaps my practices are working. That's good enough for me, since I'm now in love with my practices regardless of where they lead. The journey without a goal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Strozzi-Heckler has a Ph.D. in psychology and is a seventh-degree black belt Shihan in aikido. He is a cofounder of the Lomi School and Tamalpais Aikido, and founder of Two Rock Aikido and the Strozzi Somatics and Somatic Coaching. He is also the cofounder of the Mideast Aikido Project and Training across Borders, organizations that bring citizens from warring countries together to practice aikido, and the chairman of the board of Aikido Ethiopia. Richard was featured on the front page of the Wall Street Journal for developing the groundbreaking leadership program for the United States Marine Corps and was named one of the top fifty executive coaches in The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching and in Profiles in Coaching. He was also an advisor to General Jim Jones, the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe from 2003 to 2006 in Afghanistan. Richard is a pioneer in bringing somatics and embodiment practices to education, health care, leadership, team development, military, technology, and international peace work. He lives and works on Coast Miwok land in the Stemple Creek watershed in the foothills of Northern California. This is his ninth book.

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