Call of spirit.

William Homestead

The University of Montana

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The Call of Spirit

By

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Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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The Call of Spirit

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The Call of Spirit weaves together three narrative styles—personal narrative, interview, and critical exposition—in order to explore personal callings within the context of spiritual and environmental ethics. The personal narrative provides an example of spiritual searching and finding, and explores the desire for meaning in a postmodern age. The interviews provide examples of ethical activism, and thus how ideas and ethics are actually lived. And the critical exposition explores important ideas and ethical debates relevant to listening to and following a calling.

This thesis argues that religious experience, contemplation, and critical rationality contribute to an environmental ethic. More specifically, I argue that imagining a transcendent dimension, which is also immanent and grounded in mystery, opens us to multiple modes of knowing that gives us a fuller understanding of reality. This fuller understanding then leads us to engage our potential and our current environmental ills via ethical forms of activism. To support this argument, I explore many examples of lived ethics and callings, including permaculture, hunter-gatherer existence, forest activism, vegetarianism and veganism, teaching, eco-therapy, parenting, and daily mindfulness.
"How can we become more fully human and at the same time be saved from the fate of being merely human? Where is Spirit in this God-forsaken, Goddess-forsaken world of modernity? Why are we destroying Gaia in the very attempt to improve our own condition? Why are so many attempts at salvation suicidal? How do we actually fit into this larger Kosmos? How are we whole individuals who are also parts of something Larger?"

-- Ken Wilber
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Introduction

This is an unusual book. It combines personal narrative, critical exposition on mysticism and environmental ethics, as well as interviews with four individuals on their life-paths and calls to various forms of ethical activism. I honestly didn’t plan to include my own story. I’ve already gone down the personal narrative path in an earlier book and hoped I was done using that style. But criticisms from fellow participants in a writing workshop that I was holding back, along with my own sense that I shouldn’t refuse to expose myself since that’s exactly what I have asked my interview subjects to do, led me away from an academic writing voice and towards a more vulnerable one.

But before I go any further let me make a declaration, even if it’s only for my own sake. My life is nothing special. I survived existential struggles, became a spiritual searcher, wandered and worked as a factory worker, waiter, printer, landscaper, and bookstore clerk, eventually taught college as an adjunct instructor at Purdue University (adjuncts are poorly paid “guns-for-hire”—it’s like being in a ditch in front of the first rung of the academic ladder), and I keep trying to write even though it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever tried to do. But that brings me to the one thing I do give myself credit for—I’ve stubbornly followed my inner life, my path to learn, teach, and write.

Fortunately, I also have some special stories to share. My interview with Brent Ladd explores his more than two years living a hunter-gatherer existence. Syndee L’ome
Grace discusses her five years as an animal rights activist in Washington, DC. Andy Mahler reveals insights from his many years as a forest activist. And Rafael Catala shares his experiences teaching the relations among mysticism, personal growth, and the creative process. But my interview subjects also share much more than what they’ve done. They share how their life-paths have unfolded, including their deep struggles, spiritual experiences, and calls to express who they actually are.

The ideas and style of this book have unfolded over a period of six years. The writing has been an odyssey for me, with many missteps and false starts, and thus it thoroughly reflects my learning process. I chose the combination of personal narrative, exposition, and interview because I’m convinced that stories make ideas more interesting, as well as more deeply felt. Following a calling demands that we integrate multiple modes of knowing and stories help to elicit this integration. Readers should be prepared, however, for a bit of a roller coaster ride. The writing was an odyssey and I suspect the reading will be as well. Rest assured that the ideas and styles will also integrate and the ride will be worth the taking.

My goal in writing is to further legitimate callings, spiritual experiences, and ethical forms of activism. We know quite a bit about jobs and careers in our techn-industrial cultures, but far too little about listening to deeper impulses and then following where they lead. This wouldn’t bother me, except for the fact that this failure to listen puts our own health and the health of the planet in constant jeopardy. Now don’t get me wrong. Jobs and careers are meaningful for all kinds of reasons—including paying the bills and putting beans on the table. There’s also no need to be overly serious. Following a call requires equal amounts of purpose and play. I love struggling to write. It gives me
deep satisfaction, especially since I know that books have the potential to inspire others
to follow their callings.
Chapter One

The Bottom Drops Out

"Life is essentially a drama, because it is a desperate struggle—with things and even with our character—to succeed in being in fact that which we are in design."

-- Jose Ortega y Gasset

"To be completely honest with oneself is the very best effort a human being can make."

-- Sigmund Freud
After seven years, three New Jersey colleges, and four majors—computer science, business, liberal arts, and communication studies—I, the late-blooming narrator of this highly subjective tale of spiritual insight, was on the verge of receiving my passport to a money-making future: a Bachelor of Arts degree from a respected, quasi-Ivy League university. There was only one problem. I was breaking down.

It was the Spring of 1985, at Rutgers University, and I was twenty-five years old. I took seven classes, twenty-one credits, in order to finally graduate, and worked thirty hours a week as a room service waiter at a local Marriott hotel. “Roooom service,” I bellowed, over and over, while knocking on room doors in brown polyester pants and vest, ruffled white shirt, and shiny bow tie. My job was to play the role of happy employee whose joy in life was to deliver insanely overpriced food to the daily influx of business clientele. This clientele always seemed happy to see me, especially since they charged their fifteen dollar Marriott burger and imported beer to their expense account, and then probably spent the evening with the hotel’s selection of soft porn.

My all-time favorite customer was a Swedish businessman who answered the door naked, laughing hysterically. He was watching the hit movie comedy *Stripes* with Bill Murray and he emitted high-pitched giggles--imagine Kermit the Frog tickling the Swedish chef after he inhaled a helium balloon—the entire time I was in the room. He took my pen to sign the check, pointed toward the TV, threw out some high-pitched giggles, leaned over to sign the check, righted himself, pointed toward the TV, threw out
more high-pitched giggles, and gave me a gleeful wave goodbye. It was a Promethean display of good cheer and un-body-self-consciousness. I had that job for four years. I could tell you such stories.

I was also passionately in love with Jennifer, the beautiful gift shop girl at the hotel. For our first date, I took her to a Halloween viewing of The Phantom of the Opera at an old, creepy church near the Rutgers campus. An organist played the film score while student-ghouls crawled under the pews and grabbed our ankles. It was frightful and fun, she laughed at my sarcastic jokes, and we were on our way. I introduced her to New York City—art exhibits, Broadway shows, Tower Records, thrift shopping at the Antique Boutique, the Strand Bookstore and its “8 miles of books,” funky cafes and restaurants, and of course lots of film. We had an amazing time, but she was five years younger than I, eighteen when we first met, and to her, I was the older brother she never had.

Jennifer stayed over at my place whenever she wanted, and since I wasn’t her brother, she slept in my bed, her legs intertwined with mine, our breath shared, but no sex. NO SEX! She went on dates with other guys, once having the young stud pick her up at my apartment. I shook his hand and threw in a mock, “have a nice time, but make sure you drive safe and have her home by midnight.” This went on for two years. I was somehow okay with it, thought it was amusing, until she got serious with one of the dates. You see, I had a plan. She was supposed to eventually come around, get over the brother thing, and realize we were perfect for each other. Sweet, no? I naively thought my devotion would count for something, as if my willingness to forgo sex would win me some kind of karmic relationship points. So in a bluster of male bravado—showing absolutely no emotion—I told her that I never wanted to see her again. I knew she loved
me, in her way, and I figured refusing to see her would make her shoulder some of the hurt. And it hurt. I'll never forget the question she once asked me: "If we got together, you would never leave me, would you?"

The combination of a ridiculously busy school schedule, inane employment, and unrequited love is a potent mix. But it was my upcoming graduation that brought me to the edge. Most communication studies graduates sought advertising and public relations jobs in nearby New York City. When I first chose the program, I planned to do the same. But as the end of the semester approached, thoughts of commuting to the city twisted me inward like a terrified animal.

I decided to take a practice commute. I had taken the hour-long train trip from New Brunswick, New Jersey to Penn Station in midtown Manhattan numerous times, but never with the early morning work crowd. I needed to know if I could do it day after day. I chose to do my experiment on a Friday, when I had no classes. I arrived at the station on a mild, mid-April morning with the requisite look: to-go coffee in right hand, New York Times folded and wedged into left armpit, and my version of a business suit: a black jacket I bought for five dollars at a local Catholic mission (get there early if you want to beat out the poverty-stricken to the good stuff), one-hundred dollar black shoes bought from a trendy Greenwich village store, black "WilliWear" slacks and white button-down shirt (no ruffles), and skinny black tie with a touch of silver glitter (it was the mid-eighties, don’t forget).

The 7:15 express arrived on schedule and I found a window seat next to a seasoned commuter. I knew his pedigree because he gave me absolutely no notice. I, on the other hand, was checking everyone out. And "everyone" was like my seatmate—ass
cheeks securely planted on the drab, dull yellow and orange vinyl bench seats, coffee and headlines guiding a slow ascent into the day. I glanced at the Times for awhile, but I soon turned my attention outward toward the passing landscape of northern New Jersey. New Jersey’s nickname is “The Garden State,” and I swear to God that this moniker is not just false advertising. We have much beauty to offer in our overpopulated state, especially the forests of the Pine Barrens and the ocean beaches. But large swaths of the northern landscape fulfill the Jersey stereotype of unrepentant industrialization. The mechanical torsos of oil refineries dominate the land, spewing dark smoke into the air. When the conductor squeaked out “Elizabeth” over the static filled intercom, the smell of burnt oil had already announced the stop. My friends and I referred to Elizabeth as “eau de exit thirteen.”

The train arrived at Penn Station and I began navigating the chaotic mass of bodies, eventually making my way up the escalator to the street. The assault was immediate—people everywhere; the angular buildings reaching towards the sky, defying human limits; a homeless person begging for change, smelling of liquor and piss. I saw my first homeless person when I was ten years old. My parents took my older brother, sister, and me to the smash Broadway musical, Jesus Christ Superstar. We were in the car, stopped at a light, when I looked out the window and saw a dirty and disheveled man sprawled on the concrete slabs of the sidewalk. I don’t know if I said something. I hardly remember anything from that day other than Pontius Pilate’s outrageously high platform shoes, the colorful antipasto platter at Mama Leone’s, and the image of that man lying on the side of the street being dodged by passersby. My ten-year old self didn’t understand
how that could happen, and I still didn’t, at least not in my heart, but now I was doing the dodging.

I became part of a flow of workers heading east toward Madison Avenue, the heart of the advertising industry. I bobbed and weaved my way through the crowd, pretending I was late for an important early morning meeting. At one point, I got stuck behind a wall of suits and the film “Koyaanisqatsi” flashed in my mind in that ephemeral way our unconscious enters our waking hours. “Koyaanisquatsi,” which is a word taken from the Hopi Indians that means “life out of balance,” is a montage of fast and slow motion images that juxtaposes shots of nature, industrialization, and urban life, set to the pulsating rhythmic drone of the modernist composer, Philip Glass. The film has multiple fast motion shots of people scurrying along the streets of New York like tiny worker ants. In one segment, the image of mobs of commuters scrambling up an escalator is paired with gobs of Oscar Meyer hot dogs shooting along a mechanized assembly line.

I eventually reached the office building of Olgivy and Mathers, one of the largest ad agencies in the world, but I didn’t go in the door. I just kept walking back and forth along the huge city block, looking at the other hot dog-people, continually getting in their way. Up until this point, I had been having fun with my practice commute, but the imposing physical structure of the building brought back my instinct for protection, as well as physical symptoms: heavy breathing, light-headedness, a speeding pulse rate. I stopped walking, unable to move, not an inch, for a good five minutes. I knew then that there was no way I was going to get a job in the city. I decided to stay in New York for lunch, but no longer. I didn’t want to deal with the evening rush hour.
It was liberating to finally make a decision, at least temporarily. The next morning, a radiant sun-filled Saturday, I walked in a park adjacent to the university contemplating whether or not I was going to write the seven final papers demanded by my classes. Lilac trees dotted the landscape; the tiny, fragrant flowers creating a visionary field of lavender. Their scent, strong and yet diffuse, seemed to weaken my meager defenses and I suddenly dropped to my knees, taking long, labored breaths, and then fell flat, violently crying, with my face wedged into the turf as if trying to merge with the soil.

I couldn’t believe I was on the verge of fucking up again. My stay at the first college I attended, Montclair State, ended with a semester of six “F’s,” which was due to a combination of alcohol, pinball, and being more interested in playing tennis for the school team than my major of computer science. I dropped out, finding work at a factory. I eventually quit the factory job, got the room service gig, and went back to school at a community college, where I atoned for my failures by making the dean’s list. Next came Rutgers, although the admissions department didn’t accept me at first due to my checkered past. I wrote them an impassioned letter, stating that I had matured, that I had clear goals, and would they please not judge me by my past mistakes. I was sincere and they went for it.

But with one more week of schoolwork left, the prospect of earning a diploma meant nothing to me. I had tied the value of a degree with a career and now that the latter was in doubt, I just didn’t care. I’m the youngest son of a factory worker and a secretary, the first one in my family to go to college, and there was an unspoken expectation that a college education led to a lucrative career. My parents paid for my education. It was time
for me to prove that they had made a wise investment. This expectation didn’t have to be articulated. It’s an amorphous part of American culture, especially if you grow up blue collar, asserting a subtle, but continual pressure. I did love many of my classes, especially “Art, Music, and Literature from the Renaissance to the Present,” and “French Film,” but the quest for high grades and a cushy career was a race. I had circled the track only to approach the finish and find that I had spent seven years chasing a goal I never wanted.

As I lay crying on the ground, I realized that all I wanted to do was wander for a while, reading and thinking with no specific goal in mind. This thought pulsed through my veins, gathering blood and transporting it to the surface of my skin. My head became light, conjuring up a memory from earlier in the semester. I was walking amid the large oak trees and dark red brick buildings of the Rutgers campus, which always seemed to be alive with a palpable buzz of learning, when a bubbly recruiter for the financial planning industry accosted me. She immediately launched into her spiel, stating that her company was looking for ambitious individuals to train. Without missing a beat, I looked into her eyes and replied that I was sorry, but I had absolutely no ambition. The image of her startled, horrified look, as if I had just sucked out her life force with a toothy kiss, came back to me in vivid detail. I started to laugh as violently as I had been crying; the sweet scent of the lilacs filling the air, my face still burrowed in the earth.

When I managed to write the seven papers and get my degree, I felt no sense of accomplishment, only a momentary sense of relief.
Chapter Two

Spirit Unfolding

“As we gaze into the void of our future extinguished self and dissolving substance, we encounter there the wellspring of life and creativity from which all things have sprung and into which they return, only to well up again in new forms. But we also know this as the great Thou, the personal center of the universal process with which all the small centers of personal being dialogue in the conversation that continually creates and recreates the world.”

-- Rosemary Radford Ruether

“The more adequately I can interpret the intuition of Spirit, the more that Spirit can speak to me, the more the channels of communication are open, leading from communication to communion to union to identity—the supreme identity.”

-- Ken Wilber
I grew up Lutheran, which, for me, included a panic attack when I was unable to write a prayer in Sunday school (was I supposed to ask for things?) and a confirmation service in which I had to answer two Bible-related questions in front of the entire congregation (another panic attack). During my confirmation Q & A, the pastor mercifully asked questions I was familiar with from a practice session the previous evening. When my turn came, I stood up, gave the requisite responses, thoroughly relieved to be finished. But before I could sit down the pastor asked me to repeat my answers with more volume so that everyone could hear. I looked at him in terror, as if I was the reincarnation of Job confronting the Old Testament God of wrath and punishment, and dribbled out a pathetic “what?” He chuckled “never mind,” bringing forth howls of laughter from everyone present, including, of course, my amused family. When the confirmation service was over, I was so flustered that I said “congratulations” in response to the handshakes I received from parishioners as they shuffled out of the church. Why I was congratulating them, I do not know. But it was a day for joy and laughter: now that I had been officially confirmed my parents agreed to stop forcing me to go to church.

So I wasn’t religious, but my breakdown did start me searching. And I got my wish for wandering and thinking. After finishing school, I combined room service earnings with graduation money and went to Europe for two months of summertime travel, the use of a Eurail train pass and hostel card providing a minimum of expense and
a maximum of adventure. I visited the Van Gogh museum and ogled prostitutes in Amsterdam; conversed with an older gentleman in Munich, who after giving me directions, remarked that I spoke English quite well for an American; watched young children play soccer with a tattered, makeshift ball on a street outside the Coliseum in Rome; got my hand slapped by a poor, wrinkled French woman when I squeezed an apple she was selling; and found my way to the fleshy beaches along the Cote D’Azur. The fascination of each day diffused the frustration of my final semester, releasing energy for more creative pursuits. I brought along a decent camera and spent much of my time trying to capture the poetry of the landscape and people. Taking pictures invited me to participate in everything, ever alert to emotional nuances and the colors, curves, and angles of each moment unfolding into the next.

The most significant event of my trip occurred when I found a copy of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* someone had left behind on a train. I read it slowly, stopping often to reflect on Pirsig's claim that we need to cultivate the peace of mind that does not separate self from environment, including, in his case, a motorcycle. I searched my memory for some type of similar experience and recalled sitting in my third grade class. The classroom was filled with discordant noise, but then the particular utterances of my fellow students merged, grew, and echoed in my ears, overtaking my tiny thoughts. The waves of sound traveled outward, easily enveloping the room, and “I” rode with the sound until I felt outside myself, or completely outside my thoughts. I slipped into a dream-like but very real state where I witnessed my fellow classmates, and myself, from a heightened perspective that felt more true than anything I had experienced before.
There are no words for what I experienced, which is exactly the point. I discovered a place where there is no separation between self and other because there is no filter of words and thoughts creating a separation. It was a peaceful moment while it was happening, but not when it was over. I knew something major had occurred: things were not as they seemed, not as I'd been taught, not as we all pretend. I didn't attempt to tell anyone. What could my eight year old self say? When I finished Pirsig's book, I gazed out a train window at the rolling landscape and gave thanks to the unknown soul who left it behind.

I returned home from Europe in early September penniless, as well as clueless as to how I was going to make a living. My dad called to tell me that they were looking for temporary help at his factory—Crisco department, fifteen dollars an hour. "Nothin' to sneeze at," he said. I choked and told him I'd be ready by six the next morning. This was to be my second tour of duty with Proctor & Gamble, my father's employer for over thirty years. The first time, after I failed out of school with my six "F's," I worked in the Granuals Department driving a forklift, unloading trucks filled with empty cartons and sleeves for Tide, Cheer, Oxydol, and Spic and Span, and then delivering them to the appropriate assembly lines. I also drove into a window, crashed into the Comet conveyor line, and nearly flattened the head manager. I quit after four months and swore I'd never work there again.

The next day my father and I made the first of many trips from Jersey to Staten Island, the forty-five minute drive giving me ample time to ponder the ironic fact that I was commuting to New York after all, not to the big city, but to one of the "five boroughs," the one Manhattan uses as a trash dump. We passed the Great Kills dump,
which stretched for miles along the highway. Bulldozers graded the mountains of refuse, while thousands of seagulls picked through rotting fruit and vegetables, disposable diapers, and last week's chicken. The pungent odor, which no car window could withstand, woke me out of my groggy, early morning haze. It also signaled that we were ten minutes from work, assuming we left early enough to avoid the daily traffic jam. We arrived and split up at the plant parking lot, my dad heading for the food warehouse where he was a general warehouseman, which meant, "you name it, he did it," and I sauntering apprehensively down the sidewalk towards Crisco. Non-stop puffs of white floated out of the factory silos, drifting softly into the sky as if they were manufacturing clouds.

Few illusions remain once you're on the Crisco gallon's assembly line. Take the plastic bottles out of the cardboard carton, lean over, place 'em on the conveyor belt—making sure they're in proper alignment—and then send the empty carton along another conveyor belt to the end of the line. Then do it again. Do it again. Proper alignment. Keep it running. Or on the third floor. Lids. The plastic lids that crown the top of Crisco shortening are placed on a metal carousel that periodically turns and dumps a row onto a pair of spinning rods, which then shoots them, one at a time, down to the second floor where they are combined with a can into a finished product. Placing the plastic lids on the carousel all day long is the job, except when you're at the other end of the floor loading up the metal lids, the kind you take off with a can opener.

The most relevant description of my new job was "temporary," although factory work did have its benefits. I was paid well and once again had the opportunity to experience why my dad came home from work so tired, always needing a nap before
dinner. During one of our return commutes, he asked me about my day. I revved up my whiny voice, contorted my face, and told him that I had to mop the bathroom and clean the toilets and urinals. “So what?” he replied, looking me straight in the eyes, “that’s just another day for me.” I was an idiot for complaining. Still, it was difficult returning to the factory. I distinctly recall a fifteen-minute mid-morning coffee break where I sat under one of the few trees on the plant property, reading an article in the *New York Times* about ozone holes and the clearcutting of forests. I put down the paper in disgust, which gave me a clear view of the endless production of pollution flowing from my building. I was stunned by my participation in what felt like a cycle of death and self-destruction. I didn’t know how to react. I did know that the palpable presence of life I experienced in Europe had faded and I was falling back into despair.

After each workday, I hung out with Eric, a close friend and fellow Rutgers graduate. One evening, while talking in the kitchen of my tiny apartment, I blurted out: “I wake up every morning wondering why I am alive.” Eric recoiled at first, but after a short silence he replied that he knew someone who might be able to help me, a poet and scholar he recently met while working on a poetry journal. Eric called Rafael Catalá and within minutes we were walking on streets near the Rutgers campus, past tightly packed row houses, across a two-lane main drag with pizzerias and taverns, to Rafael’s blue-gray condo. Rafael greeted Eric at the door with a hug, which led him to give me one as well, and then we followed him to the living room. He was a smallish man, with a kind face, dark hair, and a striking, aristocratic nose. I listened while Eric and Rafael chatted, but my attention soon wandered to the books that covered nearly every inch of his living room walls. There was a diverse selection, but what caught my eye were numerous books
by the 20th century Indian spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti. I had discovered
Krishnamurti’s *Think On These Things* at a used bookstore a week earlier and was
surprised to see so many other titles. “Who the hell is this guy?” I thought. At the first
opportunity I pointed to Rafael’s books and asked him about Krishnamurti’s writings.

Rafael began talking about the spiritual unity of the universe, stating that we are
like waves that are inseparable from the ocean. Each one of us is unique, and yet the
waves are one with the whole ocean and the ocean is fully present in every wave. This
sounded similar to Pirsig, but I told him that these ideas gave me little comfort. I had a
job I hated and couldn’t imagine feeling more separate and alone. Rafael continued
speaking, this time about God, and I was immediately turned off. God was something
professional boxers thanked after they had just finished pummeling their opponent. The
word had nothing to do with the awareness we were discussing. Rafael countered that
God is within every earthly manifestation and when this is experienced we realize that we
are God made manifest. I was intrigued, but I continued to protest the use of the word
until he pointed to a single stalk of wheat sticking out of a vase and said: “Call it wheat
then, and this wheat is the intelligence of the universe manifested as the homeostasis of
the planet, as the birds and the trees, as you and me and all things.” I was hardly
convinced, but I was shaken by my negative fixation on those three little letters. We
talked for hours into the night. When Eric and I finally left, I was too wound up to go to
sleep so we strolled around the Rutgers campus until the sun came up. I got home in time
to change into my work clothes and head off for another day at the factory.

Despite my many doubts, Rafael and I began meeting twice a week to study
mysticism. Rafael fascinated me, especially since he was a scholar who believed in that
God-crap. I didn’t understand how he could be mystically minded and a critically minded academic. I was greatly influenced by existential philosophy at this time, which states that our existence precedes the formation of our identity, and thus we are responsible for creating ourselves without the comfort of religion. But while I was suspicious of comfort, there was a part of me that was desperately seeking something more than existential courage in the face of a meaningless universe.

Rafael suggested we begin our studies by reading the work of Joel Goldsmith, a Christian mystic who traveled the world in the fifties and sixties teaching a spiritual practice he called “The Infinite Way.” “The Infinite Way” sounded like a name of a cult to me, but I was willing to withhold judgment until we began our reading. I initially hated Goldsmith’s books—there was far too much world denial, not to mention the Christian language. Rafael was not uncritical, but he felt that Goldsmith was useful because he provided spiritual principles in a clear, step by step fashion. Rafael argued that the contemplation of our deeper identity, which Goldsmith called the “infinite invisible individuated,” led to an inner fulfillment that manifested itself outwardly as genuine service. This sounded compelling. I liked the idea of inner fulfillment leading to service. I also knew that alienation was not my natural state of mind. And the phrase, “infinite invisible individuated,” reflected what I had experienced in my third grade class—that reality was somehow spiritually unified and materially diverse at the same time. I decided to work with this phrase, in a sort of experiment that led me to recognize the divinity of everything I encountered. I made a decision to read Goldsmith very selectively, rejecting his larger world view while embracing specific insights and principles that I could incorporate into a spiritual practice.
Rafael and I also discussed a host of other topics, including Jungian psychology and quantum physics. A larger, more integrative vision of knowledge, as well as a larger understanding of self, was always the central focus of our time together. Rafael began and ended each meeting with a guided meditation, inviting me to watch my thoughts without judgment, which occasionally led to an expansive silence that dissolved, at least temporarily, my worries and anxieties. Our meetings usually lasted an intense four to five hours. I often walked home around midnight, under the dark, domed night sky, and past the pizzerias, taverns, and row houses, which were suddenly beautiful for the simple fact that they existed. Rafael became my teacher, counselor, and friend. He demanded nothing in return, not money, not obedience, only a commitment to study that matched his own.

At first, my doubts concerning mysticism, my abilities, and the worth of our meetings prevented our conversations from progressing very far. Rafael responded by stating that we should make friends with our doubts since they are our constant companions. This amused me, and made me more receptive, as it signaled that he also lived with doubts. So I made friends with my doubts by listening to them but not letting them rule me, especially when we discussed knowledge of some type of transcendent reality. It helped considerably when Rafael argued that God was omnipresent, and thus an awareness and attitude rather than a separate entity. When we consciously reside within the presence of this mystery, we are freed from constantly striving, becoming sensitive to everything and separate from nothing.

Rafael and I also discussed my spiritual experience in third grade, which he gave significance as the preview of a larger life. This early insight had lain dormant in my unconscious, although I began to wonder if the heightened reality I discovered
contributed to my later dissatisfaction, or more precisely, to crying face down in the turf amid the scent of lilacs. Why was I overcome with physical symptoms—a speeding heart rate and shortness of breath—when I stood on the sidewalk in Manhattan outside of Olgivy & Mathers? Why was the factory assembly line chipping away, day after day, the connection and energy I lived while traveling in Europe? Why did grades and careers always seem false, as artificial as a can of Cheese Whiz? I wondered if the answer included the fact that my experiences of these cultural realities rarely mirrored the spiritual reality of unity and diversity I discovered at such an early age, a reality that suggests that there is deeper meaning to life.

Rafael argued that religious experiences are significant because they feel significant to those that have them. They’re often transformative, enhancing our psychological development towards increased love and compassion. Religious experiences can certainly be denied, ignored, and poorly interpreted, but they are not mere figments of our imagination. Rather, they enlarge our rational and imaginative life, which are prime agents of our perception. They open us to mystery, to not-knowing, and thus to multiple modes of knowing what we can know. For me, the process of legitimating my spiritual experience helped me to understand that a transcendent dimension, while more fully known via experiences of unity, is an intrinsic part of our contemplative life. We evoke the transcendent as soon as we explore our cosmic origin, or why something exists rather than nothing.

Studying and meditating didn’t make mopping floors at the factory any easier, but it did expand my perspective. My sense of self changed dramatically as I began to identify with Spirit, or more specifically, with Spirit unfolding as matter, life, and mind.
This new perspective replaced my existential angst with a playful non-attachment. Life was suddenly amusing, a blast, something to be enjoyed no matter what the circumstance. By identifying with Spirit rather than my sense of alienation, I was free to explore and experience multiple dimensions of life. This is not to say that I no longer saw the ugliness that is so pervasive in the world. Rather, I now had a sense of clarity that allowed me to perceive the ugliness and suffering of our world as the manifestation of a lack of awareness. Krishnamurti referred to this lack when he wrote that in the distance between the subject and object lies the whole misery of mankind. For him, when an awareness of unity is absent there is fear instead of compassion.

My struggles had prepared me to meet Rafael, as did my trip to Europe and discovering Krishnamurti's writings in the used bookstore. Eric was insightful enough to introduce me to Rafael, and in an interesting twist, I introduced Eric to one of my former professors, who guided him to the graduate program in philosophy that he needed to find. The greatest gift I received from Rafael was his insistence that I had something to offer the world. He saw the awakening of talent, ability, and character where I saw poorly chosen school majors and wasted time pursuing unwanted careers. His message was clear: your life is your continually unfolding project. This simple statement relieved me from feeling I had to figure everything out. I continued working at the factory, knowing it provided funds for future freedom, while I paid attention to my inner life and began to follow a call to explore the spiritual dimension of life.
Chapter Three

What is a Calling?

“Self-actualizing people are, without one single exception, involved in a cause outside their own skin, in something outside of themselves. They are devoted, working at something, something that is very precious to them--some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense. They are working at something which fate has called them to somehow and which they work at and which they love, so that the work-joy dichotomy in them disappears.”

-- Abraham Maslow

“A petty life always produces misery and confusion, not only for itself but for others.”

-- J. Krishnamurti
The willingness to recognize, listen to, and express our personal callings often unfolds slowly, with many twists and turns, and even periods of outright rebellion. Listening to our calls is difficult, especially since we must converse with our unconscious. The unconscious contains much wisdom, but it also contains our shadow, or the powerful part of ourselves that blocks our calls. The shadow takes many forms, including repression and regression, prejudice, obsession, and a slew of unhealthy emotions like envy and guilt. The shadow is our inner genius when it is denied, ignored, blocked, frustrated, unheeded, and generally unexpressed. It’s the creative process turned inside out and on its head. Kafka expressed this beautifully when he commented that a monster is a writer who doesn’t write. But it would be foolish to try to rid ourselves of our inner monster. It’s a powerful beast that will just find other destructive ways of expressing itself, including a condemning morality that is dismissive of others who are fulfilling their callings. The key to dealing with our shadow is to integrate rather than deny its power. Or as Jung put it, we must make darkness conscious.

The Greeks used the word “daimon” (or “daemon”) to refer to our inner genius or god within, which they claimed also existed as a guiding spirit in the intermediate realm between the gods and the mortal. Socrates consulted his daimon, which spoke in “no’s,” directing him away from poor decisions. But the daimonic is complex, containing creative and destructive impulses that have the ability to take over our life. Thus the daimonic must be consciously attended to, cared for, and ultimately directed towards
creative pursuits that desire expression. Unfortunately, although perhaps understandably, Christianity was so fearful of the destructive impulse that it transfigured “daimon” to “demon,” the ultimate expression of evil, which was then contrasted with good clothed in angelic form. The daimonic was cleaved, split into Jeckyll and Hyde, leaving our inner life without wholeness. Christians were instructed to listen to church hierarchy, which became the new intermediary between the divine and the mortal. We were called by God to be good, moral, and obedient, but not who we actually are.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke intuitively understood the power of the daimonic, refusing psychoanalysis because he feared that if his demons left him, his angels would flee as well. He knew that his inner angels and demons were indivisible and drove his creative process. But myopic religious views and poorly applied therapeutic practices are only two of a myriad of factors that alienate us from our inner creative intelligence. There are numerous social factors that reinforce the shadow, keeping us stuck in fear and inhibition, unwilling or unable to access our divine talents: material prosperity that blinds us to the spiritual dimension of life; the discrimination of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation; our cultural desire for certainty and security; the failure to honor modes of knowing other than instrumental rationality; and our general mis-education concerning what it means to be a “success.”

But even if we do manage to lessen the influence of these societal barriers, expressing our inner life is an ongoing process. For the Jungian psychologist James Hillman, this process begins as a growing feeling that we must do a certain thing. He states that our callings are “an urge out of nowhere, a fascination, a peculiar turn of events struck like an annunciation: This is what I must do, this is who I am.” Or, a calling
may be less vivid or sure, more like “gentle pushings in the stream in which you drifted”
until you have “unknowingly landed on a particular spot on the bank. Looking back, you
sense that fate had a hand in it.”

Callings are complex and multidimensional. We are called by our talents as
writer, activist, musician, artist, teacher, or scientist, and yet we are also called by subtler
gifts. David Spangler writes that we may be a “great listener whose silence and empathy
become a call in itself that draws out the toxins of despair or the sweet wine of
enthusiasm and dreams.” Or we may have a gift for “relating to children or for crafting a
loving household . . .” Spangler states that such gifts are important because they create a
space where others may thrive and discover their own gifts. Another author, Gregg
Levoy, writes that we may simply be called to “do something (become self-employed, go
back to school, leave or start a relationship, move to the country, change careers, have a
child), or be something (more creative, less judgmental, more loving, less fearful).”

There are two essential and interrelated attributes that help us to follow our
personal callings: patience and discernment. The discernment process is often tentative
and uncertain. We may have intuitions that are clear, but interpreting their message takes
time. Callings do not operate according to cultural or egoic time frames, especially
timetables for so-called worldly success. Callings are supported by what is eternal in us,
and thus they operate under a different logic and pace than do our techno-industrial
cultures. Recognizing and accepting this is essential if we are to avoid becoming
continually frustrated. There is an unfathomable gulf between the advertising slogans that
drill into our brains that we are entitled to “have it all, right now,” and the realization that
we already do have it all and merely need to express it. We must learn to have faith in
this deeper realization and let it guide us through the inevitable fallow times of doubt and insecurity.

Life itself is a calling. Our potential dwells within us, quietly waiting to be realized and expressed. We must learn to hold this continual call lightly, however, so that our sense of purpose may be productively expressed as our life. If we hold onto our specific calls too tightly, identifying ourselves solely as activist, artist, writer, scientist, parent, etc., we will be jostled about worse than a subway ride during a New York City rush hour. We will go up and down with every disappointment, every problem, and every unexpected turn of events. We must remember to identify with Spirit unfolding, which provides a sense of purpose, but also a playful non-attachment from the emotional turbulence intrinsic to an active life.

We need to find balance by remembering that we are called to the present moment. Many people who feel called forget this simple truth and use their deep sense of purpose as an excuse for inconsistent behavior. In fact, some called individuals can be rather rude, especially if they feel they have a special talent that others can’t understand. I have experienced this rather immature reaction. This book became a burden at times, rather than a loving expression of my soul. And for awhile I started acting like I didn’t have time for the needs of other people. After all, I was working on something important. I sadly forgot the soul of this project: We are ultimately called by Spirit to be who we are, and this cannot be rigidly compartmentalized into separate facets of our life.

There are no mediocre souls. Everyone is called. Hillman states that we all have the potential for extraordinary character, and that it is a mistake to equate character with a specific kind of job or talent: "... character is not what you do, it is the way you do it.”
Still, if we are having trouble discerning a specific call, the multiple authors of *Listening Hearts* have developed an impressive list of indicators: a deep sense of peace; an interior joy that is unselfconscious and uninhibited; tears of joy that are comforting (rather than disturbing or fatiguing); a growing awareness that seemingly unrelated strands of experience are beginning to make sense, converge, and fit together; intuitions that are clear, quick, and full; synchronistic events in which we find what we need to find; and perhaps most tellingly, persistence—the call keeps coming back, through multiple channels and experiences.

The characteristic of persistence is important because it reminds us that while we may deny our calls, they never really leave us. They simply wait for us to become spiritually mature enough to listen and act. However, callings almost always require gestation periods of solitude and contemplation. We may think that we are doing nothing, but in reality we are doing much inner preparatory work. When we do act on our callings, its important to remember that the “fruits” of a call are often a long time in coming, sometimes after death. There are numerous examples of authors who were little read or misinterpreted in their own time, but made major contributions to future generations. We must be content in knowing that we are doing what we must. This certainly takes spiritual maturity, but it can also be a source of deep satisfaction.

Practicing humility is also an indispensable step to hearing our calls. It quiets the endless chatter of our isolated egos, making us receptive to inner, as well as outer forms of intelligence. The daimonic is also experienced in the natural world as an animating presence from which we may receive guidance. Arrogance separates, tricking us into thinking we can triumph over nature, while humility connects, opening us to wisdom.
within nature. But we so often leave out larger forces when interpreting who we are and what we are to do with our lives. Our culture teaches us that we are only products of our family story, rather than also celebrating our intimate relation with the story of the earth and universe. Hillman calls this the "parental fallacy," which he states is a prominent cause of our environmental and psychological despair. We are prisoners of a limited vision, unable to leave "the house of the parents" and leap into "the home of the world." Thus, the simple act of getting outside and practicing humility is an essential step for igniting deeper passions. The unifying experience of beauty and our biophilic relationship to the diversity of life helps to liberate our potential.

Finally, callings are a form of communication. Our calls are an ongoing dialogue within our larger system of matter, life, mind, and Spirit unfolding. We listen by attending to our withins, experienced as bodily empathy and instinct, a discerning and synthesizing rationality, an intuitive sympathy with the wisdom of the earth and universe stories, and an awareness of the purpose and play of Spirit. We must recognize that we are called by patterns of intelligence, both inner and outer, that are larger than and transcend our little self or ego. By doing so, we realize along with Martin Buber that living means being addressed. Levoy writes that we are more likely to feel addressed when we have the "conviction that the world is animated by a loving presence and that our life is somehow witnessed. We must be receptive in a spirit of conversation, appreciation, and courtesy. By being willing to receive we will our calls to happen, to make themselves known" [my italics].

And yet, Hillman once again reminds us that this is a difficult task: "... awakening to the original seed of one's soul and hearing it speak may not be easy. How
do we recognize its voice; what signals does it give? Before we can address these questions, we need to acknowledge our own deafness, the obstructions that make us hard of hearing: the reductionism, the literalism, the scientism of our so-called common sense” [my italics].

The barriers are many, but the call of Spirit is always present. If we don’t know how to listen, we may want to start the dialogue by calling to something larger than ourselves. A friend, Carter Draves, did just this on a trip to sacred sites in England. In Glastonbury, she camped and lit candles, spending time in silence. She also asked for guidance by praying, dancing, and singing to the earth, to ancestors, to the Goddess. This did not lead her to a specific call, but it opened her to a deeper commitment to the earth and to those who have come before. She felt energized on an emotional, psychological, and a cellular level. It led her to honor “kinesthetic feelings”—embodied spiritual wisdom—and to “trust her own knowledge.” In the next chapter, Brent Ladd describes a similar ritual. He also went to a place sacred to him and asked for guidance. The key to both examples resides in Carter and Brent’s humility, pure intention, and the feeling that their rituals were sacred to them. Also, they petitioned for spiritual awakening, not material things.

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The next three chapters contain interviews with people who have followed their personal callings. My decision to interview Brent Ladd, Syndee L’ome Grace, and Andy Mahler emerged through circumstance and my own commitments. Each is someone I met
briefly via my process of learning about spirituality, environmental ethics and activism while living in Indiana and teaching at Purdue University. In this respect, their inclusion in this book reflects a simple and yet powerful realization: our calls are interrelated. When we commit to a life of purpose, we are bound to meet and be influenced by others who have made a similar commitment.

Although I barely know Brent, Syndee, and Andy, I was aware that they were spiritually minded, thoughtful, and that each had a love for the earth that caused them to make interesting life-choices. But the interviews were a mystery to me—I had no idea what they would reveal. The only areas I insisted on discussing were their spiritual experiences and their struggles to follow their callings. Perhaps there are some people who have lived a graced existence, without any major crises, but I’ve never trusted that claim. Most of us need at least one, if not multiple, crises, dark times, and kicks-in-the-ass in order to wake up to a more purposeful life. Brent, Syndee, and Andy have gone through and continue to go through tough times. My interview subjects are not enlightened masters, they are people present to the mystery of Spirit—to the unfolding interplay between unity and diversity—who have allowed themselves to be guided to experiences of health and wholeness.

The order of the interviews fell naturally into place. Brent’s story focuses on his attempt to relearn the wisdom of the “old ways” of our hunter-gatherer past and the value of simple living; Syndee’s life is driven by her tremendous sensitivity to both humans and the more-than-human world and her work for animal rights; and Andy’s path unfolds from his love for the woods and his role as a leading forest activist. This progression from hunter-gatherer life to our fundamental biophilic relationship to animals and the
forests flows one into the other. After I put the interviews together, I also noticed a progression of age—Brent is in his early thirties, Syndee her mid-forties, and Andy has recently turned fifty—and so there is a logical flow in this respect as well. But the interviews could have been placed in any order and "worked," since they reflect an interrelated web of spiritual themes. However, Brent and Syndee have different views concerning diet and our ethical relation to animals. This tension has acted as a catalyst, causing me to explore the relations between our food choices and spiritual ethics in later chapters and the second half of their interviews.

Along with common themes, each story is also unique and told with distinct styles. Brent tells a tale of intense physical effort, but the main content is his inner process of awakening, including visions and dreams. Syndee reveals how growing up on an Iowa farm strongly influenced her natural constitution and sensitivities. Her life-process continually unfolds from the dynamic interplay between circumstance, a life-changing spiritual experience, and the maturing of her spiritual sympathies. And Andy tells his story via a kind of organic philosophy influenced by many activist experiences, contemplation, and a deep sense of his spiritual identity. I did not use my role as the interviewer to ask critical questions; rather, I sought to guide them such that they told their stories in their own voice.

"Callings" and "religious experience" are loaded terms. They tend to make us think that there were these amazing people in the past who floated above the problems of the world, never getting their hands dirty in the complexities of life. The following interviews explode these mistaken ideas and then let them fall back to earth, where our spirituality is actually experienced and lived.
Chapter Four

Brent Ladd’s Story

"Gaia is sick. In her fevered state, she dreams--through the minds of her most sensitive human children--of the simple folk who once lived lightly on her ample body, taking little, giving back in pious reciprocity, admiring and fearing her magnificence."

-- Theodore Roszak

“So, you have been considering a change of pace? Want to leave the rat race behind? Possibly even bypassing the cabin on the hill with sheep, chickens, and an organic garden, and diving head long into that wild lake of your dreams called Primitive Lifestyle? Great! I welcome the company. You see, I took the plunge two years ago, and I am still swimming with my head above water, though just barely at times.”

-- Brent Ladd,

qtd. in Wilderness Way magazine
I first met Brent Ladd in the early 1990s. We both attended twice-monthly meetings of the *Tribe*, an environmental discussion group led by Fred Montague, a professor who taught courses at Purdue University such as “Earth Science,” “Deep Ecology,” and “Wildlife in America.” Fred was a source of awakening for many. Brent took the wildlife course, which ended up affecting him greatly: “It was a pivotal decision in the path I would later take. Dr. Montague is one of those unique professors who goes far beyond the prescribed course text, in fact, pretty much throwing the text out the window. Not only did we have discussions on wildlife, we were also challenged with every factor that affected wildlife: pollution, habitat destruction, mindless capitalism, the very civilization itself.”

We had similar discussions at the gatherings of the *Tribe*. I remember one in particular that involved Brent. We were discussing the overpopulation of deer and Brent suggested a scientific solution: somehow supplying the deer with birth control pills. He was roundly critiqued by those present, who tended to be wilderness enthusiasts with little patience for non-natural technological solutions. I remember this occasion vividly because Brent was so out of harmony with the thinking of the rest of the group. The Brent I knew at this time seemed clean-cut and bookish, easily one of the least wild of the bunch. I was shocked when I saw him years later at an Earth Day celebration at Purdue dressed in full buckskin, with long hair and a beard. He told me that he spent the majority of the past two and half years living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, at least as much as one
can in late 20th century America. This information was impressive enough, but he also had an intense look in his eyes that mirrored his physical transformation.

I begin our interview by asking Brent if he would share childhood experiences significant to his later life.

I grew up on a farm in Indiana and spent many days exploring the grasses, woods, and fields near my home. Mostly living in the moment. My favorite thing to do when I was really young was to lay on my back in the tall grass and listen to the mourning doves coo and the redwing blackbirds call. My sister and I would ride our bikes down to the marshes and explore. My mom even made me a buckskin outfit and my dad bought me an “authentic” play musket that actually shot round cork balls! I guess I thought I was Daniel Boone even back then. But that started to change when I turned five. They had to bodily force me on the school bus, kicking and screaming. I disliked school and was often in trouble. I didn’t know how to conform, I guess.

We used to play “cowboy and indian” in the pasture and fields around our home. I also hunted for pheasant and deer, and helped to run a trapline with my father at a young age. When I turned twelve we got pigs and cows and were eating those for our meat. My father stopped hunting and trapping. He said that the only reason he hunted and trapped was to help provide food for us. Since we had farm animals, there was no longer any need.

By the time I was fourteen I was responsible for taking care of the pigs. I had a pivotal experience in which I realized that suffering and death were
sometimes an inevitable part of life. I always tried to nurse the runt pigs back to vigor, but often one or two would be so weak that they just withered away and died. I soon came to recognize when a pig just was not going to make it. Rather than have it suffer for a day or two, I came to grips with the idea that taking its life now would be better. Taking the life of baby pigs was very tough for me. But there were lots of experiences with life and death growing up on a farm. The distance between the soil, crops, animals and our stomachs have always been very short. I’ve always been acutely aware of where my food comes from. But it wasn’t until I was living in the wild that the influence of my childhood experiences became clear to me.

We took a significant jump in time, continuing his story at that fateful moment for many—college graduation. For Brent, graduation marked the beginning of a turbulent period of struggle.

I received my Bachelors of Science degree in animal sciences and tried to take the next step and look for a job. But when I went over to the career services department in the school of agriculture and looked through what was available, I got a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. It was like being punched in the gut. I knew on every level of my being that I could not and would not be a part of agribusiness. I knew that agribusiness policies were destroying rural communities, as well as the soil and water all over the planet. I did not want to be a part of this destruction.
I started to have thoughts of starting a small farm or going to California in search of the music business—at the time I was lead guitarist for a small time rock-n-roll band. I was depressed, with no job. It’s funny how things can change in a flash when you think you’ve hit rock bottom. Something clicked. I liked animals and liked observing them. I had loads of experience with farm animals. I would become a farm animal behaviorist! A phone call and a few days later, I found myself in the office of a premiere farm animal behaviorist who actually had a graduate student studying the effects of music on farm animals. The professor put me on the payroll. I didn’t blink an eye. My duty was to assist his student in her research. I was soon enrolled in a graduate program with my own research projects. My co-graduate student and I saw things eye to eye and liked one another. We were a great team. Before I knew it, we were engaged to be married.

Looking back, I had many influential experiences during graduate school. Perhaps the biggest influence was taking a philosophy course on ethics and animals. The arguments, ethics, and ways of understanding differing points of view transformed me into a deep thinker who could constructively apply ideas to the science end of my graduate research. But I was pretty defensive about attacks on farmers raising animals for food from the other students. I had raised animals myself, as had my parents and their parents before them. It was the way I understood the world. Still, at this point my thinking had completely evolved from “red-neck country boy” to an understanding that we, as people and stewards, are obligated to provide farm animals with an environment in which they can express their species-specific natures. That was the reason I had I started graduate
school—to study ethology and the behavior of animals in order to develop environments for farm animals that would be humane.

For my research, I did behavioral comparisons between animals kept in a variety of conditions on working farms, from extremely confined, such as twelve chickens to a small wire cage or a mother pig and babies kept to a very tight crate, to free-range conditions and several other in-between environments. As time went on, it became excruciatingly difficult to spend time in the confinement buildings. This was because my research, along with the research of many others through history and recent studies in cognitive and biological sciences, clearly demonstrated that animals kept in factory farms were indeed suffering. My thesis defense ended up being a lively experience, as there was a mix of agribusiness, philosophy, and ecology professors in the room. The thesis can still be found in the Purdue library full of disturbing pictures and scathing results that incriminate factory farms, as well as some recommendations for improving the lives of farm animals. Unfortunately, because I was in the department of Animal Sciences, my full results and thesis were heavily edited before finally being accepted.

By this time I was heavy into the environmental scene. I became a vegetarian, except for occasional pork raised back home on the small farm. I began putting more and more pressure on myself to make a difference within the system. Social situations were trying for me when it came to food. I thought no one really gave a damn about what they ate as long as it was cheap and easy. My graduate advisor and I even had a falling out over a film we were producing on animal welfare for the National Library. I had pretty easily captured a lot of
footage that made the film look like an animal rights flick and demanded that it be included in the film. In the end I got most of what I wanted. I had become galvanized by my two years of research and philosophy and would not compromise my ideals. I was driven to "save the farm animals." So driven, that I began to leave a lot of life by the side of the road.

Finding a burgeoning new career, our life partner, and a commitment to have a positive effect on the world would be enough for most of us, and it was for Brent, but our unconscious often has other ideas. In the summer of 1993, Brent and his partner took a trip west to present research on animal behavior at academic conferences in Washington and California.

The trip west was supposed to be so that my partner and I could give our research results at two different international meetings—one in Washington and one in California. But for me, the most meaningful part of the trip took place all along the journey. I had become bitter with science and the sterile world view that science propagates, and was trying to come to terms with a more philosophic way of understanding. On our way west we camped at Bear Butte, South Dakota, and that night I had vivid dream of a buffalo stampede running towards and then over me. The next morning I could hardly walk. It was strange—my whole middle and groin was seized up and hurt like hell. I'll never forget that dream. For some reason, I had checked out a copy of *Black Elk Speaks* from the library to read during the trip and started reading it the day before. It wasn't until later in the trip
that I found out in the book that Bear Butte was a holy place to the Sioux and Cheyenne. I continued to read *Black Elk Speaks* while sleeping outdoors in places like Glacier National Park in Montana, Olympia, Washington, and the Redwoods of California, which I'm sure added to the profound effect it was having on me. It was opening my mind and soul to a very different way of seeing and knowing. I also had more vivid dreams that I am sure stemmed from my reading.

After we returned from our trip, I went through a lot of inner turmoil and my partner was not at a place where she could understand what was happening to me. I didn't understand either, but I felt I was getting important messages that I shouldn't ignore. It was at this time that I had the first inkling that my marriage was beginning to fail. In an attempt to save our relationship, we moved to Texas A & M University where we were to take positions studying behavior and consciousness in animals. My partner thought things would get better once we got to Texas, but the whole experience was a nightmare. Everything went wrong. First, our trailer broke down three times on the drive west. Then the housing we expected fell through. And then, worst of all, the advisor for the project we came to work on changed, and so did the entire focus of the project, from animal welfare to animal testing. We felt overwhelmed with the feeling that we weren't supposed to be there, and so we decided to return to Indiana. We ended up getting research positions at Purdue, but I sensed that I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

After returning to the Midwest, I felt a tremendous need for answers. I had an intuition and decided to go on a fast at the "Potholes," a beautiful nature site
and swimming hole during Indiana’s hot and humid summer months. It was now December and I was there alone. I thought of Black Elk, fasted, prayed, and asked for guidance. On the first day, I was filled with hunger pains and my mind did not quiet down. On the second day, the hunger pains began to abate and it came to me that I must fully humble myself. So I went naked and continued to pray for guidance. The wind came from the north, the east, the south, and then the west, and I felt a presence larger than myself. That night, instead of a dream, I had a vision. I was flooded with images, with my eyes wide open and fully awake. The top of my head opened up, and I was able to receive more and more.

Brent essentially went on a vision quest, which has been used as a rite of passage for thousands of years by indigenous cultures. What follows is a description of Brent’s vision and how it effected his life. At first, he was a bit reluctant to share his vision with me and ultimately with readers: “I have held on to the images and essence of what was given to me that night. I feared that if I told these things to others, I would lose the power of my vision. So I have struggled with how to share this with you. My decision is that I don’t want to have fear attached to this and that it may be best to share what was given to me because I am being asked to.”

When I originally decided to do a fast and seek direction for my life, I really had very little idea of what would happen, although I knew what was possible. My only connection with this way of seeking direction was from reading *Black Elk Speaks*. In many ways I was naive, yet I had no fears. I basically went
on intuition. You must remember that I was coming down from a very heavy scientific perspective on the world. I often found myself doubting whether or not anything like God was possible.

When I was first dropped off at the nature preserve to begin my fast, I found a spot where I could sit and meditate. I was able to loosen up and breathe. I knew why I was fasting and seeking answers. I was unable to make sense of my life and how I should integrate with society. Which way to go? When the wind from four directions visited me, one after the other, I felt that something greater than myself was there. I had goose bumps and a feeling of euphoria. What was it? I could only think that it was God, or maybe a better name would be what I have heard indigenous people call the Spirit that moves through all things. My thoughts at the time were that the Spirit was telling me it knew why I was there and that it would help me.

The evening of the second day of my fast I was exhausted and fell asleep early. The date was December 9 and I was sleeping on the ground with a sleeping bag. I awoke in the middle of the night and became stiff and breathless by what I saw in front of me. Just out of reach to my right, on a patch of green moss that was growing on black rock overlooking a creek was what looked like a ghost. It was in the shape of a coyote or wolf and was dancing back and forth, shimmering with white light, and with its feet just off the ground. I rubbed my eyes to see if I was really awake or not, but indeed my eyes were open. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my ears. Then the image vanished. A short moment later.
a lone coyote howled from across the creek. My hairs were standing on end. I could not quite believe what I had just experienced.

What seemed like many minutes passed and I lay very still, not understanding what I had seen. Every little rustle of leaves or other sound made me hold my breath and listen intently. I finally closed my eyes and fell asleep again. This time a very vivid dream came to me. At first, I felt as if I were floating outside my body and my dream contained all of the trees, grasses, and rocks, just as they were around me during the day. Also, it was daylight in the dream. Then the coyote/wolf image jumped into my dream. It ran and leaped as if playing—its body shimmering white. Then it jumped very high into the air. In what felt to me like a conscious decision, I looked up. The sky was in a great circle above me and within the circle flew what looked like a large hawk or bird of prey. I could hear its shrill voice call. Then everything seemed to focus on the large bird. In a flash its eye shot down toward me and into my eyes. It entered into my body and I awoke from the dream with a startled feeling that it was more than a normal dream. I felt that the spirit of the bird had melded with my own.

I have thought deeply about the meaning of this dream. My intuition tells me that the dancing coyote-wolf represents letting go and dancing with life, but also about being cunning and brave enough to remain my own person, and if necessary to “go it alone” and dance my own path in times when no one else believes in what I am doing. I think the coyote/wolf leaping upward was pointing me to the large bird because birds can gain the “big picture.” They can see all that is below and around them. However, the bird’s eye came into me, as if it were
seeing everything about me, which was scary. I felt that the message was for me to gain the ability to see and understand the “big picture” and how all things connect together and influence one another. Most of all, I feel I gained an understanding that there is something like a Great Spirit and that all things have spirit.

Not everyone who goes on a vision quest will have a vision as dramatic as Brent’s. He was prepared by months of unconscious urges and contemplation for his experience. Vision quests involve fasting and rituals within a sacred spot, which provides a means for letting go of negative attachments that have stunted our development. This process demands struggle and humility, but the potential rewards include a reawakening of dormant aspects of our soul and a vision of future possibilities. Those who go on vision quests often return empowered from their sacred site and rituals ready to express their psychological growth back in their communities.

After my vision took place many things began happening in my life. I continued to have vivid and meaningful dreams. Most of the dreams were about me realizing the power I had within me, and that if I were to release it I needed to journey and discover the “big picture.” Also, beautiful, wise people were coming into my life and sharing things here and there. I found it very difficult to continue my work at the university, as it did not seem relevant to what my spirit was leading me to do. Increasingly, I began to see hawks flying wherever I went. They reminded me to not get dragged down by petty things, but to focus on the whole.
In March of 1994, three months after his vision, Brent went on a humanitarian trip to Juarez, Mexico. Brent felt "high" in Juarez, which is certainly surprising since it's a poverty-stricken border town. But despite his sadness for the slums and the overall material poverty, he also experienced many positives in the simple, slow-paced existence he discovered there.

The way people treated each other--family and joy emanated. At the time, I didn't fully know why I was so deeply moved by this trip. What I did know was that I had never experienced anything like Juarez. The trip made me acutely aware of how thoroughly my culture was driven by rampant consumerism. In hindsight, I've realized that if one could major in primitive living, I would make it a prerequisite that one visits a so-called Third World country. One's ideas on materialism and what one can do without quickly become solidified.

After returning home to Indiana I got depressed. I even sometimes wished I had never left Juarez. My feelings were so strong that I continued to have vivid dreams. It is important to remember that this was highly unusual for me. Before my dream of the buffalo stampede when I was visiting Bear Butte, the only powerful dreams I had were the nightmares of my childhood. But these new dreams weren't nightmares, they were intense dreams of ancient landscapes and ancient-looking people, and they were happening at a rate of four per night. I felt a tremendous tension between the worldview I inherited--based in science and a traditional religious background--and the feeling that the dreams were calling me
to search for ancient spiritual connections. Because the people in my dreams often seemed from a long time ago, I felt a strong urge to live as people had lived long ago.

A friend loaned me a packet of information on outdoor survival schools. In the packet I came across one that gave me goose bumps. I wrote a short note saying I wanted to attend the gathering. They responded by saying “glad to have you, and by the way we have a few staff positions open.” My intuition said, “This is your chance, dude!” My heart said, “Hey look, you’re still married, even if unhappily, and you’d better stay put if you want to make this marriage work.” I felt caught, to say the least. My wife must have known because, to my surprise, she enthusiastically stated that we should call about the openings. Within a month, my wife and I found ourselves in the north woods of Wisconsin at the outdoor school. I felt that this was the beginning of making a go at living the earth ways. However, if you want to canoe wild rivers, there are bound to be rapids and waterfalls. Two weeks after arriving at the school, my wife made it clear she no longer wanted to stay in the marriage. I knew things weren’t going well, but this news still devastated me. Only those who have gone through divorce can understand the darkness, pain, and anxiety of such an experience. I had gone over the waterfall and felt I was drowning. For a time, I felt it would be better off to die rather than endure the suffering and heartache I was going through.

Despite his heartache, over the next few months Brent was able to learn the “old ways” at the wilderness school, including basic survival techniques and building a
primitive shelter. He also met Native Americans--the school was near a reservation--and studied their religion, while also participating in sweat lodges. Learning about native cultures was essential to his new life, but it also led him to have a bit of a “shaman complex.”

The shaman, or medicine person, is what is glorified and emphasized about native cultures by our media. Therefore, I, along with many others I know, was especially drawn to this aspect when first learning about primitive life-ways. Learning about all the plants and the medicine uses seemed paramount to me and topped my list. This isn’t a bad thing, if one progresses beyond it, because it drew me into the woods, meadows, and river areas and allowed me to familiarize myself with wildness. My first summer I learned to recognize maybe one hundred plants and their uses as medicines, even though one need only learn a half dozen or so to take care of most medical needs, from bee stings, to cuts, to colds.

Brent was a volunteer at the camp over the summer, but he eventually became restless and felt the need to explore the woods on his own. And so, his marriage was over; he had left a decent-paying research position, leaving him with only a few hundred dollars to his name; and he was wandering through Wisconsin.

I was an opportunist--doing whatever I had to do to survive, without going back to civilization. I was, in effect, making a break from civilization at the mental and emotional levels. I was trusting more in myself and discovering my
true heritage. Knowing that 99.95% of my ancestors had lived a hunter-gatherer way of life made my heart grow stronger. At first, I felt like an alien in the woods. It was not until I left the outdoor school and began spending long periods of time alone that I understood that I was not comfortable being alone in the wild. It was a very different environment than what I had grown up with. I even got lost twice, once in the woods and once in a tag alder swamp. These were humbling experiences, but experiences that caused me to seek guidance beyond myself. I discovered that if I were humble enough, what I needed would appear, including food in the form of a fresh roadkill deer and fish from a small lake.

This was also the time when I began to face and deal with many difficult feelings: the break-up of my marriage, separation from society, my rejection of my religion and scientific viewpoints. At first I spent a lot of time grieving for these losses, day after day. I lost weight. I was not really sure what I was doing or what direction I was going in. I prayed a lot and just put my life out there for the Creator to use. After about one month—or one moon cycle—of this grieving and praying, I began to feel a huge change. I still remember it clearly. It was an October day and the colorful leaves were falling. I was standing near my wickiup looking out over a small lake when I felt a soothing but overwhelming presence all around. I eventually came to know this presence as the spirit of all things. It is the trees, the water, the fish, the deer, the grass, the squirrel scolding me from her perch in the oak tree, the wind rustling the trees. At that moment, I had the very clear understanding that all the beings around me were saying: Wake up! Wake up! You are not alone! We are here and alive and you are part of us! I felt so
elated, so high and filled with joy and energy that I then knew that I was a new person. Although I didn’t understand it at the time, during my grieving I was also letting go of my past, accepting myself and readying myself for an openness to new ways of being. I once walked among nature and admired it, I now walked within it and truly knew that I was part of the whole circle of life.

My confidence grew tremendously from my spiritual awakening. I knew that I was supposed to learn again how to live harmoniously with the earth. I felt called to be something different from everything my life had been pointing to. Not to point fingers at others, but to change myself so that I could help others to see the value of simple living.

Brent’s journey towards a deeper understanding of himself and his relation to the earth was well under way. Perhaps the greatest change Brent experienced was that his conception of time “blossomed.” He lived day to day, with the knowledge that if he lived in tune with the earth, all would be provided. “There was never a rushed feeling. Time opened up and expanded, grew younger and unbound.” His experience of timelessness also tuned him into a series of significant meetings.

I met an Episcopal priest who was renovating a Boy Scout camp so that he could expose urban youth to the wisdom of the wilderness. I ended up staying there for awhile, helping out with some of the work. Talking with him validated my experience. He was someone who understood the necessity of following one’s heart. I also had another significant meeting. Midway through my first winter in
the Northwoods, I met a woman who was ailing from Lyme disease—a most debilitating and awful disease, spread by deer ticks. I grew fond of her and wanted to help in any way I could. Because many of her days were spent in bed, she asked if I would move in and care for her. I said I would. It was very difficult for me to see this person in misery despite everything I tried. The mythic aura surrounding “the Shaman” had been burst, and I learned a good deal about the fragility of human life. Being a medicine person has little to do with drums or rattles or chants, or even how many herbs you know. This woman was helped not so much by the herb I gave her as by my simply being there, lending an ear and a hand and letting her know I cared. I no longer have the “Shaman complex.” I realized that we all have unique potentials to help and to heal by our presence and caring.

With the coming of spring, Brent had been away from “civilized” ways of living for about a year, but he was far from finished. He wanted more company on the journey and so he contacted some of his friends from the wilderness school.

We kicked around the idea of starting a community based on living primitively. After working out details of where we would set up a primitive camp and agreeing on some basic premises, a tribe was born. I moved with three others to the Jordan River Valley in Michigan, where we stayed on land owned by parents of one of the group. It was a good wilderness spot, especially since it was adjacent to the state forest. Our new tribe built primitive shelters, which ended up
involving a lengthy process of trial and error. Books on primitive building and the training at the wilderness school were only so much help: we had to rediscover the skills honed by thousands of years of practical wisdom on our own. And we did. The tribe eventually took a significant leap into a primitive lifeway. However, in exchange for being able to stay on the land we agreed to do work at the parent’s house. This coming and going from our wilderness life had a deep effect on the tribe members. It was like leaving and entering a different dimension. Those who occasionally visited us experienced the same phenomenon, as if they totally changed realities.

While the tribe was having an overall positive experience—learning the old ways and discovering new realities—the reality of going primitive also proved to be far more difficult than they ever could have imagined. Our spiritual struggles always have a profound physical dimension, especially when you are called to explore hunter-gatherer existence. I asked Brent if he would detail the physical aspects of his path.

We wanted to build our shelters from materials we could harvest from the forests. Materials that would make a shelter worthy of northern Michigan weather—from below zero to above one-hundred degrees—and all the snow and rain anyone would want. The soil was sandy, with little grass or clay. We thought, as have most of North America’s subarctic tribes, that birch bark was ideal. It takes approximately forty to fifty good sheets of bark, depending on size of shoot, to cover a twelve foot wigwam or conical lodge. We applied for a permit with the
forest service to harvest birch bark from several strands scheduled to be cut.
However, prior to settling on the birch bark wigwams, we decided to build earth lodges, basically underground shelters. As incredulous as it now sounds to me, we dug a four feet deep by sixteen feet diameter pit through sand and gravel, using steel shovels. We were modeling our structures after the Mandan earth lodges, which were dug a foot down.

We began by axing down huge hop horn beam supports and figuring out the best way of placing the ceiling beams, but it soon became apparent that the sheer amount of materials needed to construct the lodge would be prohibitive. In addition, we began questioning the structural integrity, knowing that tons of earth would be pushing from all directions. We were trying to live primitively by using the white man mentality. We decided to go with what was originally used in this geographical region—conical lodges and wigwams. We thought we would build one of each and see the advantages and disadvantages. The wigwam was straightforward. However, the earth lodge idea wasn’t totally dead and we decided to construct a nine foot diameter conical lodge within the huge crater we had dug, banking up four feet of dirt around it.

We liked the idea of trying to harvest materials for our shelters nearby and had permission from neighbors to harvest several basswood and ash trees. We thought we could peel the bark and use it rather than birch bark, which wasn’t nearby. Felling large diameter, sixty feet tall trees is not a simple thing, and we nearly killed ourselves in the process, all with the help of bucksaw and axe. I believe the trees were trying to tell us something, because from the get-go, the
first five trees all became hung-up on neighboring trees. Several of the trees "barber-chaired," which is a very dangerous situation when felling trees. After seven trees the message started becoming clearer—the natives rarely felled any trees larger than wrist size, primarily because of risk to life and limb, and secondarily because of energy expenditure to do so. A revelation occurred and for a time we dubbed our tribe “The Little Trees,” vowing not to cut anything but saplings and wrist size trees from there on out.

We had peeled a good share of basswood and ash bark, which led to another hard lesson—basswood bark cracks, splits, and curls horrendously upon drying. It is very marginal for shelter coverings. Ash also cracks and curls, but much less so. Soon it was back to square-one—what the natives used: birch bark. Birch bark is tough, rot resistant, water proof, and beautiful. We finally succumbed and got our permit to harvest birch bark. If done properly it doesn’t kill the tree, as long as direct sunlight doesn’t shine upon the inner bark of the tree.

Placing birch bark on the wigwam was straightforward, with only a bit of coaxing to cinch bark down around the curved ceiling. Placing bark on the conical earth lodge was even quicker. However, we needed forty strong poles for a frame to hold the weight of the dirt we piled on it. As you might guess, this left almost nothing of a smoke hole. The smoke had a tough time going out and we had a tough time breathing. Furthermore, all of those poles sticking out caught considerable rain, which dripped onto our bedding.
By mid-September, we were having frosts. I began noticing that in the mornings, it was much warmer outside than it was in our lodge! I decided we had built nothing more than an elaborate cold air sink, which was also damp, smoky, and cramped for two people. Believe it or not, we endured this for over three months, despite having rain about every other day. Finally, we said “enough,” and chose to dismantle the failed experiment and build a regular good ol’ down to earth but not in it conical lodge. We made it twelve foot in diameter rather than the nine foot we were living in. We needed only thirteen wrist-size poles for a frame. Amazingly, we dismantled the old lodge, moved materials to a location of red pine for winter wind protection, and built the new lodge in a day’s time. The new lodge had almost twice the floor space, the smoke went straight out the smoke hole, and it is so well lit, you can read fine print. It is dry, warm and beautiful. I guess the natives already knew that.

Another aspect of primitive living that we thought deeply about is food. Nutrition, diet, methods of obtaining meat, and water were all hot topics of discussion within our community. It is difficult to obtain enough food from the wild in the twentieth century. There are three primary factors that limit the hunter-gatherer diet right off: the amount of privately owned land, the strict hunting and trapping seasons, and strict limitations on hunting and trapping methods and bag limits. Getting fresh wild greens in summer is easy, and enriches the diet, but the best item for living in the north is meat and as much fat as one can get. I learned that it is possible to live quite well on spruce tea and meat, as long as one eats the entire animal. Eating organs and eyes gives trace amounts of important minerals.
and vitamins A and C not found in muscle. The spruce tea also provides vitamins A and C, which are hard to get in the winter. However, because of the limitations I just mentioned, I had to purchase up to fifty percent of my food in the form of rice and beans. I learned ways of making wild meat stretch in the diet, one of which is to make a brothy stew, adding some tubers or squash or rice occasionally. Adding a beaver tail now and then adds great amounts of much needed fat and is very tasty.

Because of my change from vegetarian to meat-eater, I had to come to terms with the fact I would have to kill to get meat. I certainly don’t like the idea of someone else doing the dirty work and buying meat. Most domestic meat is practically poison anyway. I had to come to terms psychologically with killing another living being. This would not be difficult had I been without other rations. However, I was eating well during the summer and therefore it made it difficult to think about killing. I felt that every creature out there is doing its best and that I didn’t have a right to pluck it from this world. But the closer I got to nature, the more I understood it hasn’t anything to do with rights and everything to do with the circle of life itself. Life feeds on death whether you are a vegetarian or meat-eater. I had a deep sense of respect for the animals I began hunting and trapping for food, as well as a sense that it would be disrespectful if I didn’t use the entire animal.

There is much more to share from Brent’s story concerning the material aspects of going primitive, but while he learned much from the many physical and mental
challenges, his adventure was “done for spiritual reasons.” These reasons included sharing all that he had learned. Unfortunately, Brent soon discovered that the rest of the tribe did not share this ethic.

We had lived in the Jordan River Valley for six months, proving to ourselves that we could meet the physical challenge, but we wanted more freedom. Our adventures whetted our appetite for an even deeper experience of wilderness. We put the little money we had together and bought forty acres in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan near the Ontonagen River. Things started to go wrong right from the start. Our car broke down on the way up and we needed to get help to get the car towed and then fixed. This was the first time in quite awhile that I felt dependent on others. I felt totally out of my element. I suddenly recognized that there were limits to how much we could leave civilization. After we got the car on the road, it soon broke down once again. This led me to another realization, this time in the form of an intuitive flashback to my trip from a few years ago to Texas A&M. I suddenly recalled how everything went wrong on that trip and how it turned out to be a major signal.

This premonition left me concerned about our future, but I was still committed to the new location. Thanks to a friend, we eventually got the car towed all the way up to our new land. But this just began the next round of difficulties. We arrived on May 1st and there was still two feet of snow on the ground. We also came across a large black bear eating a deer, and then found five other deer, still alive but emaciated and dying from the hardship of the long

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winter. Previously, we had only seen the area in summer. Our dramatic arrival confronted us with the fact that we had decided to live in an extremely harsh place.

Fortunately, the weather soon broke, and we were able to begin to plan and construct our camp. But as the summer progressed, I became concerned by the fact that the tribe was becoming increasingly insular. My friends wanted absolutely no contact with the civilized world. I, on the other hand, had always thought we would have a community that people could visit so that they too could have their soul nourished through exposure to the old ways. This philosophical difference nagged at me, and eventually placed a wedge between the others and myself. And then a major rift occurred when we were felling trees for our lodging. I was concerned that we would run out of time before the cold weather came. I suggested we rent a chainsaw from town in order to get the job done more quickly. To the rest of group, this was a total act of betrayal, even though we made other technological compromises by using steel shovels and axes.

I flashed back to my earlier premonition. More seemed to be going wrong than going right. I decided to make a four-day solo journey into the woods in order to think. It rained for four days and four nights and I got very emotional. I realized that we were living a life based on fear, when it should be about freedom. I also had another dream, this time about Tecumseh, an Indian leader whose ancestors lived back in my homestate of Indiana. I knew I had to leave. This was perhaps the hardest decision I have ever made in my life. I loved them as my family, and I loved the way of life, but I wanted to share, not to isolate.
Brent returned to Indiana. The whole of his wilderness journey dates from the spring of '94 to the fall of '96. But then, for another year after he was back in Indiana, he lived out of a tipi on his grandfather’s property. Brent ended up starting his own woodland skills camp, teaching a slew of wilderness techniques, including fire by friction, rope making, plant identification, shelter construction, and how to make deer-skin clothing. He also got married, raising with his wife two children from her previous marriage and their newborn child. His partner Elizabeth practices midwifery and has spent many years helping to run an environmentally based community school for elementary-aged children. They live in the countryside, raising free-range chickens and eggs for themselves and the community, while using the chicken manure to enrich the soil for their garden. Brent also got trained in permaculture, which is a place-based farming philosophy that uses synergistic planting arrangements that mimic nature’s wisdom. To better pay the bills, he works for the state of Indiana protecting water quality. He still teaches wilderness skills whenever he can. To end our interview, I asked him to share some reflections on his experience living as a hunter-gatherer.

Although the transition from society to woodland life was hard, it was far more difficult to make the transition back into society from a neo-hunter-gatherer way. As Nick Hockings, an Ojibwa elder told me, “you have to be willing to suffer to get something good. Not that you will suffer, just that you must be willing to do so.” Thus, I have learned that a person grows much during a time of conflict. Maybe only really grows when there is conflict. There I was alone in the
middle of the woods without foundations of religion and science; those had crumbled. I had to face myself and go within. That's where I found answers and truth to questions that had nagged me.

I have come to believe that each soul on the earth has a path or paths to walk. Everyone is where she or he needs to be at this moment in time. That may sound like a cop-out or oversimplification, but it's too complex for me to hash out. Whenever I am humbled enough to allow my spirit to guide me, good things happen, whenever I ignore my spirit or do not listen, I stumble. Some folks may just not be listening. They are on a path, but need some conflict to get aware, something so different and far out that gets them outside of their box.

I've learned that rather than allowing a parent or society to create one's reality, it is possible to begin to develop one's own. For me, this reality became shaped around a native perspective. Where food is nourishment more than entertainment and the four food groups consist of deer meat, raccoon meat, beaver meat, and general critter meat with summer greens and berries tossed in. Where one's home is the woodlands and the sleeping quarters are made of twig and bark. Where every animal and plant is used to its fullest extent with respect. Where sitting silently for hours in wait for a deer becomes normal. And where entering into different dimensions of dream and wakefulness, while being able to hear the woodlands—the birds, animals, and plants—becomes completely part of your reality. Now I know that being native has nothing at all to do with one's blood relatives and everything to do with one's perceived reality. This is important, because seeing oneself capable of doing something "outside of the box" requires
the ability to work with reality for it to occur. This can be accomplished through
dreams, waking life, prayer, meditation, and vision. I think it is the most powerful
trait anyone can develop. But be careful, you may get what you wish for!

Another real toughie for me, and still is really, is balance. I came to the
realization I had a dark side. And I accepted that! Man, was that hard. Next came
the fun part of actually giving in to my wholeness as a person, a spiritual being.
Being able to bring both light and dark together allowed me to become a different
person. I was able to see beyond the veil of heaven and hell and good and bad and
right and wrong. Basically, this means not going to extremes, which I know
sounds contradictory. I just walked my path while being aware of what was
around me. Not saying yes or no to extremes. Just yes to being me. I learned to be
me, finally.

But coming back into society really flipped me out. I freaked out when
people wasted food. I spent most of my days dealing with food at some level.
Either gathering roots, or berries or leaves or setting traps or hunting or drying
meat or cooking my food, eating my food, and on and on. It was a way of being. I
developed such a reverence for what I ate and the circle of life and death that it
just blew my mind to see people waste food or clothing or anything like that.
Also, the way people treat each other, either with niceties or indifference. That
may be a response of too many people to deal with. I have finally learned not to
shoulder that any more.

I also learned not to judge too much about materials and circumstances. I
noticed that other creatures didn’t judge their environment, they just accept what
is there and use it or not. There is no judgment for the rabbit that lives in a shrub outside of the building where my office is located. If the discarded plastic bucket doesn’t move or try to eat it, it moves in during a heavy rain. It judges whether or not a thing or situation is dangerous for its immediate life and limb, and if not it either utilizes it or ignores it. Same with a spider. A discarded Pepsi can works just fine for shelter. And truly indigenous people do not judge a metal axe for where it was made or for how much. They see if it is suitable for their uses and if superior to their own stone axes, they adopt it immediately. I recall the first year back in Indiana when I was still holding on to living in my tipi. Just down the hill was a discarded satellite dish that came in handy for drying herbs and clothes on. I realized that if someone gave a “primitive” hunter a Jeep they might use it to travel the ten miles a day rather than walk. They might be able to do all their hunting in two days rather than four. Of course, from experience we know that the initial benefits of such technology are wonderful, but the rest of the baggage catches up and in the long term serves us up quite a few compromises.

So, in coming back into the world, into the rat race, I had to accept certain realities and come to terms with things here. Rather than dwelling on the negative, to focus on the positive, while also keeping an eye on the negative. As I see it, a big part of the equation now is how each one of us six billion human beings can find balance with ourselves and the earth around us and with the various technologies that serve us and that we serve. I think indigenous tribal peoples hold important clues to the answer of balance. They have not forgotten. Seeking out peaceful tribes like the Hopi is a good thing. We should ask ourselves: how do
they live in peace all the time? Is it the way they teach their children? For me, the greatest learning and most joyous times are now. My daughter Rhianna Rain was born in our home with a midwife. She slept on my belly and it made me cry with the deepest emotion I have known. It is quite a responsibility to raise children now or anytime, but especially now, when our values are so different compared to the majority. I have come to believe that the single most important thing I can do is love my children and allow them to carry their wisdom, inquisitiveness, and creativity into adulthood. Hey, they are born with it. We just need to figure out how to let them keep that. Let the children keep their wholeness!
Chapter Five

Syndee L’ome Grace’s Story

"The ultimate descriptive task, for both artists and scientists, is to ensoul what one sees, to attribute to it the life one shares with it; one learns by identification."

-- Barbara McClintock

"Numbers are difficult to visualize, and can often be upsetting. Yet, in the United States alone, 7,000 calves, 130,000 cattle, 360,000 pigs, 24 million chickens are killed every day in order to support a meat-based diet. If you can, imagine that the average American consumes approximately 2,400 animals in a lifetime. In order to satisfy this meat consumption, agribusiness has developed an immense slaughtering machine that causes great suffering to animals, creates long-term environmental disasters, endangers healthy food production, and ultimately, threatens the economic independence of developing countries who support this growing American appetite."

-- Michael W. Fox
I first met Syndee L’ome Grace at Purdue University in 1994. Her partner Bret, who I also know from Fred Montague’s Tribe discussion group, introduced us. It was clear right away that she was an extraordinarily open-hearted person. She gave me a big hug that seemed to say: “You are the friend of someone I love, so you must be a wonderful person.” Syndee and Bret were only in town for a few days, so I didn’t get a chance to hear much about the particulars of her life. I just knew that she was a long-time animal rights activist who occasionally gave workshops in deep ecology. I only saw her one other time since then—a brief visit at an ecopsychology conference we all happened to attend. But during the time I was looking for environmental activists to interview, I received a flier in the mail announcing a series of workshops organized by Syndee, Bret, and others. The workshops were scheduled to take place at the home of Syndee, Bret, their young son Mayan, and dog Wispy Wolf, on twenty acres adjacent to the Hoosier National forest in Bloomington, Indiana. I looked over the flier, pleased to see the good work they were doing, but it also dawned on me that Syndee might be a perfect person to interview. This feeling proved to be quite correct. During a weekend retreat we ventured out into the woods and I heard the story that gave birth to that hug.

Syndee grew up on a farm in Northwest Iowa with a traditional Christian upbringing. She was a self-described “good girl,” who always followed the rules. And yet, she somehow ended up devoting her life to environmental and psychological healing, spending five years as a leading animal rights activist in Washington, DC. We began by
discussing her childhood and its significance to her later life. Life can be difficult for farm kids. Money is often tight for farm families and there are usually few, if any, other children with whom to play. For Syndee, this meant that she had very few store-bought toys--the only one she can remember was a swing set--and that her brother and the animals were her best friends.

We built huts and tree houses, swung on ropes, jumped through the loose straw, and played among the hay mounds. The only life I knew was outside. Our family eventually got a TV, but you would rarely find me in front of it. I preferred to help my dad with the outside chores. Occasionally, Mom would try to get me to help doing chores inside the house, but I had no interest being inside the box. I was a wild child. My parents often told the story of how--at age four--I got up in the middle of the night in order to help a pregnant sow deliver her piglets. There was even a blizzard, but that didn’t stop me. I put on my little boots and coat and ventured out through the snow to the barn. My father followed me there and found me doing my job, helping the newborn piglets find their momma’s “booba.”

The greatest teachers I’ve had are from the non-human world. At such an early age I learned about death and the life force moving on through pigs--seeing the little babies who would die, and older pigs who would die for various reasons, seeing the life-force leave and the moment it left. I watched that in early childhood. I was exposed to that as a mystery. It was sad, but also something more than that. I knew it was something more. I also learned about birth. I saw
hundreds, if not thousands of baby animals being born. I watched that miracle. I watched itsy-bitsy little animals come to life. There was something about me as a little girl—I felt like I was a helper to those little animals. The identification I had with the animals was extraordinary.

One day, when I was only about four and a half years old, I went with my father as they took the pigs to market. I was always told that when they loaded the pigs on the trailer, it was to take them to "pig heaven." My dad told me to stay in the truck, but I wanted to see this place called pig heaven. I ended up seeing two of my best friends—Big Snorts and Happy Grunts—get the knife. After that day, I eventually came to realize that the meat in the freezer was not meat, it was my precious friends. I mean, I could teach the pigs to sit, come, and roll over much easier than any of our dogs. They are very, very intelligent beings. But I grew up in the late fifties and early sixties and it was quite difficult for anyone to challenge meat eating. I was taught that there was no alternative. Eating meat was essential for a healthy diet. After I had this profound childhood experience, and others like it growing up, I had to numb myself. But there was just no other way of life, no other thought on meat eating from the adult world and the medical community. You had to eat several portions from the four food groups!

By the time I was a teenager in the early seventies, I sensed that many farming practices were just not right. All of the farmers were going into confinement hog farming, all of them, but my father didn’t for ethical reasons. But he also knew that he couldn’t continue raising pigs because he wouldn’t be able to compete with the larger operations. So he sold out in 1972. Our neighbors
constructed a huge building for processing hogs and that’s when I knew it was wrong. The noise, the stench—the smell alone told me it was wrong. And I also remember the soil blowing in the winter. We would have snow, a beautiful blanket of white, but within a week some of the snow would blow away. The exposed topsoil would then start blowing and all the new snow would be black with dirt. My senses told me that was wrong too. I didn’t know that the plants of the prairie had been yanked from their home, leaving the soil with nothing to latch on to. Or that the soil would end up in the Mississippi River and then the Gulf of Mexico. I didn’t know that. I just knew that my eyes, nose, and ears told me something was wrong.

In 1972, Syndee left the farm in order to attend Luther College in Northeastern Iowa. Leaving for college is often a significant time in our lives, especially if it is the first time we have stepped out of “the house of the parents.” It usually takes quite a bit of time for young students to fully leap into the “home of the world.” Many never really make the jump. Syndee, however, was aided by a “lightning bolt” experience while scuba diving during a spring break trip in the Cayman Islands.

I was an 18-year-old freshman, on a package-deal style vacation with other students from my college. Nothing all that special about it. But then something amazing happened. I went scuba diving and my heart burst wide open, lighting up every part of me. I’ll never forget that mystical moment feeling no gravity, feeling so free with my body, with the water, with my breath, and with
my surroundings. It was exquisite. There was every color imaginable, every color fish . . . the coral . . . I can still see that first panoramic view in my mind’s eye. Something happened during that dive that I could not explain.

I was so embedded in the life of rural America, the so-called “bread basket,” and so to be guided to the water and the Cayman Islands, which was not yet very developed, was an amazing experience in itself. It was a peaceful, romantic, beautiful place that did not fit into my reality. I had read about the oceans and fantasized about islands, but I never really experienced the water world, other than the small streams and gravel pits of Iowa. And now I had literally dove into this other world, a world completely unknown to me, and it was mystical, it was magical—the colors, the feeling of being held safe—it was a gift to be able to experience this mysterious realm. But before I could really contemplate what had occurred to me, something else happened that made the experience even more profound. A mere two hours after leaving the water, I was in the hotel restaurant receiving my package-deal lunch. The waitress brought out several platters of “seafood” and placed them in front of my friends and me. I looked at this platter and it was haunting, it was human-made death and unnecessary. How could it be that only a few breaths ago, I was in their world, and they were so yielding to me, so curious, so trusting and inviting. Their world was so safe, so perfect and colorful. It was paradise. In that moment, the most hypocritical thing I could do would be to eat them.
Syndee was in an altered state of consciousness for the remaining week of the trip, which led her to an “euphoric gestalt shift.”

The next few days were euphoric. To know that there were experiences in this universe, on this earth, that were a mystery, left me in awe. Everything was enlivened and animated. I noticed everything with a heightened perception. I even remember walking differently. It was an euphoric gestalt shift, a rearranging of the pieces of my reality into a new whole. And this new whole contained a deeper, more profound sense of who I really am. My body, psyche, and spirit were so fed that I barely slept. It felt like a journey beyond the physical realm and yet it was completely rooted in the physical, in the body. I remember walking on that island and noticing the leaves on the trees in a new way. Of course, they were different, tropical trees that I had never seen before, so that may be why they were so pronounced and vivid. But the leaves seemed to wave at me, hold and love me. It was certainly not the kind of experience you can explain over a beer, which is what that trip was about for many of my fellow students. I created my own agenda that week because of what was flowing through me.

I’m a social creature and always strive for connection with other people, but it was clear none of the other fifteen students had a similar experience. I was the only one who couldn’t eat the platter of “seafood.” Everyone else just ate it. It may have been a struggle for others, but no one expressed it. I think a lot of people experience the mystic realms, or that deep surrender to the divinity of the moment, which is every moment if we are open to it. But my fellow students
clearly had a different scuba diving experience. I didn’t know how to share my experience with them. So I felt alone, but that didn’t matter. It was between the ocean world, Spirit, and me, and it was a gift. It was a time of extreme clarity, one of those times, those turns we make in our life in which there is no going back, no desire to go back. I think we all take significant turns in our life from which every other life experience spirals. This mystical experience was the most shaping for me. I immediately became a vegetarian. There was no other way of being. This proclamation was so liberating because I never really liked eating meat and all of a sudden I wasn’t going to. It didn’t matter that people told me I would die if I didn’t eat animal flesh. It just didn’t matter.

It’s pretty simple. I had received my message from God. There was no reinterpreting or misinterpreting or numbing myself to the reality of the message. It was simple: don’t eat animals, eat from the world of plants. Of course, my understanding of God was different from everyone else I met in Northcentral Iowa. I had never met another person whose God I wanted. I was on my way to a meaningful relationship with God, but it was very different from everyone else.

God is a raw, pure essence of love and life force, connection and trust. And for me the life force is whatever guides our breath. Whatever that breath is, wherever it came from, and when we leave this fleshy plane, wherever it goes, that mystery is God. God could certainly never be genderized. To call God a he or she is just nonsensical to me.
Syndee’s sense of purpose was definitive and absolute. Her mystical experience supplied her with a call to explore vegetarianism, although it’s important to add that her innate sensitivity and childhood schooled her for such a dramatic lightning bolt experience. When Syndee returned to college, she did not find an environment sympathetic to her call. Her background prepared her for the spirit of the call, but not the particulars. Following and living our callings often begins as a struggle. For Syndee, it was especially difficult since it was still the early seventies, in the Midwest, and there were no other non-meat-eaters at the college. As a result, classmates often made fun of her.

I was a complete anomaly. Because of my surroundings, my vegetarianism profoundly set me apart. It was a profound difference, between me and peers, between me and my teachers, between me and everybody in my life. It was such a core, heart issue. Nobody could relate, nobody could empathize. I eventually stopped sharing it. But I was never offended or affected by being teased about being a “veggie.” There was just absolutely no other way to be. My interest in vegetarianism also led me to environmental and social justice clubs at college. I knew even then that these issues were all interconnected. But this knowledge came from inside me. I had no outside mentors or comrades. It took many more years before I met others who were putting their inner worlds out in the form of creative activism. But at this point in my life I didn’t even know such people existed.
Syndee ended up getting an interdisciplinary degree focusing on human health. She then searched the whole country for a place to continue her formal schooling. "I wanted a small, intimate program that would integrate academics with practical experience. I found such a program in the educational psychology department at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington." Her reasons for attending grad school were multiple.

I was still motivated by the need for degrees in order to be recognized. I was still very much on the job grid, the corporate grid, and the consumerism grid. But I also pursued academic work because I had a passion to work with people. My childhood empathy with animals was naturally extended to include a profound empathy with humans. My whole focus was on how to create more love among humans. I could feel that one of our biggest challenges was simply loving each other. But it didn’t take me long to realize that our greatest challenge was loving ourselves. It is only when we truly have a deep love affair with ourselves, unconditional love for ourselves, that we can stop living a fictional love with others. When we pour out true love from the inside, then we can be in love with each other, but if that isn’t there, it’s an illusion, it’s a fiction for me to say I love you. Because what do we know about love if there is a war going on inside? But I also went to graduate school because I didn’t know there were other choices. I had no mentors from the activist or spirit arena. Our culture told me that if you wanted to help people you did studies of people, you did sociology or psychology.
And I was the best little girl, I was the most obedient, good little girl. So of course that’s what I did.

After finishing her graduate work, Syndee sought adventure and spent a season as a tour guide in Alaska. But while she loved this life, she kept feeling called to do more: “I kept coming home to working with people, working with love, working with heart, and working with spirit, even though I didn’t know how to articulate that.” And so she did come home, both to working with people and back to Luther College, where she became the Director for Residential Life.

I worked daily with young people and discovered such a hole, such an emptiness within so many of them. They seemed to be missing a core piece of who they were, and they usually tried to fill this hole with some dysfunction—alcohol abuse, eating disorders, shopping, watching hours of TV, sexual promiscuity. They tried to fill their emptiness with a pseudo-meaningfulness that came from the external world instead of from their inner world or the wonder of the natural, non-human created world. I could see the turmoil of a disconnected culture through the eyes of these relatively privileged young people, a disconnection from spirit, from nature, from what it means to be a human on this planet. I eventually discovered my own ecopsychology in relation to these young adults and their challenges. Simply sitting in my office and discussing their problems didn’t work. Transformation took place more readily when we escaped the box of my office and took a walk, or sat up against a one-hundred year old oak
tree, or found earth objects and shared what they represented. Every person, without exception, wants two things: to love and be loved. My job was to model, show, and teach a way for these students to come home to this love and to themselves.

Syndee enjoyed her work, but she soon had another life-changing experience. In the fall of 1981, she had an epiphany during a trip to Minneapolis, prompted by the simple sight of a health food store.

I had no idea there was such a thing as a health food store. I went inside and was shocked when I saw a magazine entitled *Vegetarian Times*. I proceeded to ask the manager if they had any other copies. He kindly brought out five back issues. I bought all six copies. I took the next day off from work and read every issue cover to cover. And in the back of all of them was an ad—“if you are interested in the rights of animals, please contact People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals.” I couldn’t believe what I was reading: There’s an organization for the ethical treatment of animals? You’ve got to be kidding me! I wrote them a postcard telling them I did some public speaking in the Midwest and that I would love to integrate some of their stuff into what I was talking about. I soon received a phone call from Ingrid Newkirk, the national director for PETA. Ingrid invited me to a weekend conference for animal rights activists in Columbus, Ohio. I responded with a mixture of excitement and still more shock: animal rights
activists? What's that? Sounds like me, but no one had mirrored this back to me until now.

I had a full schedule of work planned for that particular weekend, but nothing was going to stop me from going to Columbus. I had to miss the opening of the conference on Friday evening, but I drove all night and eventually arrived on Saturday. The spirit of the gathering was already in full bloom. I couldn't believe it. Here I was in a room with one-hundred twenty-five other people, and it was as if each one of them was me talking. I never experienced that before. Never. That was the first time I heard people express their inner world, their passion, such deep empathy—for not only humans, but for animals and for this earth—and it was expressed openly and without criticism. It was such an amazing circle for me to enter. I was in awe. Eventually, the topic under discussion turned to vivisection, but I had never heard that term before. Vivisection? What's vivisection? Life-section . . . taking apart life? I remember sitting there trying to figure it out, and a little embarrassed about asking anybody, because it was a heated discussion. The meeting was in a hotel, so I snuck out to the lobby desk and asked for a dictionary. I looked up vivisection and was just so horrified that anything like that was happening on this planet.

Syndee took a lengthy break as the memories filled her with emotion.

I was so naive. I could never understand war and this was in that same line of thinking, feeling, and knowing that something is just wrong. Where have we
humans gone? How could we let our conditioning do this to us? How could we separate ourselves like this? I mean from the earth, okay, but from a fellow species . . . how could we do it? And then I saw the pictures [long pause]. At that meeting we decided to focus on vivisection, specifically on primates because we felt if humans would open their hearts to any species, certainly it would be primates.

Regional rallies were organized at four primate centers—Atlanta, Boston, the University of California-Davis, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Syndee was a Midwest organizer. It was 1982 and the experiments they focused on were Harry Harlow's maternal deprivation studies. Harlow, supported by the legitimizing power of objective science, forced young rhesus monkeys to grow up without their mothers. The monkeys responded by sitting passively, staring out into space, winding themselves into tortured positions, and tearing at their flesh. Harlow's studies "proved" that there was a bond between mother and child.

Harry Harlow was a respected academic and researcher, who chose to devote his studies to maternal deprivation. I looked at the pictures taken by his fellow researchers and knew it was wrong. Something was missing--there was no human consideration for these fellow beings. Any feeling, empathetic, loving person who has a heart could not look at these pictures without feeling sick. It was extreme animal abuse. And I didn't want to read the research. It was not relevant
to anything I know in this world. It was meaningless. It was a horror picture show, except that it wasn’t fictitious. It was real.

We brought a busload of people from Iowa and joined about fifteen thousand people at a rally protesting the maternal deprivation studies at the University of Wisconsin. It was an amazing event for me because I was able to give voice to my inner world with other humans who felt passion and love and were not afraid to put it out in the world. This feeling was so alluring and is what drew me in. But there was one aspect from the very beginning that I was uncomfortable with. I could not relate to the anger, to the yelling or chanting that was negatively directed towards humans. I felt uncomfortable with it and so I had to ignore that part. I certainly shared how I felt about it with my fellow activists— who later became my deepest friends—but I was kind of a loner. Pretty much everyone had that part in them. They were pissed. I can access it—there is a bit of that in me—but not that much. It’s just that I can so thoroughly understand how we, how society, strayed away. I don’t want to punish us. I want to hold humans and love us and empathize and change us. I want to share with humans why change is imperative if we are to recover as a species, if we are to survive.

If I was going to be an angry activist, shaking my finger at you about what you are doing wrong, you are not going to listen. The core word here is listen. This is always in my heart. When I sit alone and with others, it all comes down to that seed question: How do we continue to shed the layers of conditioning so that we can really hear and listen to the life force that connects us to absolutely everything? How do we listen? Because in our culture we have been taught to be
very active, and very responsive, and to engage in dialogue, and yet there is not an emphasis on real listening. The only listening that a majority of our culture does is to consumerism. We listen to the media, to the TV, to commercials, to billboards. But how do we listen to what is inside instead of that external world of our consumer culture that is just killing us? How do we just stop?

Real change has little to do with saving the earth, or saving animals, and has everything to do with coming home to who we really are. Everything else will spiral out of that. When we hear the voice of Spirit, the voice of that amazing life force, we don’t hurt each other, we don’t deliberately stomp on bugs, we don’t kill animals so we can consume them. We don’t do that. It all stops. At least that is what I have been able to bear witness to. At some point along our paths we just stop and start to ask questions like: how can I live more simply? I think social-psychologists say we make a thousand snap decisions daily—a thousand—we have to ask how we can make every one of those decisions the most loving. And that’s where we need each other too, because we all discover ways of living more simply and lovingly. We need to share our stories and our discoveries with each other. And how do we communicate that information in a loving way so that our walls don’t go up? So that I don’t turn you off from the get-go? How do we do that? These questions are what led me to the next chapter—next volume—of my life, which was activism.

Syndee ended up moving to Washington, DC. She describes her activist life after she left her “pretty little life, cozy little house, and pretty big salary at Luther College.”
In January of 1983, Yookee—my malamute companion—and I moved to Washington, DC to explore the political process in hopes of making a difference. I started studying issues. I collected voluminous amounts of information and just talked to every person I met who was active in different arenas. My intention was to work on the issue that needed the most help. Wherever there was the least amount of organizing, I was going to pursue that. But I also wanted to be a cross-pollinator, a networker, because my life had taught me that everything is connected. It wasn’t only about animal rights, or rainforests, or social justice, or gender issues, or nuclear waste. It just wasn’t. So I did the study and then came back to animal rights. I felt this was the most misunderstood issue and that it needed the most help, in the sense that there were so many voids. And the biggest void I saw was a political one. There was not a national organization that lobbied for animal rights. So I started one called the National Alliance for Animals. I created a non-existent position in a non-existent organization. It was simply a heart-thought—that’s all it was, a heart-thought. There was another woman who was very instrumental, Connie Kagan. She also held the vision for the Alliance. Connie was my mentor while I did this, and I did it from February 1983 to December 1988.

It was an amazing undertaking. As a lobbying group, you can’t influence Congress unless there are two other prongs—grassroots organizers who are in touch with their local Congressperson and two senators. And then we as the lobbying arm can serve as a very effective triangle. We create a relationship with
both the people and their representatives so that we can speak on behalf of this network we are establishing. That way, when we go to Capitol Hill, we are not speaking as this insignificant lobby group about animal rights, but we are speaking because we have some constituent power. We can use some significant names from say, Cedar Rapids, Iowa business people who care about animal rights.

So we set up a national network for animal rights. But one of the first things I had to acknowledge was that we were only an organization on paper and all we were was me. So I called thirteen activists throughout the country and I said, “I’m from the National Alliance for Animal Legislation and we are doing a tour. I’m wondering if you would like for us to come to your town and do a presentation to assist you in grassroots organizing and in your knowledge of how we can apply animal rights to the political system?” Everyone was thrilled, they said, “when can you come?” So I bought a six-hundred dollar Eastern Airlines pass--for twenty-one days you could fly all over the U. S.--and I put together a three-hour presentation on the how-to’s of grassroots lobbying. In twenty-one days I did seventeen workshops. I would fly at night and do workshops during the day. I was in Boston, Houston, Knoxville--I just zig-zagged all over this country. And at everyone of those seventeen gatherings I said, “how would you like to come to Washington DC this summer for a weekend conference to learn more about the how-to’s of grassroots lobbying, and then on Monday we could all go down to Capitol Hill?” Everyone said “yes.” I thought that maybe we would have thirty people come to Washington, but we had two-hundred people come to that
first conference. And over the years the conference grew to up to eight-hundred participants. And then on Monday we’d go swarm Capitol Hill.

It was really beautiful. Our presence was absolutely essential. But in the end I felt we were up against this force, and all we were doing was instead of taking ten steps backwards, maybe it was only two steps. It always felt like that. The corporate world was just too big. And to go to Capitol Hill and lobby effectively—it’s all up here [pointing to head]. It’s all facts and figures and numbers... there’s little of this [holding heart]. It’s like, you go to meetings to present this aura of being a nice person, but most importantly to be a professional—the stature, the body. We taught people about body language: “When you go in and you lobby, make sure that wherever you sit that your eye level is at least as high, if not higher, than the Congress person you’re talking to, or the aide you’re talking to.” I mean, this was my life for five years! I felt it was such important work, but it was just killing me. It was head work—and yes, I have a brain—but for me, I just want to shut the brains of everyone off. I mean, will you shut off your brain? Let’s just stop all this stuff up here and let’s speak from our heart. But it’s impossible because nobody knows how to do it. We’ve never been taught how to dig.

To me, what became apparent after several years of working with hardcore activists, is that our actions are mostly a kind of throw-up expression of what is hurting us—and it’s verbal, it’s academic. What really starts activism is some heartbeat, but for some reason—because the pain is so great—we shove down what is embedded in the heart. It all gets shoved down and we start living with this
belief that we can't even go there because there is so much work to do and we can't stop. We end up working in this arena where we debate and argue, we defend, but we don't listen. It's all from the head. It all becomes an academic issue. I believed in the government. And I believed we could change from the top down. My government classes taught me that we could have influence. But I learned that as long as it remains in that academic realm it is a very hurtful downward spiral. So that was my experience in Washington, DC, and that is why I had to get out. I stayed until December of 1988, until I thought I was going to die. I thought my spirit and my heart were going to die. I thought I was going to die of a true heart attack. I call this my d-date, because of all the d's--death, dysfunction, de-spirited. I have like thirty of them I can recite . . . all of the d's I was feeling. I was in such despair, such depression. I knew I had to live my inner world and I struggled to do that on Capitol Hill. I struggled to do that within the beltway with other activists--with whom I had fallen in love--but our ways of expressing our passion diverged. All I wanted was to hug people, but the Washington world was about finger shaking. So I found a successor and I left.

I went home to Iowa to be on our family farm--my parents were in Arizona--and all I did was recover myself. I soon became conscious of the fact that I wasn't breathing. So all I did for two and a half months was breathe, and walk Yookee--she came with me to DC and came home--and I spontaneously discovered the power of my breath. All I did was breathe and walk with Yookee. I disconnected every clock in the house, every TV, every radio, so I could be in silence. I stocked up on food so I wouldn't make many trips out. I was totally by
myself, and yet with everything. I needed to completely separate myself from Washington. My whole identity was that organization. My whole being was the National Alliance for Animals. And I had little support when I left, virtually no support from the activist world. Most everyone was so upset with me, even angry. I had never experienced people directing anger at me like that. How could I abandon animal rights? How could I abandon the most amazing organization? How could I do it? But I just knew that I had no choice.

Then amazing things started to happen. I discovered breath work, which has become one of the gestalts of my life. I discovered it through my personal experience, and then through thoroughly researching it at the Library of Congress. I was amazed to find that indigenous cultures had done many different forms of intentional breath work for thousands of years. And then I discovered that there are dozens of different teachings of breath work in this country. And so that became one of the amazing spirals of my life. I not only practiced breath work, I also got trained and became a certified breath work facilitator. I believe that for many people breath work can be the epiphany. It can be that experience, that transpersonal moment when we see the oneness of this creation, and then our life is transformed.

Syndee’s path since leaving Washington has been filled with many more adventures, including being the principal organizer for Earth Day 1989 in New York City, and helping to form an activist based intentional community in Massachusetts. More recently, Syndee and Bret purchased the property in Bloomington, Indiana.
Amazingly, there new home was the site of a former illegal dumping ground adjacent to the Hoosier National Forest. Syndee and Bret have hosted workshops at their home on numerous topics, including permaculture, ecopsychology, ecological design and alternative building construction, breath work, and vegetarianism. Syndee also practices "hearththerapy," which combines breath work with an exploration of our life’s purpose.

Syndee and Bret also brought their son Mayan into the world. Syndee was forty-three years old at the time of Mayan’s birth. She describes their decision to establish a home in Bloomington.

We knew that we didn’t want to move to a pristine area and take away, in any form, from its beauty. We wanted to move to a place that was asking: please help me, please clean me up, please honor me. And this place was just oozing with ugliness. So far we have removed—with help from the county—one-hundred twenty tons of trash. I have found that this amount is inconceivable to most people. It’s like a billion dollars--none of us can really conceive of what a billion dollars is. Well, the same is true with a one-hundred twenty tons of trash. And we have cleaned up maybe about a fifth of it, most of it is buried. So it’s a lifetime of work. It’s a labor of love for this planet, for this land, for my home.

Our dream was to start with the illegal dump and create an eloquence, or not even to create, to just let this earth thrive, to just let it be, and then to do the human touches that enhance and reflect and mirror the exquisite beauty that it is. As Bret said, we’ve begun to do the work of the hands. For years--after I left DC--I was very clear that the work was about heart and spirit, and connecting and just
sinking our roots into this earth and into all that gives us life, all that connects us to that initial starblast, that infinite universe of giving and love. But where do the hands come in? We’ve got a lot of work to do with our hands because of the human-created trash that is all over this planet. It means getting our hands dirty. We live with an illusion about throwing stuff away. But where is away? We’re a disposable culture, to such an extreme that I often fear that we are going to dispose of ourselves. We’ve treated the whole earth as if it was an illegal dump. You definitely have to get your hands dirty if you’re going to do good work in this culture. So the home that we’ve created is about the integration of life and work and play that is devoted to the heart and spirit... and hands.

And that brings me home to what, for me, the dream is about: re-creating culture. It starts here, with my inner culture. What’s this garbage in here? Because as long as I’ve got garbage in here, I’m going to be trashing this world in one way or another—whether it’s other humans, or animals, or the earth itself—I’m going to be trashing. How am I going to clean up the trash of my inner world? Trash is such a metaphor for life on this earth today. But thank Spirit that when we first looked at this land, Bret could see beyond the tons of trash. I couldn’t. When we came out here, there was a piece of trash on every square foot—most places had mounds. And here I had this child in my belly. I could not see beyond the trash. I was scared. I was so scared. I can remember crying and saying to Bret, “I don’t want Mayan to be picking up trash for the rest of his life.” But that’s why in moments of disempowerment we need each other’s wisdom. And that’s what Bret
was for me in that moment. He knew that this illegal dump was the perfect place for us to create a home for living and learning.

I knew the natural world growing up outside the box on the farm. I knew it in my body. I am the earth. I’ve always understood that I am of this earth. As a child, feeling free in the country, every moment was a mystical experience. Mystical moments unfold, one after the other, when we are allowed to be our natural selves, and I was a lot of the time, although I went to school where the demystification of the world began. But I took refuge at home with the animals. Our culture has no rights of passage that honors the part of us that is connected, the part that is spirit and desires the mystic realms. By the time we are young adults we are so smothered that we don’t know how to tap into it. One of my daily prayers, and Bret’s too, is that we continue to surrender and listen so that we can hold a space for Mayan where he gets to experience the splendor, awe, and beauty that is alive in this world most moments of his young life. Those who are gifted in this way are guided to Spirit.

To conclude our interview, I asked Syndee for some final reflections on her activist life in Washington, DC.

Bluntly put, my DC experience was very disempowering for me, but not one that I would change in the least. The activist presence in DC has the very important role of effecting our political decisions. I have the highest respect for those who put their lives on the line in this way. But activist burnout in DC is a
constant epidemic. DC is such a spiritual battlefield where those who don’t have a
grounded spiritual base soon become empty, excepting those rare people of
exceptionally strong will and character like Ingrid Newkirk. For anyone in the DC
activist scene or heading in that direction, my prayer for you would be to create
meaningful rituals in your personal lives that will balance your experience and
keep the love in your soul alive. Do yoga, meditate, get massages, pray, surround
yourself with beauty, garden, have non-work related dinners with friends, read
children’s books, eat simply and well, keep your space organized, write poems,
paint with watercolors—and look into the mirror everyday with love.

I surrounded myself with ugliness during my time in DC. I woke up each
day to an insanely horrific poster of a monkey getting its head bashed in during
misguided “scientific experiments” of the head injury clinic, which is the kind of
thing that happens daily in the U. S. I thought this reminder would help me to
convey my message to congress of how such sick practices must stop. But I now
know that I had it backwards. For those of us who aren’t in denial concerning
such atrocities, the challenge is to be continually mindful of the immense beauty
that this earth holds in its womb. We must remember that we all deserve to enjoy
life, just as we are all responsible for keeping the beauty that is left alive. To all
the DC activists past, present, and future, I give my deepest thanks and blessing
for what you do for all of us.
Chapter Six

Andy Mahler’s Story

“Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons . . . Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”

-- Vaclav Havel
I first met Andy Mahler at a talk he gave at Purdue University for the student group Environmental Action. Andy was the director of Heartwood, a non-profit activist organization fighting to keep our national forests from being logged. There were fifty or so students in attendance, including a few from the Purdue forestry department who wanted to argue for the necessity of logging. These students were trained to see the forest as a place in need of constant human management. Their courses taught them a scientific interpretive structure, and they planned on graduating and then getting a job that would allow them to experiment. The university supplies these students with worthwhile scientific tools, but rarely teaches a larger vision that would help them decide if, when, and how they should use these tools.

Andy handled their questions without difficulty. He was well versed in the scientific aspects of forest management. But his main point was that a management ethic is flawed from the start if it causes us to see the forest only in instrumental terms. He also reminded the audience that the national forests are public land. The public’s forests are being logged at an alarming rate, despite the fact that a majority of citizens are against any destruction of these forests. Heartwood was formed in response to this destruction. In 1990, a small group of citizen-activists from four Midwestern states got together to see what could be done to stop the logging on public lands. The results are impressive. Heartwood has grown to include a network of offices and activists from Arkansas to Pennsylvania. These activists have used protests, letters of public comment, appeals, and
lawsuits to end numerous logging attempts by the forest service and large logging companies. They have also begun a forest watch program to insure that new timber sales do not occur without public awareness.

Andy discussed these issues with the students, occasionally lapsing into technical discussions of boardfeet and forest science. But what struck me was his passion for saving the forests. At one point, he shared a bit of his own story, saying that he hadn’t chosen this work. Rather, he felt that it chose him. I was quite struck by this statement. I wondered how his calling was first formed and brought into expression. We got together at the “Lazy Black Bear,” his beautiful home adjacent to the Hoosier National Forest. He shares this home with his partner Linda, a half dozen dogs, a few cats, peacocks, hens and roosters, horses, and numerous hurt and abandoned wild animals that they try to bring back to health. The first thing I learned upon arriving was that Andy was stepping down as Heartwood director. Andy had only taken one short break during fourteen years of working as a forest activist. He told me he had no idea what he was going to do next, maybe some writing, or just some gardening and simple living.

When Andy told me he was leaving his leadership position within Heartwood, I immediately thought that this was a perfect time for our interview. We all go through crossroads when we look back at our lives to see how we got to the present and where we might be headed in the future. I hoped our discussion would prove to be a healthy vehicle for this process. I began our interview by asking him if his childhood experiences had an effect on his devotion to the forests.
I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, but by the age of five our family moved to Bloomington, Indiana, where my father took a job as a professor at Indiana University. Except for occasional trips, I’ve stayed in Indiana my entire life, and have developed a deep connection to the Bloomington area, and later to the entire hardwood region. When we first moved to Indiana we lived in Hoosier Courts, which was just some housing supplied by the university for new faculty and their kids. But soon we moved to our first home, near the edge of town. There were woods behind the house, which gave me the opportunity to simply live near trees and climb trees. I really think that was one of the most formative aspects of my childhood. I climbed trees all the time. At some critical point in my life, without being conscious of it, I imprinted on the hardwood forests. There is something about the embracing, overarching scale of the hardwoods that resonates very deeply within me. There is a kind of communication that happens when you are a kid, and I strongly feel that I made a connection with the maples and oaks that had an effect on my later life.

I did travel to Brazil with my family shortly after we moved to Indiana. The sensations in Brazil were very different. The spirit world was much closer to the surface there than it ever has been for me in this country. We took a canoe trip down one of the rivers, deep into the rainforest. I don’t remember how long that trip lasted, but the whole experience opened me to a world that seemed to be filled with possibilities. It opened me to different ways of seeing and being. This trip had a definite effect on me, but the bulk of my outdoor schooling occurred back in Indiana, simply by playing outside. I have always been very enthusiastic about
life. I always liked staying out late and playing after dark. I never wanted to come in. I never wanted to put on shoes. I never wanted to sleep. I just wanted to be outside playing.

I often went outside in the evening to lay on my back and looked up at the night sky. I’d look at the stars, and get completely lost in the vastness and depth of space. This led me to try to make sense of some of those fundamental human questions. Where do we come from? Why are we here? What is my purpose in life? What is the connection between the infinitely small and the infinitely large? Where does the human scale fit into this grand design? What does it mean to be alive? What is the culmination of all the previous lives that have led to these lives, to my parent’s lives, and to their producing children? What is the relationship of human beings to each other and to other creatures? I asked myself these big and deep questions, from which answers were not forthcoming. But the questions lingered.

I also had other significant childhood experiences. When I was eight years old and I spent time in the hospital because of an unknown disease that left me paralyzed. The doctors didn’t know how long it would last, or if it might be fatal. At one point, they told my parents that I only had a fifty percent chance of survival. I also remember a series of dreams where a voice spoke to me. There was a face, although I really don’t remember the face, only the eyes, and it basically said, there’s lots of scary things out there and they’re going to seem very real and have great power over you in terms of your reaction to them, but if you
can remember this voice you will know at some fundamental level that you are safe and everything is going to be okay.

We took a significant jump in time and continued his story with an intense period of personal struggle during his late teens and early twenties.

I often felt inadequate, like I didn’t belong. This was partly due to expectations that came with being a first generation American with parents who were war refugees. My parents wanted me to fully embrace this country and the ideals of being an American. I did my best but I never quite fit in. I think that time when I was paralyzed was critical to my experience. I came close to dying, which gave me a sense of having been given a gift. I received the gift of knowing how close death is, but also that life is fully available and there for those who chose to live it. I always looked for what I wanted without necessarily following the existing script of fitting into the culture at large. I was alienated from the culture and the objective of being fabulously wealthy.

I really struggled with my sense of inadequacy and worthlessness. I was suicidal at different times in my late teens and early twenties. I felt that I was a failure and had let down everyone who loved me. There was definitely a tension between my parents and me concerning definitions of success. My parents did their best to hide their disappointment and be supportive, but I carried a lot of baggage internally in terms of not living up to expectations. One of the recurring themes of my life is trying to distinguish between real needs and indulgences, and
then fulfilling my real needs without causing suffering to others, especially to others that love me dearly. But when I graduated from college, I felt that my obligation to my parents was largely complete because I never really wanted to attend.

I struggled to understand the nature of existence, and my own experience and responsibility. I was unable to justify being alive. I felt I had absolutely nothing meaningful to contribute to society and that the best thing for the planet and myself was just to get on out. There is a kernel of goodness in the heart of the human being. I have a good little heart and a strong desire to be a good person and do good things for others. But the kernel of goodness is often discounted amid the longings, desires, needs, and expectations of parents, culture, teachers, and the peer pressure in school. When you take away the parental, societal and peer group expectations, and have already discounted the importance of the fundamental kernel of goodness, you find nothing there. You scrape away all that external stuff, discount the kernel of goodness, shine a bright light to see what's left, and you see there's nothing there. Nothing.

So basically, when you've deconstructed yourself and see nothing unique or good or worthy, you think maybe its time to extinguish this particular experiment and start over with somebody who knows what they want, somebody who has a clear vision and purpose, as opposed to this poor teenage soul who hasn't had a chance to do anything yet, but who looks around and sees a world full of extremely accomplished people who from all appearances are well-adjusted, happy, and know exactly what they should be doing in life. I compared
myself to others and saw that I didn’t have a clue as to what I should be doing, or what my calling is, and how I was supposed to relate to the people nearest and dearest to me.

I came very close to a white-out, but I slowly, somewhat methodically and somewhat haphazardly, tried to construct an identity on nothing other than that still, small voice that says there is still something of value here if it can just find a way to come out. The way it finally came out for me was through finding a place where I felt at home and finding a person with whom I could explore the depth of relationship. Of course, there have been lots of missteps, false steps, hurt, anxiety, all the stuff that goes into working out over time how you live with another person, honoring their needs while trying to meet your own. But I found a place and partner that nourished me. And lo and behold, the purpose manifested itself in ways that were so compelling, so uplifting and rewarding. It had very little to do with deliberate conscious choice—it had to do with studying, preparing, and trying to become a full and complete human being. The different pieces of my consciousness or persona came together and I eventually discovered an opportunity to be of service to both the human family and the larger family of living and non-living beings who share this wonderful point in time and space.

After Andy graduated from Indiana University with a degree in art, his ambition was “to be happy, do no harm, and live a simple life.” Due to a number of circumstances, he moved about an hour south of Bloomington to a house adjacent to the Hoosier National Forest. He was living with his girlfriend, and Linda was living nearby with her.
boyfriend at the Lazy Black Bear. Both couples split up and Andy and Linda eventually
got together. The year was 1981 and Andy still had no idea he would become a forest
activist. He simply wanted to live close to the land. For the next few years he did just
that, while working on a writing project and fixing up the house.

I spent a lot of time just doing what needed to be done, whether it was
automotive repair, farm machinery work, gardening, putting siding on the house,
plumbing, or fixing the gutters. But in 1984 our tranquil life started to change. We
spent a lot of time riding horses and walking in the woods, and it became
increasingly difficult to ride anywhere without encountering a clearcut. But being
a relative newcomer to the county, I didn’t feel like I had a say. I didn’t have my
voice, so to speak. I didn’t know how to talk about the issue, except to complain
and grumble. I also didn’t know if it was private land or not. It seemed impossible
to believe that they were actually cutting down the national forest, so I assumed it
was like our place—private land inside the national forest.

Andy and Linda eventually learned from conversations with neighbors that in fact
it was the Forest Service cutting down the Hoosier National Forest. But it was a proposal
to build motorcycle and off-road-vehicle trails about three-quarters of a mile away from
their house that first got Andy started in forest activism.

It just seemed like such an indignity to dedicate the public forest to that
kind of noisy and destructive use. Linda and I decided to go to a local meeting--
we saw a little notice in the local paper—at the courtroom annex. It was 1985 and Bill Hayden of the Sierra Club came down from Bloomington to explain some things to us. It was a rainy night—six inches deep in some of the streets in town because it was so intense—but even so, fifty people showed up to talk about what was happening in the forest. A group known as Protect Our Woods emerged from this meeting. There were probably about a dozen people that took on a fairly active role. I played the role of connector and communicator, since I had fewer commitments in terms of family and a full-time job. I was the coordinator. I went to each person’s house to find out what they were doing and shared information in such a way as to minimize the duplication of effort and maximize what got done. We really had to work hard to educate ourselves. We had to find out what was going on and get in our letters of comment. After a fairly intense effort—it took all of my time and all the time Linda could spare from teaching—we were ultimately successful in stopping the off-road vehicle and motorcycle trails.

Over the next five years, I got completely involved with Protect Our Woods and was elected president of the organization. We developed relationships with newspaper reporters, politicians, and whoever we thought could help us mobilize public opinion and support to stop the level of destruction proposed by the Forest Service. And we experienced something I think a lot of environmental activists don’t get to experience—success. We established a goal for ourselves—which was to stop the ORV trail proposal—and not only did we stop this proposal, we got the Hoosier declared officially closed to ORV’s. We were the first national forest so designated. We got the forest plan re-opened. We got timber cutting
stopped. I mean, we had remarkable success. It wasn’t through the work of one person, or even one organization, although most people who were involved would acknowledge that Protect Our Woods played a pivotal role in making it happen. It was a collective effort. It was a clear expression of public will. We got what we wanted without litigation—we never filed a single lawsuit. And I think we only filed one appeal of a Forest Service proposal. We used none of the tools upon which we have subsequently come to rely—no legislation, no direct action, almost no public protest. It was just an organizing effort that resulted in change.

The success of Protect Our Woods is celebrated in a chapter from Steven Higgs’ book, *Eternal Vigilance: Nine Tales of Environmental Heroism in Indiana*. Higgs writes that Andy played a key role in this success, “securing one of the state environmental movement’s most impressive victories ever.” However, as Andy and his fellow activists stepped back from their victory, they discovered a disturbing reality.

We found that all our success had done was to protect our own backyard at the expense of forests in neighboring states, where the cutting was not abating, or was increasing to make up for the decline of cutting in the Hoosier. It was like squeezing a balloon—narrowing it at one end just makes it bulge out elsewhere. So we were not able to take satisfaction in our success. And that is how our experience with Protect Our Woods led to the formation of Heartwood.
Andy was now a full-fledged forest activist. He movingly reflects on how this happened to him, and how making a contribution to protecting forests contributed to his own personal growth.

I came to an understanding about three years into this work that this was not something I was doing on a temporary basis. Originally, I said I was just going to do this for a little while because the need was so great, but then I was going back to what I imagined for myself. I had a plan. I had expectations. But two or three years into it I started realizing this was not something I was doing until I could get back to my “real” life. This was my real life. I stopped pretending that it was a temporary situation and embraced it. I embraced it as being worthy of my fullest concentration. But activism was not something I ever imagined for myself. I was sort of drawn to politics, as the expression of the collective will of people. And I liked doing things with people. But I never imagined I would engage in any kind of environmental activism. I had all these mixed up ideas concerning what I thought life was supposed to be about or what role I was supposed to play in life. But there was something about my own lack of clarity concerning my purpose that led me to the woods. I was an empty vessel and the forest filled me up. The forest recognized the skills that I might be able to bring to bear to protect the forest. Somehow, I was enlisted. I didn’t enlist, I was drafted. I was in the woods and the forest pushed me forward. The forest chose me and said: You’ve got to do this. You have to do this.
For the first twenty to thirty years of my life I was kind of a slow starter. I never got done being a student. To me, being a student was about exploring ideas for their own sake. My upbringing taught me to hold up the life of the mind as an ideal of human character and spirit. My parents held up the intellect as the highest expression of human potential. I had no religious context. I did go to a Unitarian church from time to time with my friends, but I made no kind of connection there. I also manifested an interest in service in high school, mostly as a volunteer for Big Brothers. But it wasn’t until I got involved in forest protection that I fully recognized the joys of the life of the mind and the life of service. Service in the sense that there is a great need out there and all this information and experience I accumulated—all this work I had done as a student—somehow came together and clicked. All this information and training I had from different arenas—including theater in college, debate in high school, or simply the skill of applying information toward a specific end or organizing information to create a greater clarity—all the talents I accrued from twenty years of being a student came into play as an activist. I discovered something I’ve only found a few other times in my life, which was an integration of different components of my interests, character, and experience. It all fell into place in ways that propelled me forward. And this allowed me to be very effective as an organizer, spokesperson, and coordinator of the effort of other people.

Doing this work has been such a revelation for me, such a learning experience about myself. Certainly there is still an ego present in doing this work, and thus a certain amount of gratification in getting recognition, but for the most
part the work has been its own reward. Just the doing of it. But one of the things that has been most rewarding is the continuing and unfolding revelation of the true nature of the work. When I first started I thought activism was a simple matter of organizing people to achieve a specific political result. But in the early years with Heartwood I was walking in the woods with Phil Burke--Phil was the financial coordinator for Heartwood at the time--and he helped me to come to a new understanding of activism. Phil had spent the last twenty to thirty years studying esoteric wisdom traditions, and he opened my eyes, reminding me of some the connections I made as a child in the canoe in the Brazilian rainforest and the dreams I had as a kid. Phil reminded me of the whole realm of human experience which is not part of the political, and not necessarily part of intellectual experience, or of the whole cultural and social reality within which we operate.

Phil helped me to make a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is information that is accumulated from experience in the world. It’s about learning, whereas wisdom is about remembering. It’s not something that comes from the outside, it’s something with which we are born, something we carry within us. This was the gift Phil gave to me. Not providing me with new connections to the outside, but reminding me of the great wealth of understanding I could bring to anything I was doing based on my own innate wisdom. I remembered my fundamental connection to Spirit, to that which connects all the pieces together, or to the irrefutable, intuitive understanding that there is not a separation between that which is seeing and doing and that which is seen and
being done. I remembered that there is a prevailing, fundamental wisdom that is the guiding essence of all this experience, all this manifestation. Phil reminded me of this reality, and I was like, "Oh Yeah, Yeah!" And this remembering put all the work I had been doing in a very different light.

My revelation was that the work is not about saving the forest. That is certainly what it looks like, and for all intents and purposes--and as far as most people are comfortable describing it--saving the forest is the work we are engaged in. But on a more fundamental level, the work is about ourselves. This has been my reality for many, many years now. It's not really about organizing people to achieve a political end. That's the cover [laughs], but the real work is understanding, it's compassion, and not just compassion for all living beings, but compassion for ourselves. People who work real hard to achieve some social good are often real hard on themselves. I see it a lot in the activist community. Not in all, but in a lot. They have a high ideal to which they aspire, and they are often critical of others and this society of ours because it doesn't match their ideal of human potential. But on some deep level, we often feel that we don't necessarily live up to our own ideal of our potential. Therefore, we can be intensely critical of ourselves, and that hardness that we bring to our shortcomings often manifests itself as projections--towards other drivers, and all over the place [laughs]. So one of the fundamental lessons of compassion is to realize that it is all okay. You're doing the best you can, and you simply need to be a little more tolerant, forgiving, and loving towards yourself.
Gary Snyder defines the "real work" as discovering what we really do and what our lives really are. Andy gives full voice to how his awareness of the real work effected his views on activism.

Humans are a momentary eye-blink on the vast scale of time from which the creation has unfolded. The life force has created the great diversity and beauty we see here in an eye-blink--an eye-blink that may have taken millions of years by human standards--but the point is that the human construct of time is inconsequential to those who don't wear wristwatches. This understanding of time changes our understanding of the work we do here. In some sense it doesn't matter whether humans destroy this planet. There may be planets elsewhere in the universe that have ten times the diversity. What the timescale provides to me is an understanding that says maybe none of this really matters on a grand scale, or in terms of the life force, or the eternal, or God, or whatever you want to call it. This line of thinking leads me to ask questions like: What does it matter that species are going extinct? Well, it matters because it matters to me. I care. It may be just nostalgia for the world into which I was born, or it may be a biophilic reaction to the home we have shared for millions of years. I don't know, but I have come to feel a sense of the community of life. And it hurts me to see our home vandalized, to see the destruction of creatures whose role in our own well-being is incompletely understood on the scientific level, but is well understood on an intuitive and emotional level. The idea of living on a planet without tigers, without rhinoceroses, or elephants, or manatees, or slime molds, or slugs, or leaf
worts, or species we don’t even know exist is deeply troubling to me. And I don’t
even need to see them, or experience them first hand, to want with every fiber of
my being to allow them to live and to experience their birthright to exist.

I care because I care [laughs]. I don’t need a higher authority other than
that intuitive sense of what is important in life, and one of the things that is
important to me is to live in a world of wonderment, diversity, and magic. And I
see these values destroyed across the landscape. But like I said, in one way of
framing this discussion it really doesn’t matter, and yet I also bring an intuitive
importance to this work. It is the combination of these approaches that gives me
the freedom to see my activism from a slightly different perspective. For example,
when I remember to draw upon my inner wisdom—knowing that on one level it
doesn’t matter and on another level it matters very deeply--I can go up to
anybody, even those with hostile intent holding firearms, and know that there is
something in them that is coming from a place of fear. There is something in them
that sees in me a manifestation of all the insecurities and injustices that they have
experienced in their life. What I need to do is know that they see me as an
embodiment of the parts of the world they find scary and hateful, and then bring
to their awareness just a little bit of an opening to the possibility that the world is
a friendly place. I need to make them feel that the people they imagine are
working at cross-purposes to their best interest are somehow part of the same
family of humankind to which they belong. My spiritual awareness tells me that
the way I treat people I encounter in this work--including those with whom I
disagree—is as important as the intuitive passion we bring to our efforts to protect
the natural world and the species that inhabit it.

Now, that is my intuitive understanding. I am also a human being with
insecurities and fears, and sometimes I get in a situation in which I feel
inadequate and uncomfortable. But oftentimes, when I go to a public meeting or
gathering, I will try to identify the person in the room who is most likely to be
antagonistic to me and I will seek that person out. I really believe that this practice
has been fundamental to my involvement as an activist. I am willing to engage
people in honest, one-to-one dialogue. I don’t enter into it expecting to change
their mind. I don’t enter into it expecting them to like me. And I certainly don’t
enter into it because I think they will suddenly recognize me as their brother and
somehow change their hearts. I only enter into it because I feel drawn to establish
that connection, because I think that act of dialogue is a revolutionary act. The act
of communicating with someone you are afraid of, or with someone who might be
afraid of you, is a very small step towards the healing of this planet. Treating
others with respect and compassion is absolutely fundamental to protecting the
natural world. If we can solve the rifts between the human family, the natural
world will take care of itself. If we can help people heal their sense of insecurity
and inadequacy and fear, I have no doubt the earth will be able to heal itself.

Andy has beautifully articulated how a spiritual awareness has influenced his
activist work. I asked Andy if a spiritual awareness could also help activists deal with the
common problem of burnout.
Burnout is a very real phenomenon within the activist community. I think burnout stems from the exhaustion of fuel in the case of those who are running on anger or fear, and the tendency to be only ends oriented without taking pleasure in the doing. I think many burn out when the outcome they desire becomes increasingly unlikely to occur in their lifetimes. Or perhaps they burn out after they achieve a specific end, but then find that there is another, much bigger mountain to climb, and thus achieving that end does not give them the sense of satisfaction they hoped. But overall, I think not having a connection to an unlimited fuel source leads people to exhaustion, just because this work is so demanding.

One of the things I have been mulling over in my mind as we seek to fill the director position is this: what is the nature of activist work? I see a lot of people with full-time jobs, full benefits, full pay, and all that other stuff you’d expect in the regular work world in the environmental community. This causes me to question the extent to which activist work is service instead of employment. I am very grateful that during part of my activist life I have been able to get paid, and certainly getting paid increases the likelihood that people will be able to do activist work, but I have never seen this work as employment. I really do question whether we want employees in the environmental movement. I think it is a period of service. We should see this work as a privilege or a higher calling. We need to recognize that there are rewards for letting go of our expectations of what we thought life was supposed to be about, or what our needs are, or what we
imagined our role in life was supposed to be. We need to let go of that and be open to the possibility of serving some higher good, which is not something imposed from outside, but is something that arises within. It is the doing of the work, the service itself, that is our reward. On some subtle level, I believe adopting this attitude actually increases the likelihood of success.

This work can definitely be very wearing on people. If you put your best efforts toward something, but despite your best efforts a place is destroyed, that is very emotionally exhausting. It certainly helps to have some sort of spiritual basis for continuing this work, otherwise a sense of frustration and anger will wear you out. Perhaps my sense of spirituality has allowed me to have a degree of equanimity, which allows me to bring some emotional distance to the work. It helps to feel our life experience on the existential plane is designed to provide us with opportunities to come to an appreciation of our true nature, and of deeper forces that are at work in the expressed world. The feeling that a deeper awareness of Spirit is the real work has changed my perception of the importance of doing the specific activist work. It's sort of a paradox--I still revere the work of forest activism, but at the same time I feel like just engaging in this work on a day-to-day basis is not going to get the job done, either for the forest or for us. There has to be something else. My connection to Spirit causes me to question much of the activism that I see. This is not to say that much of the activism that takes place should not happen, or wasn’t important or useful or fun. I just believe that there is another dimension to this work that will get us closer to both the
objective of protecting the diversity, beauty, and wonder of creation, and our
growth as human participants in that creation.

Andy’s spiritual views are certainly not dominant within the activist world, but
the Heartwood forest alliance has incorporated a deep sense of community into their daily
operations. I once witnessed one of their forest councils or “circles.” There were about
thirty committed activists, both men and women, from every state in the hardwood region
sitting together to make important decisions concerning their continuing efforts to protect
the national forests. Someone kept track of those who wanted to speak by creating a list
and “stacking” them according to who raised their hand first. They also had a moderator
who volunteered to guide the group dialogue, making sure it stayed on topic. If
someone’s turn to speak came but they felt like their point was already articulated or no
longer relevant, they simply skipped their turn. There was much passion within the
group--everyone was very direct when stating their views--but there was also an amazing
respect for everyone in the circle. They all seemed to recognize that they were working
for something beyond the desires of their isolated egos. For Andy, the basis of this
“Heartwood way” of democratic decision making and active engagement is their mutual
trust and shared vision.

What we developed in Heartwood that is fairly unique in the forest
protection movement is a cooperative network. Based on the bonds of trust and
shared purpose we developed early on, we have been able to build a sense of
community that has sustained us as activists. We have tapped into some
fundamental experiences, some fundamental energy flows when people sit in a circle—a circle of respect, compassion, and conviction—that has energized the forest protection movement and allowed us to fulfill more of our potential for achieving change in the world. We have provided an example for lots of groups that have come into being in the eastern United States, and also for groups in other parts of the country that were already established but did not have a shared sense of purpose. In fact, in many cases they found themselves competing with each other for limited monetary support and media coverage. What we have been able to do is show how much more enjoyable this work is when done from a place of mutual respect and mutual aid. But we haven’t invented anything new. It has been described at times as the Heartwood way, but what we have brought is very old. We’ve simply reconnected with something fundamental to the human experience—working on a human scale. We use technology, but the primary unit of organizing is face-to-face, one-to-one, and the circles within which we sit. The circle is fundamental to many religious traditions, but we began to work this way because it’s a natural configuration for respect and cooperation. And based on our shared vision, we have been able to project power—power grounded in community and our love of place and each other—that is far greater than one would expect considering our meager resources and somewhat limited numbers.

It occurred to me while Andy spoke that there was a clear path of forest protection that started with the formation of Protect Our Woods in Indiana that leads through Heartwood all the way to the National Forest Protection and Restoration Act, which is a
bill currently in Congress that would end all logging on public lands. I asked Andy if I was correct in noticing this connection. I also asked him how his willingness to follow his call to activism has effected others.

The most profound and transformative part of this work for me is the extent to which my decision to become an activist has had extraordinary effects far beyond what I could have entertained when Linda and I decided to go to that first public meeting. I am continually reminded—and I say this with the greatest humility and respect for the people with whom I have worked—that just by deciding to do this, and by sticking with it, I’ve had an effect on other people’s lives. I don’t say this out of any sense of my own importance, but because people have continually told me that the commitment I demonstrated provided a model for them and other activists. I always feel honored when I hear this because these activists are now some of the foremost activists in the forest protection movement. People have done me the great honor of thanking me for the role I played in their formation as activists, but also as human beings.

When I went to that first meeting in Paoli, Indiana, my hope was only to figure out some way to reduce the damage I was seeing around me. I had no idea that I would discover that there is no higher or nobler path than the path of service. And it almost doesn’t matter what you serve. You just need to know that a path of service is available to you, and that if you engage this path you begin to feel that you are part of some kind of greater design. I am grateful to find that my life seems to fit into some design. For me, this design has been expressed as the
circle of care that local citizens from around the hardwood bioregion have brought to the relations of our human tribe to the forests. And it is this growing circle of care that has provided protection to our national forests.

You know, most people are surprised to learn that there is a national forest in Indiana. There is very little awareness that historians have estimated that eighty-seven percent of Indiana was once forest covered. Most people’s experience of Indiana is flying over in an airplane or driving across on the interstates, and all you see is flat land, cornfields, industrial developments, and human settlements. So it’s amazing that the work we did on the Hoosier would provide a spark that would ultimately affect the course of the forest protection movement on a national level. Protect Our Woods was the first organization in the country to call for an end to the commercial timber sale program on all national forests based on our review of both the sylviculture inventory data and the economics of the program. Basically, there are three problems. One, there is no economic justification for spending taxpayer money to destroy public resources. Two, there is no ecological justification for logging these forests, or if there is, it is extremely limited and should be divorced from economic considerations. In other words, to the degree that the Forest Service bureaucracy profits--via the size of their budget and bonuses for management--they are more likely to plan timber sales.

But the third component that we really brought to the equation was the political. We were able to demonstrate compellingly that the public opposed the logging of their national forests. For example, by having in our region the first
public poll asking if citizens wanted logging on the national forest, we found that seven out of ten voters in the eighth congressional district in Indiana opposed all logging on the Hoosier. So we built on that steadily with Heartwood, and other organizations on the national level also came to adopt that no-logging stance. A network of groups has formed that share this commitment, and now it is even the mainstream position of groups like the Sierra Club. And now there is a bill before Congress introduced by Cynthia McKinney, a democrat from an urban district in Georgia, and Jim Leach, a republican from rural Iowa, who have joined forces to put forth the National Forest Protection and Restoration Act, which would end the commercial timber sale on all federal public lands.

This model of a network of mutual support and shared effort has really captured the imagination of the forest protection movement. Those individuals who were calling for a higher degree of protection than was ever considered politically feasible now have a supportive network. They now have the resources—not necessarily financially, but in terms of experience, knowledge, and research—to make their case. By bringing support to those who wanted to take a stronger stance, we were able to demonstrate broad-based mainstream support for what would otherwise be a marginalized political position. I have no doubt that we will ultimately succeed in getting protection for these public lands. We have a circle of care in place with people who know each other, trust each other, and who are willing to work together to provide mutual aid in times of need. I believe that the infrastructure that we have established will provide benefits long into the future.
The Heartwood family will be a force to be reckoned with on the issue of forest management as long as I can project into the future.

When I began this interview, I mainly wanted to focus on Andy’s spiritual path and its effect on his views of activism. I didn’t expect to go into much detail on the workings of Heartwood and forest protection as a whole. But as we began to talk, I realized that Andy’s story is a communal story that illustrates once again that following our calls encourages others to do the same. However, it always helps to have strong leadership. A couple of times during our talk I felt it was a shame Andy was leaving the director’s position in Heartwood. To end our interview, I asked him where he thought he was heading personally, as well as for his thoughts concerning our collective environmental future.

I feel I need to reconnect to other aspects of my being. I need to sit in silence. I need to be in a position of being open again to listen for guidance. And if that guidance is not forthcoming, then perhaps I need to wander a bit until a path becomes clear. And if a path never becomes clear, then I’ll just try to act with integrity on a moment to moment, day to day basis. I’ll try to bring compassion to all my dealings and seek justice, however that might present itself in my daily life. I bring a sense of trust to my decision to take a slightly different path. I have a great sense of trust that others will be doing the work within Heartwood that needs to be done. I’m sure this mutual trust and respect will allow each party to grow.
I have had a strong sense for some time that there are major changes coming. I mean, you don't need a crystal ball to see how the major trend lines of our voracious appetites are running up against some limitations. So what will be the impact of this modern industrial juggernaut on the earth's ability to continue to provide for limitless growth? What will be the ramifications? I don't know, but I think that many people feel on a deep personal level that things are seriously wrong. As a result, they are seeking greater understanding, greater connections, and greater meaning in their lives. We are living in an era of unprecedented economic prosperity, but that prosperity is not providing people with a sense of satisfaction or well-being.

I feel that we may not recognize much of the world we will be living in during the next twenty years. I think the global economic system will be transformed and that there will be serious dislocations to people on a grand scale. But once again--as with forest protection work--I don't think life is about some specific end point to which we are headed. Life is about connection, community, compassion, and a commitment to justice. These are the fundamental ingredients that will help us as human beings in our collective efforts to reconfigure a much more just society. Overall, I think we will be living in scary times, but that doesn't mean we have to be scared. I think we will be living in troubling times, but that doesn't mean we have to be troubled. I think that the times ahead will allow us to measure the validity of alternative ways of being and doing, which will supply people with a sense of hope. They will supply a sense of peace in times that are chaotic, or a sense of goodness in times when bad things are happening. I think
this is what we will find. And those of us who have a vision of humans living sustainably, respectfully, and harmoniously on this planet will be called upon to provide expressions of human potential to help guide our human family through the scary times ahead. I hope to be among those who help guide us to that place of greater peace and well-being.
Chapter Seven

The Farther Reaches

“Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence, but apply the requisite stimulus and they are there in all their completeness . . . No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.”

-- William James

“I have frequently seen people become neurotic when they content themselves with inadequate or wrong answers to the questions of life. They seek position, marriage, reputation, outward success as money, and remain unhappy and neurotic even when they have attained what they were seeking. Such people are usually confined within too narrow a spiritual horizon. Their life has not sufficient content, sufficient meaning. If they are enabled to develop more spacious personalities, the neurosis generally disappears. For that reason the idea of development was always of the highest importance to me.”

-- Carl Jung
Brent, Syndee, and Andy have done a considerable amount of inner work, passionately seeking a meaningful place in the world. But from a more critical perspective, perhaps they are merely naïve and romantic, foolishly trying to “save the world.” After all, aren’t Brent and his buddies just a bunch of white boys playing at being hunter-gatherers? Did Brent really think he could turn back the clock and return to a primitive lifeway? Does Syndee really think animals deserve the same rights as humans? Or that she could love and hug senators into caring for animal rights? And does Andy really think his spiritual awareness will save him if he walks up to someone with firearms and hostile intent? I imagine that some readers might raise these criticisms. I obviously thought of them. But what I find most compelling about their life-paths is that they challenge the norm. They are rare people who live their convictions and take risks. They also share common spiritual experiences and understandings that prevent them from being easily dismissed.

Brent, Syndee, and Andy each had glimpses of spiritual unity, whether through experience or contemplation, and each sought to listen to and follow their inner wisdom. I’m specifically reminded of Brent’s description of his epiphany after grieving the break-up of his marriage, separation from society, and rejection of his religious and scientific viewpoints: “After about one month—or one moon cycle—of this grieving and praying, I began to feel a huge change. I still remember it clearly. It was an October day and the colorful leaves were falling. I was standing near my wickiup looking out over a small
lake when I felt a soothing but overwhelming presence all around. I eventually came to know this presence as the spirit of all things. It is the trees, the water, the fish, the deer, the grass, the squirrel scolding me from her perch in the oak tree, the wind rustling the trees. At that moment, I had the very clear understanding that all the beings around me were saying: Wake up! Wake up! You are not alone! We are here and alive and you are part of us! I felt so elated, so high and filled with joy and energy that I then knew that I was a new person.”

Or Syndee’s underwater mystical experience and its euphoric aftereffects: “I was an eighteen-year-old freshman, on a package-deal style vacation with other students from my college. Nothing all that special about it. But then something amazing happened. I went scuba diving and my heart burst wide open, lighting up every part of me. I’ll never forget that mystical moment feeling no gravity, feeling so free with my body, with the water, with my breath, and with my surroundings. It was exquisite. There was every color imaginable, every color fish... the coral... I can still see that first panoramic view in my mind’s eye. Something happened during that dive that I could not explain. The next few days were euphoric. To know that there were experiences in this universe, on this earth, that were a mystery left me in awe. Everything was enlivened and animated. I noticed everything with a heightened perception. I even remember walking differently. It was an euphoric gestalt shift, a rearranging of the pieces of my reality into a new whole. And this new whole contained a deeper, more profound sense of who I really am.”

And Andy’s “remembering” after his conversation out in the woods with his friend Phil: “In the early years with Heartwood I was walking in the woods with Phil Burke—Phil was the financial coordinator for Heartwood at the time—and he helped me to
come to a new understanding of activism. Phil had spent the last twenty to thirty years studying esoteric wisdom traditions, and he opened my eyes, reminding me of some the connections I made as a child in the canoe in the Brazilian rainforest and the dreams I had as a kid. Phil helped me to make a distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is information that is accumulated from experience in the world. It’s about learning, whereas wisdom is about remembering. It’s not something that comes from the outside, it’s something with which we are born, something we carry within us. This was the gift Phil gave to me. Not providing me with new connections to the outside, but reminding me of the great wealth of understanding I could bring to anything I was doing based on my own innate wisdom. I remembered that there is a prevailing, fundamental wisdom that is the guiding essence of all this experience, all this manifestation. Phil reminded me of this reality, and I was like, ‘Oh Yeah, Oh Yeah!’ And this remembering put all the work I had been doing in a very different light.”

These epiphanies transformed their thinking and life-paths. But we need some context to understand why Brent, Syndee, and Andy provide examples of living a calling. In many ways they are “self-actualizers,” a term coined by Abraham Maslow to describe people who have an overriding concern with character and growth. Self-actualizers are not perfect people, nor do they have an ego investment in calling themselves self-actualized. Those who are genuinely concerned with self-actualization know that expressing our potential is a continual process that often includes struggle and crises of meaning. Personally, if I ran into someone who said they “attained” self-actualization, I’d run like hell in the opposite direction. Maslow also coined another phrase, “peak experience,” which describes an unsought experience of joy, ecstasy, and connection that
enhances our psychological development. He considered these experiences to be a natural part of being human, although our social circumstance can either invite peak experiences or make them much less likely to occur.

Maslow, along with Anthony Sutich, institutionalized interest in self-actualization and peak experiences as humanistic psychology, which became an emerging third force of psychological investigation (after Freudianism and Behaviorism). However, Maslow and Sutich soon decided that their interest in peak experiences deserved special attention. They established yet another field of study, transpersonal psychology, devoted to the relations between religious experience and psychological development, or the “farther reaches of human nature.” Maslow and Sutich did most of their work in the sixties and early seventies. The field grew in the ensuing decades, especially via the work of Ken Wilber. Wilber has theorized a developmental model of the farther reaches that gives legitimacy and meaning to spiritual discovery.

I discovered the work of Ken Wilber in 1987, about a year after studying with Rafael. I read Quantum Questions, which includes the spiritual writings of the major physicists of the twentieth century. This book was important to me because I was still struggling with what seemed like a contradiction between my spiritual longings and my critical reason. I was overjoyed to find that famous scientists also struggled with this dilemma. I was even more enthused when I found that Einstein claimed that a “cosmic religious feeling” of unity motivated his scientific investigations. Erwin Schroedinger, in a piece entitled “The Mystic Vision,” is even more direct: “A hundred years ago, perhaps, another man sat on this spot; like you, he gazed with awe and yearning in his heart at the dying light on the glaciers. Like you, he was begotten of man and born of woman. He felt
pain and brief joy as you do. *Was* he someone else? Was it not you yourself? What is this Self of yours?"

The mystical musings of these famous scientists were quite thought provoking, but even more importantly I felt that my spiritual search was legitimated by rational thinkers. This gave me a deeper confidence in both my reasoning ability and my intuitive convictions. I’ve gone on to read the majority of Wilber’s numerous books, which detail a complex interweaving of individual biological and psychological, and collective cultural and social development. In short, he’s taken on the formidable task of theorizing an open-ended theory of everything. I’m not going to try to do that. But I will highlight a few areas of Wilber’s theory of transpersonal development as a means for analyzing the peak experiences described by Brent, Syndee, and Andy, as well as the differences between Brent and Syndee concerning diet and the ethical treatment of animals.

Wilber’s psychological model has ten levels of development, each reflecting a more expansive sense of identity that transcends and includes the previous level. The levels begin with the newborn’s prepersonal (prerational) identification with the physical world, eventually moves to the formation of rational awareness and the mature ego’s identity as a world citizen, and then, at least in a few adepts, proceeds all the way to the enlightened master’s continuous transpersonal (transrational) realization that they are Spirit aware of itself. I can’t say that I’ve met any enlightened masters recently, but it’s important to map and legitimate the higher transpersonal levels since many have glimpses of these levels that inform their sense of self and the direction of their lives.

Wilber’s model also contains over two dozen distinct and yet related lines of development, including cognitive, interpersonal, artistic, creativity, love, concern,
specific talents, and spirituality itself, all of which proceed through the various levels. His writings make it clear that we do not easily waltz through these levels and lines. There are numerous pathologies that may keep us stuck at a certain stage or cause us to regress. Thus, the unfolding combination of the ten levels, the over two dozen lines of development, and numerous potential pathologies create our process of individuation. In other words, it’s what makes us unique and very human. We may be somewhat enlightened in some lines, or areas of our life, while being downright stupid in other areas.

In order to make better sense of Brent, Syndee, and Andy’s experiences, I’ll explore two of the higher levels, beginning with the sixth level, vision-logic, which resides at the brink of the transpersonal and thus takes our reasoning abilities to their limit. Vision-logic is marked by a synthesizing intelligence that considers all perspectives in search of situational truths, which often results in feelings of responsibility and care. This level also marks the beginning of an ecological and spiritual awareness in which we are able to integrate whole and part, as well as body and mind. However, we may still have a bias towards identifying with the soul of humanity rather than with the soul of the world (anima mundi).

Wilber refers to this stage as integral-aperspectival (following the seminal work of Jean Gebser), because while no single perspective is final, we joyfully participate in the continual process of creating higher unities that integrate seemingly divergent perspectives. Thus, vision-logic, at its best, represents a process that integrates reason with instinct, emotion, and imagination in the phenomenon of perception. We willingly tolerate ambiguity and paradox while making an inner commitment to growth, joy, and
increased meaning, both in our life and in the lives of others. However, awakening to this level of meaning is often a turbulent process. Wilber writes that the vision-logic is the home of the existential self, including all the suffering that is usually associated with that phrase. In other words, when we awaken to the existential need for meaning, we also awaken to how often this need is disregarded in our societies. We become acutely conscious of the despair of the world, of the immense suffering that takes place at the hands of human ignorance, and as a result we open ourselves to a tremendous sadness and pain.

The combustible nature of this stage tends to have a lasting effect on our awareness since it is marked by fundamental existential and spiritual questions. My own battle with the existential self, especially during my final semester at Rutgers, was buffeted by Albert Camus, who stated that feeling you cannot live in this world is of no great moment. The great moment is deciding where you will go from there. Thankfully, suffering with the world also opens us to sensing how intimately all life is intertwined, to experiencing the sheer joy of existence by coming home to ourselves and the earth.

The next level, psychic/nature mysticism, is the first of the transpersonal stages and thus is based in religious experience. The previous stage of vision-logic is constituted by deep contemplation that integrates various perspectives in an attempt to find a unity in diversity. If this contemplation is taken far enough, it has the potential to open us to the experience of unity in diversity. And if this experience is powerful enough, our center of identity more fully shifts from the soul of humanity to the World Soul, or the sacredness of the earth community as a whole.
For Wilber, the transcendent dimension is necessary for understanding the World Soul because only a higher identification with Spirit can integrate what seems to be completely separate at lower levels of awareness. The split between subject and object, as well as nature and culture, can only be integrated within the higher context of Spirit unfolding. Thus, the World Soul is a non-local phenomenon. It pervades everything. But it is important to remember that this understanding proceeds out of vision-logic in which our imagination guides the interplay between thought and feeling towards a relationship of oneness with nature. In these intuitive moments the unity of all things is revealed as an obvious pre-given of existence, but this only occurs through contemplating the sensual aspects of these same things in all their diversity.

Wilber theorizes three levels higher than nature mysticism, the subtle, causal, and nondual, which reflect small gradations on a path towards continuous spiritual enlightenment. I'm not very interested in continuous enlightenment, since it's rare at best and most likely non-existent. I am very interested in vision-logic as a higher order of rationality that is informed by transpersonal glimpses of spiritual unity. Wilber also emphasizes the practical importance of vision-logic. The world would be a much healthier place if our political decision-making bodies could simply practice an integrative thinking that takes the earth and Spirit into account. Fortunately, there are many citizens who consciously take this integrative path.

My interviews with Brent, Syndee, and Andy lead me to believe that they have consistently expressed this path, despite struggles and differences of opinion. They were each transformed by transpersonal wisdom, particularly via experiences of the World Soul and insights into their deeper nature. And their life-paths were irrevocably altered as
they sought to make sense of and express the knowledge they received. For Brent, this has led to simple living, participating in a local food network that include sustainable meat and vegetable production, and protecting water quality. For Syndee, it has led to veganism, animal rights, breathwork, and leading healing workshops. And for Andy it has led to protecting forests and influencing others through incorporating spirituality into activism. The second half of their interviews, which are interesting examples of the practice of vision-logic, will give a fuller voice to the thinking, ethics, and attitudes that underlay these pursuits.

However, there still seems to be huge incongruency between Brent’s and Syndee’s world view. Brent learned to survive on “deer meat, raccoon meat, beaver meat, and general critter meat,” while Syndee is as free from animal products as one can be in this culture. However, context is all-important when making value judgments. Brent left our industrialized meat-eating culture to explore primitive living, the cycles of life and death, and the spiritual underpinnings of the predator/prey relationship. In doing so, he explored Spirit expressed in and as the world, refining his sensitivities and awareness. Syndee also explored Spirit expressed in and as the world, but within the context of a culture desensitized to animal welfare and the heart-numbing political process. These contextual differences must be acknowledged when comparing and interpreting their specific choices.

What I find most interesting—given that Brent and Syndee are different people in different situations—is how much they have in common. They each had a mystical experience of the World Soul, and they each stated in their interviews that animal rights is not the real issue, claiming instead that what is most important is the discovery and
experience of the life force we share with everything in this world. Their experiences suggest that this can be accomplished in diverse ways. However, their respect for the life force has led them both to reject the destructive practices of agribusiness.

Personally, I don’t fully agree with either of them. I’m not the hunting type, nor am I a vegan. I’ve also never had life-altering dreams and visions like Brent, nor can I match Syndee’s depth of emotional sensitivity to animals. I am a twelve-year vegetarian who respects and is learning from their experiences and choices. Applying spirituality to ethics is tricky. It leads to a seemingly mind-boggling question. How can all expressions of life have equal and unequal value at the same time? This paradox is mind-boggling to a certain level of critical thought, but not to deeper contemplation and religious experience. We are all equal because we are all Spirit, but we are all unequal, different, and diverse because we are Spirit unfolding as matter, life, and mind. Thus, we must make distinctions and difficult choices while respecting the interplay between unity and diversity, or equality and inequality. In other words, an awareness of spiritual unity does not lead to certainty; it leads to respect, compassion, humility, and openness when dealing with the food web and particular situations. For me, this reality is an ongoing living and learning process.

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My own life path was greatly influenced by peak experiences that occurred while hiking the Appalachian Trail in New Hampshire and Maine. I was twenty-eight years old at the time. After my year of study with Rafael and eight months of assembly line work at
the factory, I wandered, read, meditated, worked as a printer at my older brother’s quick-print shop in order to make money, and then stopped working so that I could do more wandering, reading, and meditating. This process didn’t always go smoothly and I occasionally found myself needing help from my parents to make it through cash-poor times. Making enough money to completely survive on my own was not one of my talents. I tried graduate school, but that only lasted a month. Academia felt like a box without enough air holes. I dropped out and returned to my cycle of wandering and work.

My hiking adventure occurred in August of 1989. My friends Bruce and Melanie, a married couple, had hiked from Georgia to New Hampshire during the previous spring and summer, leaving them three-hundred and fifty miles short of the trail’s terminus at Mount Katahdin in central Maine. They decided to finish what they had started and asked me to join them. I immediately said yes, even though I had never spent a night in a tent. I didn’t even own a tent, or any of the gear I would need for a month-long hike, but I sensed that the trip would provide plenty of opportunities to breathe.

Bruce and Melanie picked me up at my parent’s retirement house in upstate New York, which sits next to a small lake in the Adirondack Mountains. I spent two weeks preparing for the hike by taking long, stamina increasing swims in the cool, clear lake cradled by pine-filled mountains. After each swim, I waded near the shore to wait for bluegills to investigate my leg hairs, which swayed like octopus tentacles in the softly rippling water. They were hesitant a first, but they always drifted in for nibbles, which were more like tiny fish-kisses to me. Then, to complete my training, I would daydream by the water’s edge in a nest of brown pine needles, enveloped within their sweet, earthly
scent, while the sun reflected off the surface of the lake, shooting beads of light up the base of giant pines.

I also built a rock wall. My parents recently put in a new septic system—the old one was built for seasonal use and they feared that it might be polluting the groundwater and lake—and so the yard was pretty torn up. I took the newly exposed rocks and put them to good use in the wall. I tried to allow each rock to place itself within the structure, the click of rock against rock signaling their compatibility. If the sound was too harsh, without music, I knew that I was too present, too much in charge. I soon got into a groove, working quickly, attentively, like a frenzied artist letting instinct guide the creative process, until the different shapes fell into a jigsaw-style mosaic.

After a farewell lunch with my parents, we climbed into Bruce and Melanie’s 1980 Dodge Colt wagon, our backpacks slammed against the glass of the hatchback, and began the four hour drive to our starting point in Gore, New Hampshire. We planned to spend the night at a local campground a few miles from the trailhead and get an early start the next day. It was a beautiful summer afternoon and I felt a growing sense of freedom as we drove on the winding, tree-lined highways of New England. Bruce and Melanie, who were also known as the “Bobsy Bums,” which is the trail name they received due to their matching red rain gear, were especially excited, becoming more and more energized with the passing of each mile marker. They were on a mission to finish their hike, after five months of blisters, aching muscles, and euphoric mountain vistas the previous year.

We arrived in New Hampshire as planned. The campground was small, nothing special, but at least we were outside instead of at a cheap motel. It was good practice for
me, a step on my way to wilderness. I got out my tent, which up till now I had only set up on the grass at my parent’s house, and looked for a cozy spot. I noticed a slightly concave patch of soft ground, almost like a saucer, and began the ritual—lay the ground cloth, stretch out the tent, find the pegs, piece together the elastic-filled support “beams.” It took me awhile to get it just right, but I was pleased with the sturdy construction. We went to bed early that night, around ten o’clock, since we had a big day ahead.

It was around three am when I woke up to the crashing sounds of wind and rain. It was coming down hard, and I noticed that beads of moisture were gathering along the inside edge of the tent. I felt underneath my sleeping bag and thermarest and it was damp. My tent was supposed to be waterproof and I wondered what was wrong. I sat up, turning on my flashlight to make a closer inspection. It was wet all right, and it was only going to get worse. I shined the light over towards Bruce and Melanie’s tent and called out, hoping they were awake. They hollered back and laughed, “How are you doing over there?” I laughed back, “Aren’t these things supposed to be waterproof? I can feel the water rippling under the floor. Is that supposed to happen?” Before Bruce and Melanie could reply, I realized what I had done. “I think I set up my tent in a puddle.” The laughs really started now, “You’re not supposed to do that,” “Oh,” I replied.

The morning slowly crept forward, without rain, and so I crept out of my tent, wet, cold, tired, and ready to fire: “So this is camping. I see why you love it so much.” We got our gear together as quickly as possible, which was a messy task given the wet conditions, and headed into town for a hot breakfast. I held my steaming mug of coffee close to my face with both hands, ecstatic to be warm, and silently prayed to the gods for some camping wisdom. Bruce and Melanie survived the night without any problems and
were ready to get started on our hike. We decided to find a Laundromat, however, so that I could dry my sleeping bag.

We arrived at the trailhead and were immediately greeted by a steady rain. To my surprise, Bruce and Melanie didn’t seem to notice; they simply put on their matching red rain gear and cheerfully exclaimed, “Let’s go.” I wondered to myself why we didn’t wait a bit until the sky cleared. My face must have given me away because they started chirping: “No sense waiting. There’s no telling when the rain will stop.” The adventure was officially afoot. Despite a mostly sleepless night, I felt a rush of energy as I dashed through puddles, undeterred by the stinging rain. I quickly hiked ahead of them, occasionally jumping off small boulders onto the muddy trail. When they caught up with me, they immediately asked what the hell I was doing. Apparently I was jumping off the boulders, with fifty pounds of gear and Kraft macaroni and cheese on my back, and landing with both feet together, leaving behind strange looking dual footprints. In an instant, I had my trail name—“Kangaroo.”

I continued to hop ahead of my friends. My clothes were wet, but the energy expended from carrying so much weight kept me warm, and I was slowly starting to become entranced by the rhythm of my steps and the curious smells and textures of my new surroundings. The strong scent of pine reminded me of the beds of brown pine needles in upstate New York, but it also smelled different, more rich and pungent, as if the rain and cool air had conjured up some essential secret of wilderness. Then it hit me: I had entered into the palpable presence of growth and decay, of abundant life and death that civilized culture obsessively attempts to hide.
The sun came out in the late afternoon and we decided to stop for the day. Our tents were still wet and we wanted to set them up in a sunny spot so they could dry. After a myriad of camping chores—find water, filter water, refill water bottles, set up clothes line, hang up wet socks, blow up thermarest—we got out our Whisper-Lite camp stoves and cooked our evening meal on a large bare rock surrounded by dense forest. The late evening sun made its descent, the orange macaroni and cheese tasted like it cost way more than two for a dollar, and any lingering uncertainty I felt about the trip vanished in an instant. When the sun finally set, and we finished our clean-up camping chores—wash pot with Dr. Bronner’s liquid castile soap, unhook fuel bottle, refold stove and tin fire guard—I walked back to the bare rock and gazed up into the soothing, star-filled night, listening, peaceful, and at home.

We soon made our way into Maine, which contained the most mountainness section of the more than twenty-one hundred miles of trail. We often hiked one mountain after the next, covering very little total ground. My swims had been good training, but carrying fifty pounds up and then especially down the numerous slopes gave me stiff, achy knees. It could have been worse. I met a woman who stopped hiking because she was too sore. She lay in one of the trail shelters, huddled in a ball, barely moving. But the physical effort it took to climb a mountain gave rewards. I had to focus all my mental energy upon each step, one after the other, concentration, step, focus, step, keep going and step. I kept the rhythm by reciting a saying from the Indian mystic Shankara: “He who knows is full of glory. He rides within his body as if within a carriage.” When I finally reached a summit, the sudden rush of the landscape upon my senses was
staggering. My awareness expanded in stages, as if a slingshot was propelling me farther and farther into the vast terrain of open space.

After two weeks of intense focus, followed by having my awareness slingshotted into open space, my senses became acute and receptive. At one point, I was completely entranced by a piece of moss I encountered along the trail. The sunlight danced upon it and I was dazzled by its bright, verdant green. It was so bright, so brilliant, that it seemed so much more than a piece of moss. It seemed to come from another world, and yet it was completely a part of this world. I was so mesmerized by its beauty that I kneeled down to honor it and then twisted my head in all directions, looking for someone with whom I might share my discovery. The next thing I knew I was talking out loud to the rest of nature, “Am I the only one who sees this? Oh my God, I’m losing it over a piece of moss.”

A few days later, I was hiking along the trail with my head down a bit, when I looked up and saw an extremely large creature with full antlers standing about ten feet in front of me. I had never seen a moose before, or at least not a real one. I did have a childhood acquaintance with Bullwinkle. But this was a bit different. We caught each other’s gaze and just stood there, lost in each other’s eyes. I was dumbstruck by its long tree-like legs and huge head and body. And those eyes! I never imagined there existed such large and captivating eyes! There were no sounds, only an immense stillness, until I laughed to myself in amazement. I was completely entranced and totally without fear. It was only later that I found out that moose can be dangerous. I suppose I’m lucky that the moose didn’t attack and that I’m not telling a quite different story. But the danger of the situation never entered my awareness, and I can’t help but think that it never entered the
moose’s awareness that I was dangerous. We were just two creatures, astonished by each other’s radical otherness. I’m not sure how long we stood there—time was not a construct of work weeks and time-cards—but I eventually moved off to the side and proceeded on my way, first grinning, and then contemplating my encounter with this strange, even alien, other-than-human life form with whom I was somehow kin.

I’m glad I didn’t encounter this moose on the first day or two of the trip. I probably would have been startled or done something stupid like trying to scare it away. But the receptivity that had become part of me by this time in the hike took over my reactions. I had no stupid thoughts. I had hardly any thoughts at all. The moose and I were in a conversation without words and in that silence much was revealed: There is emptiness amid the expression of all form. I had come across this idea while studying with Rafael and felt its truth many times in my life, including while daydreaming by the edge of the lake and building the rock wall. But the moss and moose experiences, along with the timeless, daily hiking, had tuned me in, more consistently, to an intimate engagement with both nature and myself, which seemed less distinct with each passing day.

Our hike ended in early September after ascending Mount Kahtadin in Baxter State Park. I took Bruce and Melanie’s picture, standing on the back of a sign signaling the northern terminus of the trail, their hands held triumphantly together against a backdrop of blue sky. My thirty days on the Appalachian Trail hardly represents the longest of wilderness trips or the most wild. Bruce and Melanie tell me that if I really want to see something, I need to hike the Pacific Crest Trail, as they did a few years later. And of course, many have gone on lengthy hikes and ascended death-defying peaks in
numerous beautiful countries. Still, my month-long hike—with occasional town stops—took me a long way from the print shop and overpopulated New Jersey. And yet, a major lesson from the trip was that there really is no getting away. The mountain vistas occasionally included clearcuts off in the distance, and during one of our town stops we saw a weather report that included an acid rain index. Apparently acid rain had become a fact of life in Maine, as it had in the Adirondack Mountain region near my parents’ home. Pollution from car exhaust, as well as coal burning power plants as far away as the Midwest, have created many dead lakes in that area.

I also carried a thousand dollars worth of camping technology on my back and brought along a small walkman and a few tapes for occasional musical interludes. Dancing on the top of mountains while listening to the bright sounds of Pat Metheny also induced peak moments of joy and clarity. I naively thought that I was going to completely leave civilization during my hike, but the intertwined complexities between nature and culture—for good and for ill—were resoundingly present.

One aspect of civilization that I was glad to encounter on the trail was other hikers. My moose meeting was the most intense, but meeting fellow hikers was also a revelation, especially since we developed friendships with such ease. We were bonded by a shared heritage, “the tribe of adventurers hiking the Appalachian Trail.” There were no cultural niceties, just an immediate recognition that we were all a part of the same tribe. This led to many story-filled evenings at the open-air shelters. Food was a hot topic, or rather, food fantasies, or the treats received from an insanely overstocked day-hiker, or the awesome salad bar at the last town stop. Other than food, discussions often strayed into how hiking led us to discover qualities within ourselves we did not know we
possessed. Many overcame physical challenges through mental alertness, inner strength, and innate survival instincts.

I felt tremendously alive when I left the trail, which I'm sure was partly due to the fact that I was no longer carrying my backpack. But it was more than a physical thing. While the triumphs and inanities of cultural life found their way to the trail, I left much of my cultural “self” behind during that month of hiking the glorious mountains of New Hampshire and Maine. And now, over a decade later, I am still able to conjure up intense feelings. My experiences remain vivid and I will never forget them.
Chapter Eight

Openness to Mystery

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious . . . Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed . . . it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity; in this sense and in this sense alone, I am a religious man."

-- Albert Einstein

"I am enormously concerned with just this world, this painful and precious fullness of all that I see, hear, taste. I cannot wish away any part of its reality. I can only wish that I might heighten this reality."

-- Martin Buber
After finishing my hiking trip, I worked at the print shop for a few weeks to get some much needed cash and then traveled cross country to visit Rafael at his new home in Corrales, New Mexico. Rafael had moved in order to work with a group of Infinite Way students, as well as work on scholarly pursuits. Rafael is the President of the Ometeca Institute, which is a nonprofit organization devoted to exploring the relations between science and the humanities within a transcultural context. His spiritual vision has led him to promote a larger, more interdisciplinary vision of knowledge, and his upbringing in Cuba has led him to search for ways to share this knowledge among diverse countries. When I arrived he was organizing an academic conference in Puebla, Mexico and editing the bilingual Ometeca journal.

The transition from the mountains of Maine, to the poorly ventilated and cramped New Jersey print shop, and then to the mesas and soft earth-tones of New Mexico provided a major lesson. Our environment has a huge effect on our level of awareness. This wasn’t exactly news, but I had never experienced this fact with such clarity. And it was scary. Human adaptability is both our greatest and worse attribute. We can survive most anything, but we can also habituate ourselves to most anything, including toxic environments in which we forget that healthier possibilities exist. Print ink stinks, and I used God-knows what kind of chemical solutions to clean it up, including on my skin. And the ink gets everywhere. If you scratch your nose, then you’ve got ink on your nose.
I once found a patch of pantone blue in my armpit. Taking a shower after work always turned into an inventory of where my hands had traveled throughout the day.

My awareness had blossomed on the trail, which made me incredibly sensitive to the chemical tools of the print shop. I kept taking breaks outside just to breathe. When Rafael offered me a room, food, and a chance to study with him again, I was out the door faster than quick-drying ink on sixty-pound vellum. This was my first trip to the Southwest and I arrived at Rafael’s home late at night, which prevented me from seeing much of the landscape during the drive. It was a crisp, early October morning when I woke up the next day and Rafael immediately told me to look outside. I walked out the door and there were hundreds of colorful hot-air balloons stretched across the sky like a rainbow. It was the first day of the annual balloon festival. I decided I was going to like it there.

Rafael and I began studying and meditating together. He even had a special meditation room. It was really just a small, sparsely decorated room with a bunch of straight-backed chairs, but we treated it like a sacred spot for silence. I had been a dedicated meditator prior to my hiking trip and felt peaceful on a regular basis. I also practiced mindfulness in my daily life by consciously recognizing the divinity of everything I encountered, including my Ryobi printing press. But a deeper clarity grew within me during my hike and then my stay in New Mexico. I felt as if I awakened to a deep mystical truth: We are all partners in God’s dream. Thus, there was no real distance between the life I encountered and myself because we are all the same dream, continually arising and never ending. Many beginning spiritual students think that a mystical awareness is extraordinary, rather than a simple, clear, ordinary awareness. They
arduously strive for enlightenment, for a fireworks experience. But we don’t experience a degree of spiritual clarity until we drop this pretense of difficulty, or the lie that a more peaceful awareness is somewhere other than where we are right now. My hike and the enchanted New Mexican landscape helped me to realize that it is perfectly natural for consciousness to be aware of its own Ground.

Rafael and I took long early evening walks that I will never forget. The houses were all adobe and thus colored and shaped to quietly blend into the surrounding earth. These structures seemed to declare that we are one with the landscape. We walked amid these earthy structures, with the Sandia Mountains at the horizon, and I would realize that like the mountain, we were witnesses to Spirit’s continuous unfolding. After the sun had set, Rafael and I often drove into nearby Alburquerque to go to a bookstore or cafe. I watched all the human activity and realized that Spirit was there too; culture was not other to Spirit or nature, just a different expression. At the end of the evening we always took the long way home and so we could drive on abandoned highways under the expansive New Mexican night sky. I would gaze upward into the dark, starry night and know that humans are significant, even though we’re a mere ripple in the vast ocean of unfathomable energy that constitutes the universe. We’re significant because we are conscious and can bear witness. I felt so peaceful because our true nature was so obvious, so simple and clear: we are the landscape, we are the Sandia mountains, we are culture, we are the night sky, we are Spirit expressed. To bear witness to Spirit’s glory—that was my job and my joy.

This description makes it sound like my life was perfect, but during my stay in New Mexico I became increasingly uncomfortable with the mystical life. Rafael met with
a dentist and his wife for meditation and study, and quite frankly, I thought they were idiots. They were certainly nice enough. But I felt they were nice in a fake, "I'm so spiritual" kind of way. She wore a mask of Tammy Faye Baker make-up, and he always seemed to be in some far off spiritual realm. I had no way of telling who these people actually were. The dentist did give free dental care to nearby Native American tribal members, which I respected greatly, but I still wanted to slap him back to earth. Rafael was obviously more generous in his interpretation. He was willing to work with anyone who was sincere about spiritual growth.

Rafael also met weekly with an Infinite Way study group, including the dentist and his wife, and he tried to persuade me to attend. I refused. I feared a roomful of otherworldly dentists and Tammy Fayes. He eventually convinced me to give it a try, and I was immediately glad I did, although not because of the group. They met after hours at a used bookstore owned by one of the members and I was happy to do some shopping. Rafael soon called the group together. He began the meeting with a guided meditation—which I also enjoyed, the energy of multiple meditators adds to the effect—and then we discussed some spiritual passages. Some of the participants were quite insightful, while others were there mainly to share tales of heartache among a receptive group of sympathetic listeners. Near the end of the gathering, a woman, Fotine, spoke with tremendous emotion and strength about her adult son, who had recently died in a car accident. She didn’t seem to be looking for sympathy, only to share her truth and speak from her heart.

When the meeting was over, we mingled outside the bookstore. The New Mexican night sky was its usual palpable presence, giving anyone who is open the gift of
perspective. I gazed upward for awhile and then returned my attention to the group, or more precisely, to Fotine, who was facing me, smiling, and looking deeply into my eyes. Our mutual gaze didn’t feel awkward. The group meditation and story sharing had made connecting easy and natural. She then stepped forward to give me embrace, as if a magnetic force were suddenly drawing her to me. Fotine’s hug was like nothing I had ever experienced. There was a depth of release that transcended me and was a true opening to the infinite. In that moment, I was her son. I was a vehicle for one last physical embrace. The talk of unity during the meeting was just talk, but now it was an experienced reality. When we stepped back, we gave each other a smile, and then a look of gratitude that stated that we both knew what had just happened.

I thought quite a bit about this embrace and the depth of connection we experienced through our mutual gaze, which was intimate, alive, and the truth of the moment. In contrast, I considered the look of the dentist and his wife, which seemed more like a pose of certainty, a projection of spiritual depth rather than the real thing. Fotine’s gaze was open, as if it included a more expansive understanding of spiritual and physical reality, while the looks of the dentist and his wife felt like they were willfully ignoring physical reality. The enchanted land of New Mexico is a great place for meeting both types of folks.

A few weeks later, I was walking along a street in Sante Fe when I came across a starry-eyed New Ager sitting on a garbage can. He gave me a glazed-over look and said, “I love you.” I was startled at first, but then laughed and said, “I love you, too.” It was oddly beautiful to be randomly told that I was loved, but I was also disturbed. I felt like he really didn’t see me. He was lost in what Wilber calls “a uniform, all-pervading,
featureless but divine goo” in which all diversity and multiplicity evaporates. He did not seem to recognize that while I am Spirit, I am also a finite individual expression of Spirit with a very real flesh and blood existence. He was like a floppy, wide-eyed puppy, which can be cute for a while, until it becomes overbearing. But what really troubled me is that I actually saw myself in him, not in spiritual sense, but in the scary sense that we were both wandering and doing nothing.

I loved wandering and doing nothing. But I began to wonder if my discomfort with the mystical life, or with my experience of the mystical life, was due to the fact I continually avoided getting involved in the messiness of the world. I was twenty-nine and wanted to be a novelist. I wanted to be aloof from the difficulties of life and record the follies of those who were not wise like me. But I was not much of a writer and even less wise. I had touched the hem of the transcendent, and even wore its divine robe for awhile, but I was also too detached. There is a huge difference between a healthy non-attachment that comes from identifying with Spirit unfolding and a problematic detachment that comes from identifying solely with transcendent Spirit. The former gives perspective, allowing a deeper integration with life, while the latter degrades into escape, denial, and projection. I was far more grounded than the New Ager sitting on the garbage can, but I also knew that I was lacking in some basic life experiences and skills. Jennifer, the beautiful gift shop girl, was the closest thing to a girlfriend I had ever had. Relationships were just too imperfect. In Wilber-speak, I may have traveled a considerable distance in my spiritual line of development, but my growth was stunted in other areas, including in my ability to simply love and be loved. I had barely begun the ongoing real work of integrating the numerous levels and lines.
The truth is that I still didn’t know why I was here on this earth. I knew in my heart that it wasn’t to write bad novels, or to meditate, wander, and work at the print shop, but I didn’t know what it was. Rafael tried to get me to keep reading books on science and spirituality. He knew that this relationship would be the site of much important work in the decades ahead. He was also willing to let me stay with him, but despite the beauty of New Mexico and Rafael’s offer, I started to get antsy. I couldn’t stay detached in the spiritual heights. My potential, whatever it might be, was not being realized by reveling in the glories of New Mexico.

I left New Mexico after four months, but my old habits lingered. I was broke so I returned to the print shop to make money—my brother enjoyed my continual returns because it gave him a break from printing—and then I spent four months in solitude. My cousin had recently bought a huge, seven-fireplace house, built around 1800, in a small town in New Hampshire. He asked me if I wanted to do some clean-up work and house-sit. I immediately said yes. I always wanted to live deliberately, in the manner of Thoreau, and my cousin’s offer felt like a great opportunity. The house was a tad bigger than Thoreau’s shack, but it was probably just as sparse and there were plenty of dense woods surrounding it. My days were mostly spent reading, writing in a journal, taking long walks, and chopping wood for my choice of fireplaces. In mid-November I turned thirty and took stock of my life: no real savings, lots of friends but no relationships, nothing of monetary value, and happy. I spent my birthday raking leaves, and then at night I lay on the soft grass, drank some cheap beer, and watched the moon.

The winter approached and I once again returned to the print shop. This time I knew my continual returns had to stop. Printing provided funds for my adventures, but it
hardly provided a means for expressing what I had lived and learned. Eric, my old Rutgers friend, was enrolled in a doctoral program at Purdue and he made it clear that I was welcome to move there. He knew lots of folks and so I would have an instant community, which I craved after my time in solitude. I made some money and moved to Indiana. My life didn’t change much initially. My first jobs were as a landscaper and a bookstore clerk. But thanks to recommendations from friends, I managed to get an adjunct teaching job in the Communication Department at Purdue and discovered an unknown talent and new stage of life.

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The mystical life is easily misinterpreted. But misinterpretation by students is nothing compared to the numerous misdeeds committed by those who claim to be enlightened teachers. My favorite example of atrocious behavior comes from Franklin Albert Jones, or Bubba Free John, or Da Free John, or Da Love-Ananda, or Da Avabhasa, or Adi Da—apparently your supposed to change your name as you become progressively more enlightened. I’ll use Franklin Jones, which will act as a reminder that he’s just a guy born in Jamaica, New York, in 1939. Jones’ teachings have been celebrated by many spiritual thinkers, including Alan Watts, who wrote in the preface of Jones’ autobiography: “He has simply realized that he himself as he is, like a star, like a dolphin, like an iris, is a perfect and authentic manifestation of the eternal energy of the universe, and thus is no longer disposed to be in conflict with himself.”
Jones’ teaching method of “crazy wisdom” doesn’t quite live up to this high praise. Crazy wisdom demands that students uncritically submit to the will of the guru, who, due to his enlightened stature, supposedly knows what’s best for the student. In Jones’ case, this meant attempting to break down his student’s ego attachments by having them participate in “sexual theater,” which included switching partners, orgies, and making pornographic movies. Of course, Jones got to have sex with whomever he wanted whenever he wanted. The end result was damaged psyches, emotional abuse, and the permanent breakup of many relationships.

In Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, Chogyam Trungpa warned spiritual students about the self-deception that often accompanies the spiritual path. Those who claim to be progressing towards enlightenment may be just playing an ego driven role that makes others think they’re enlightened. But Trungpa didn’t apply this criticism to himself. He argued that the hierarchal guru-student relationship was necessary because it taught students devotion. Of course, this devotion greatly enhanced his sex life. It would seem that attaining enlightenment is a super way to get laid. Trungpa died in 1987 from complications associated with his alcoholism. His teaching methods earned him the title, “the roaring tiger of crazy wisdom.”

Franklin Jones and Chogyam Trungpa certainly have their accomplishments. In particular, Trungpa founded the Naropa Institute in Colorado, which is a respected university that explores the genuine expression of the spiritual life. But their misdeeds supply a message to spiritual students that should have already been obvious: Don’t stop thinking. To me, the behavior of Jones and Trungpa suggests that there is no transcending the shadow. They merely detached themselves from their shadow side and then let it run
wild. The label of “enlightened guru” then elicited the consent of their followers and everyone got caught in a crazy, downward spiral of abuse. I actually like the idea of crazy wisdom because it recognizes and then attempts to incorporate a dark side into the spiritual path. But once again, there is a world of difference between a damaging detachment and an integrative non-attachment. It seems to me that Jones and Trungpa often confused the two. And they did so based on their sexual whims, which were influenced by a dangerous mix of power and uncritical allegiance.

Critical rationality is an absolute necessity for true spiritual growth and a more enlightened awareness. However, as my previous discussion of vision-logic suggests, we also need to express a higher order of rationality that is open to an ecological consciousness and the insights of religious experience. Many problems arise when transpersonal wisdom is divorced from rationality, but many problems also arise when rationality is divorced from transpersonal wisdom. What is easily lost in this plethora of problems is that religious experience supplies the ultimate context for critical thinking. Religious experience opens us to unity, but also to mystery, which calls everything into question. Experiences beyond words and thoughts gives us perspective. It leads to the realization that culture is produced by words and thoughts. We made it up. Thus, the way things are could be quite different. Our cultural practices, habits, and definitions supply stability, but they are also mysterious and malleable. Our task is to realize that a healthy culture is open to thinking that honors unity and mystery.

Martin Heidegger argued for a higher rationality similar to vision-logic, which he called meditative thinking. He described this type of thinking as “releasement towards things and openness to the mystery.” Such thinking leads us to ponder the “meaning
which reigns in everything that is” and demands that we “engage ourselves with what at first sight does not seem to go together at all.” Unfortunately, our technological age is governed by a different kind of thought, which Heidegger called “calculative thinking.” This type of thinking does not engage the mystery in things; rather, it only counts as knowledge what can easily be classified. Put simply, meditative thinking is open to connections while calculative thinking tends to objectify, separate, and dissect. For Heidegger, calculative thinking is the essence of technology. Thus, technology is not neutral—as it is so often claimed—but has a very definite bias towards a particular type of thinking and way of being in the world. Both meditative and calculative thinking are necessary, and neither Heidegger nor I make a claim that technology does not have its place, but meditative thinking pushes us to ask deeper questions, including: Why isn’t technology connected to a sense of place?

The reason we don’t ask such deep questions is because we’ve been seduced by technology’s amazing array of successes, which, without us really being aware of it, has made calculative thinking our dominant mode of thinking. Now don’t get me wrong. We all enjoy technology’s successes. I’m writing this sentence on a computer with the lights on and the rhythms of a Philip Glass CD pulsing through my stereo. There have also been many societal gains in the technological age. The Western Enlightenment project, which has brought us so much scientific and technological advancement, has also institutionalized such dignities as human rights and equality. And these are just some of the triumphs of the modern age. The list is long and impressive. According to Heidegger, however, there is a danger that technology’s ability to “captivate, bewitch, dazzle, and
beguile” will cause us to forget that our essential nature is more fully revealed in meditative thinking.

I fear that this beguiling effect of our technologically based consumer society causes us to dwell in this forgetfulness on a daily basis. When we are unsure and therefore in the proper position to commence meditative thinking, we are all too often repositioned away from fully releasing ourselves towards new possibilities. We sense something more, but settle for something far less, as our basis for understanding our desires is intermeshed with cultural codes that are fueled by an “ethic” of over-consumption. Instead of “making our lives a counterfriction to stop the machine,” as Thoreau suggested, we find ourselves entrenched in a society of technology and consumerism that has inherent biases, including a bias against nature. With little motivation for questioning these biases, we tend to comport ourselves with an attitude of acceptance that is mirrored by the acceptance of others.

Critical theorists like Louis Althusser and Herbert Marcuse argue that ideological discourses construct our subjectivity and lead us to such attitudes of acceptance. Althusser states that we are born into various ideologies that shape our perceptions, a process he calls “interpellation.” Thus, the idea that we are the autonomous authors of our experience is an illusion. In other words, we are born into a world of language and meaning systems that by their very nature attempt to speak for us. In our techno-industrial world, these meaning systems are grounded in our conceptual removal from nature and the economic myths of linear progress, technology as savior, and unlimited growth. Marcuse argues that our unreflective participation in these myths inevitably results in “repressive desublimation,” which simply means that we fail to sublimate our
instinctual energies in a constructive and creative fashion. As evidence for his argument, we need only look at the overwhelming amount of addictive behaviors that plague our techno-industrial cultures. We also need only look at how seldom meditative thinking, the daimonic, and religious experience nourish and guide our life-path.

I was introduced to Marcuse's writings in a class entitled "Language, Behavior, and Communication" that I took during my fateful final semester at Rutgers. We read *One Dimensional Man* and it contributed greatly to my anxiety ridden, soon-to-enter-the-work-world consciousness. Marcuse critically examines our techno-culture's ability to contain change by assimilating dissenting discourse into the dominant discourse of consumerism. For example, when *The Beatles* "Revolution" is used to sell sneakers, the language of change is being misused to assure that things stay the same. Such criticisms are easy to dismiss, especially since this is just one advertisement. We all like sneakers and the advertisers are just having fun, right? But it's a hell of lot trickier than the claim that we're unthinking automatons or the counter-claim that we're just making a living by supplying the necessary goods of society. It's a question of degree, and of how readily our cultural codes invite us to entertain a life of depth and meaning. For Marcuse, it's a question of critically examining the possibility that our desire for happiness has been transformed into a "happy consciousness" that fails to recognize our deeper instinctual, sensuous, and relational needs.

Underlying Marcuse's concern with one-dimensional discourse, and thus with calculative thinking, is the world view of scientism, which is quite different from the practice of science. Science is a method for testing experience. It is one way of knowing what we can know about the mysteries of the universe. Scientism, on the other hand, is a
world view which claims that only knowledge revealed through science has any validity. Ironically, the rigidity of this world view and the zealfulness with which it is defended makes it similar to fundamentalist religion. And, in an interesting twist, fundamentalist religious views are often defended with a one-dimensional bias similar to calculative thinking in which stories and symbols are objectified as historical fact.

Any world view driven by claims that it is the sole source of true knowledge is antithetical to meditative thinking. This is true for the simple reason that the more we truly ponder the more we realize how little we know. This knowing that we don’t know forces us to leave final conceptions of the good undefined, but it also opens us to multiple ways of knowing what we can know, including the insights of religious experience that give us a deeper awareness of our place within the interrelationships of the World Soul. However, we must always remember that there is nothing fixed about these interrelationships: they are spiritually mysterious and materially complex, chaotic, and constantly in process. They supply us with ever-evolving guidelines, not dogmatic rules. Humankind, as participants within this “process of interrelationship,” must stay open to mystery, not be obedient.

My friend Eric is a Heidegger scholar and many of these insights have come from conversations we’ve had during our years of hanging out together at Purdue. He presently teaches at Arizona State West University and he conveyed to me an interesting experience he had at the Grand Canyon that will help to further clarify the difference between calculative and meditative thinking. Eric reports that there is a sign at the canyon that estimates its age as being between six and eight million years old. My friend, who practices meditative thinking on a daily basis as part of his job as a philosopher,
immediately recognized the content of the sign as a feeble attempt to apply calculative thinking to what cannot be calculated. In other words, two million years is a quite a large margin of error. This is not to say that the sign supplies no knowledge, or that scientists should not attempt to give us this knowledge, but it should remind us of the limits of such knowledge. The real danger of the sign is not in its explicit message, but in its implicit and therefore more hidden message: experience the Grand Canyon as a calculative thinker.

Walker Percy has written beautifully about the problems inherent in viewing touristed locales like the canyon. Percy imagines what it must have been like for the first explorers of the western United States to cross miles of desert, break through the mesquite, and then be progressively flooded by the canyon’s depths, patterns, colors, and shadows. He compares this experience with that of the tourist who comes to the canyon with a consumer mentality and expectations created by postcards. The difference here is obviously immense. To Percy, the tourist has lost his sovereignty over experience. This sovereignty has been unknowingly given to a myriad of factors: to expectations and habits of consumption that are exacerbated by the canyon being packaged as a tourist site; to our desire to have the experience so that we can tell our friends that we were there; and to planners, experts, and calculative thinkers.

Percy’s choice of the word sovereignty can be a bit misleading. We do not want to rigidly control our experience. Rather, we want the power to relinquish our desire to control experience. In other words, we only have sovereignty when we are empowered to practice a meditative thinking constituted by a releasement towards things and an openness to the mystery. Once again, this does not mean that calculative thinking does
not have its merits, or that we should not have signs at the Grand Canyon, especially signs like the one stating its approximate age, which is, after all, quite astounding. But we must realize that even if that sign was able to give the exact age of the canyon, such calculation is but one, quite limited, way of experiencing what lies before our senses. If we are to open ourselves to mystery, and therefore to experience beyond mere calculation, we must become aware of the factors that constrict our experience and realize that we have a struggle on our hands. This will allow us to recover our experience, or more precisely, it will allow our experience to be uncovered and revealed in all its fullness.

There are many unforeseen benefits of being open to mystery. In 1994, I went with Eric and Rafael to a conference organized by the Ometeca Institute in San Ramon, Costa Rica. I wrote a paper on environmental ethics, with a particular emphasis on the sensuous imagination. My paper included the argument that our imagination can function as a mode of thinking, sensing, and imaging that more directly connects us with nature. I was excited about delivering my paper, but I was even more excited about visiting Costa Rica and getting a chance to exercise my sensuous imagination in the rainforests of such a beautiful country. I wasn’t disappointed.

In order to take a break from the intellectual rigors of the conference, the Costa Rican organizers planned a bus tour of some of the local sites. I had no idea where we were heading, but I was open to whatever the trip had to offer. After a few hours of traveling along mountain roads, we stopped at a resort situated at the base of a still active volcano. A small river flowed through the resort, occasionally gathering in gentle pools of volcano-heated water. To my surprise, the rest of the group quickly proceeded to
change into their bathing suits to go for what I am sure was the most relaxing swim of
their lives. I, however, did not have a suit. Somehow I was the only one who didn’t know
about this particular stop on the tour.

I stood there in amazement, thinking about my swimsuit back in my room,
incredulous at my inability to join the others. I thought about stripping down and going
anyway, but I already felt a bit uncomfortable at the academic conference—this was only
my second conference experience—and so running around naked in front of bunch of
scholars seemed like a bad idea. But then it hit me: I would go down river until I was out
of sight. And so I followed the winding river ever deeper into the rainforest until I found
the spot: a pool of water at the base of a mini-waterfall pouring over two large rocks. I
spent what I think was the next few hours in an intoxicating state of bliss—my sensuous
imagination finely tuned and receptive. There was the caress of the warm, pulsating water
on my flesh, the bright sounds and colors of the parrots swooping far overhead, and then
suddenly, a light, cool rain gently finding its way through the canopy of trees. When I
first ventured down river I felt a bit like an intruder, unsure if humans should be allowed
to enter such mystery. But it only took a few moments for me to feel utterly and
completely at home. The rainforest existed within me and I was absorbed within it.

My blissful state was eventually shattered when a thought concerning the group
found its way into my awareness. What if they left without me? I still didn’t know the
schedule of events for the day and so they may have already moved on, unaware that they
were one person short. At first I didn’t care, but then I realized how annoying it would be
for everyone else if they had to come looking for me. So I put on my clothes and returned
to find that they were just starting to gather for lunch at the resort’s restaurant. I thought about going back, but I decided to leave the experience alone. It was already perfect.

What made this experience so special was that it was a total surprise. The beauty of the area guaranteed us all a wonderful time, and I know that my colleagues also experienced various degrees of ecstatic connection and wonder. But I also know that my ignorance concerning the itinerary of the trip increased the intensity of my day. I had absolutely no expectations to cloud the experience. And then my lack of swimwear added the final touch by causing me to seek solitude amid less traveled and therefore more mysterious terrain. To me, this is a great example of being prepared for a peak experience by being unprepared. Or, as Walker Percy put it: “Instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden.”

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The next three chapters include the second half of my interviews with Brent, Syndee, and Andy. These interviews took place two years after our initial discussions, which is due to the unfolding nature of my own life and writing process. But this delay turned out to be a blessing, since it gave us all time to reflect upon our earlier conversations. For me, it was a chance to ask specific questions about their passions and areas of expertise, as well as catch up on how their lives had changed. I viewed it as a tremendous opportunity to sort through ethical complexities and learn. The interviews also turned out to be great fun. We had many big laughs while talking about serious
topics. But mainly, the interviews are great examples of vision-logic and meditative thinking.
Chapter Nine

Letting Go,

Brent part II

"Stop trying. Stop trying not to try. Stop stopping."

-- Zen saying
Brent and I met for our second interview at Purdue University in the summer of 2001. Brent has an office at the university where he works at his job protecting water quality in the State of Indiana. We had planned to talk outside during his lunch break amid colorful gardens designed by the Purdue horticultural department, but thunderstorms caused us to seek refuge in one of the campus buildings. Brent is cheerful and unassuming. He has completely returned to his pre-hunter-gatherer clean cut look—he doesn’t look like a radical guy—but his ideas and actions are far from mainstream. Brent takes the production of our food and food choices seriously, as we all should since they have social, economic, environmental, ethical, and spiritual consequences. But what was most striking about our conversation is how he has learned from and then let go of much of his past.

I had a list of topics I wanted to discuss, including his passion for permaculture and participating in a community food network. I also wanted to know his current views on vegetarianism. We covered all these topics, but once I asked the first question the conversation took on a life of its own. I was especially pleased to hear about how he has incorporated insights from his hunter-gatherer experience into his current project protecting water quality, which is a testament to the possibilities of effecting change by working within the system.

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I know that you’ve been trained in permaculture. What can you tell me about what you’ve learned, as well as how you’ve put the permaculture concepts into practice with your garden?

I took a permaculture design course through an institute based in Australia, which is where the practice originated. Bill Mollison first put it together back in the seventies. Most of the concepts already existed but he put them together in a holistic framework. Permaculture focuses on the interface between the elements in your land system rather than the individual elements. It’s like the Zen principle that states that it’s the empty space that makes the jar. That one concept has redirected my thinking and helped me to more clearly visualize how things fit together. This is a very simple example, but we have apple trees and some of the apples fall to the ground and rot, which can be food for the chickens to eat, and then we get eggs from the chickens. You try to tie everything together so you have no loose ends. Nature has no waste and you try to mimic that wisdom as much as possible. But there’s always a lot of unknowns, so it’s a continual process of synergistically putting elements together.

Last year I planted what I called a mandala garden. I placed everything in circles rather than straight rows. I had overlapping circles, leaving a small space in the center of each circle where I could step. And then the paths to each center created a mandala shape. On the outside of the garden I planted flowers and corn. I had the interface between crops and it was very productive. The circles really
changed how I perceived and worked with the garden. I went a step further this year by letting everything go to seed. I did some planting, but instead of putting a form to it, I let the form happen. But it’s not as productive this year and I’m trying to figure out why [laughs]. It’s a little frustrating because it’s a long process when you start with sod and then try to transform it into something that’s thriving naturally.

This raises a key question. What’s the human role in permaculture? Are you the manager? The controller? The facilitator?

I’m the observer. I’m overseeing the garden in a lot of ways, but mostly I’m observing, learning from those observations, and then trying to apply what I’ve learned. I try to back off as much as possible and work with the interactions that are happening. Some things don’t work and some things surprise you. I try to encourage the surprises to happen more often [laughs].

I’ve heard many people talk about permaculture and it sounds so simple, in the best sense of that word. But I keep thinking there’s got to be more to it then I’ve hearing [laughs]. There’s got to be all kinds of intricate knowledge about how plants interact.

The principles are simple, but the interactions can get quite complex. There are three main principles, at least according to Bill Mollison and those who have followed him. The first is care of the earth, the second is care of people,
the third is care of community, which means you’re willing to give away what you don’t need. For example, we have these apples—I keep talking about apples because we have a lot this year [laughs]—and I’ve already invited several people to come over to pick apples and make apple sauce. They’ll take whatever they want beyond what we need. We try to do the same with eggs. We sell eggs but we also give a lot away. So it’s about caring for people and community and recognizing that the surplus benefits the community of which you are part.

But the principles are also much more detailed. Permaculture emerged from the dry lands of Australia, so many of the original concepts were developed to reverse desertification by trying to encourage and propagate forests. There are a lot of people working on forest gardening techniques—woody agriculture—where you have a perennial system rather than an annual system, which is what the majority of us are living off now. But if you can get the perennials going and encourage the system of interactions, you eventually become part of the system and just harvest what you need. It’s sort of like a hunter-gatherer life. And a lot can be produced on a small piece of land, which allows everyone to trade or share their surplus food. So it’s a radically different viewpoint and system compared to what we have now.

It sounds like you’re finding interesting ways to integrate your hunter-gatherer experience into your current life. You woke up to so many things about yourself and the earth during that time. How have you integrated the sense of spirituality you discovered into your current life?
I feel like I gained a deep knowledge from being immersed in nature that is just a part of me now. But I’ve let go of spirituality. I haven’t forced it. I’m just living. When I first let go of my church upbringing and began to embrace a scientific world view I pendulum swung. I was completely anti-religion and ritual. I didn’t feel it had any place at all in my life. But slowly, during and after living as a hunter-gatherer, I started to understand why religion and ritual are so important to most cultures. But I don’t feel I’ve found a niche within any specific religious teachings or rituals. I’ve come to realize that I really don’t know that much [laughs]. So it’s best for me to not force anything. I did have many experiences while living in the woods that opened me to new ideas and possibilities, and to the awareness that there is a greater presence of Spirit. But some days I struggle keeping all that together. It’s been a process of rejecting religion and then realizing that all religions have some significance and wondering how I fit in to this realization. But I don’t want to get caught in any specific religion. Let it be [laughs].

So during your hunter-gatherer years you let go of religion and science. Has anything filled this absence? Has anything directed your transition back to a job and family life?

Some of my dreams changed my direction quite a bit. I was convinced that a hunter-gatherer way of life was the only way people could live in harmony with
nature. But then I had a particular dream that made me realize that I had to
integrate more fully into my culture by finding new ways to live the knowledge I
had experienced.

It’s fascinating that dreams have directed so much of your life-path. What do you
make of that?

I don’t dismiss dreams, no matter how weird, strange, or uncomfortable.
When I first started having dreams that felt significant I realized that my
subconscious, or spirit, was offering me messages. I realized that the dream world
is just as important as our waking life. I’ve read some books—there are lots of
different positions on dreams—but I was mainly working with my own inner
process. Everybody dreams and your dreams are for you. They may help you with
whatever path you happen to be on. There are many stories of inventors and
scientists who have received insights and solutions from their dreams. But my
dreams were important to me in terms of emotion. They made me aware of issues
I needed to work on. I also had many lucid dreams. Some were so strong that I
wasn’t sure if I was awake or dreaming. It was bizarre. I didn’t know what to
make of it.

The ecopsychologist Robert Greenway did an informal study of people returning
from wilderness trips and he said that the most profound transformation people
experienced was with their dreams. Most described dramatic changes in the frequency
and vividness of their dreams, which says a lot about how our unconscious is connected with nature.

Yes, that's what happened to me. I even learned how to change the direction of a dream. If something bad was happening, I was usually able to change it into something positive. I think I developed this ability because I spent so much energy and effort attending to the dreaming process. I specifically remember one dream right before I left the wilderness school and began wandering on my own. I was being chased inside a mall, which is really a nightmare for me—a mall is the most horrifying place I can go in reality [laughs]. Anyway, I was being chased by a guy with a machine gun. He was going to kill me so I ducked into a room. When he followed me, I took away his gun and turned him into this little Buddha [laughs]. He became this little, fat Buddha and sat down in the lotus position. Somehow I got some food, gave him something to eat, and sat down with him. So I was able manipulate my dream. And when I woke up I felt enlivened and powerful.

So how do you interpret this dream? So many of your other dreams were specific to following a hunter-gatherer path. A mall is hardly an ancient looking landscape.

I don't know if I ever really thought about it. But thinking about it now, I'd say that dreams often confront us with things that generate fear. And for me the mall represents the low-point of our society—the whole strip-mall mentality.
that's so pervasive. So maybe I see that mentality as the enemy. I hate to think in those terms, but on a gut level I really don’t know how to deal with the mall. I see the machine gun as killing the spirit of people like myself—people who are trying to find something more whole and real for themselves and their children. I don’t know—in the dream I told him that I loved him like a Buddha [laughs]. The Buddha would represent ultimate awareness. So maybe that’s one reason I’ve tried to insert myself into a cultural system that is often closed to the ideas we’ve talked about. Maybe one of the reasons I’m here on earth is to try to raise some awareness that will lead to change. I don’t know [laughs].

This is fun [laughs]. What was the particular dream you mentioned that convinced you to more fully integrate with society?

I had a dinosaur dream that was a significant turning point. About a year after I left the woods I married Elizabeth and we moved into the basement of my parent’s house. My parents live on a small farm in the middle of nowhere. I was still sticking to my convictions, trying to make a living through sharing my wilderness skills. I gave workshops, spoke for organizations, made crafts for museums and individuals. I was working really hard—tanning deerskins constantly. And I still had a difficult time connecting with people because I felt that they really didn’t understand [laughs].

Elizabeth was also committed to the work and we were putting in lots of hours and energy with very little monetary return. We started to feel pressured,
especially since we were raising a family. We were paying my parent’s a little rent and were very appreciative to them for letting us stay on the farm. But if something went wrong, like the car breaking down, we had to pay the same price as someone who actually got paid a salary [laughs]. It was tough. And then I had a dream about a woman I met while at a gathering in Idaho for primitive living enthusiasts. She wore buckskin, with a wild look in her eyes, and was digging up clay with her hands. I thought she was making pottery, but she hid what she was doing from me. When she was done she looked over her shoulder, drawing me to her creation. And there on the ground was the word “dinosaur.” She communicated a message to me without speaking—I was going to become extinct if I didn’t move on with my life [laughs]. I realized then that I had to find a different way of dealing with my issues. I had to integrate myself back into my own culture, because if I didn’t I was going to be in bad shape.

I started to interview for a few jobs, but no one took me seriously. So I made a decision to cut my hair. That was painful. My hair represented so much of who I was. It was very difficult. I was still hanging on even though I realized that I had to move on. But I cut my hair and things started to happen. I went through a few different jobs at Purdue. I cleaned dog kennels for awhile—that’s a crappy job [laughs]. And it was painful too. The research with animals is still going on. It was very emotional for me, but I felt I could at least care for the dogs. It made me try harder to find a position where I could effect change. So that’s when I really transformed. I opened myself up to a new path. I said, “lead me, show me,” and that’s when I got my present job protecting water quality. It just unfolded. It was
almost too easy to get this job, which has been wonderful because I’ve been able to take my vision and turn it into reality.

I already have the title for this interview. Letting go has certainly been the theme so far [laughs].

Yes, letting go [laughs].

So when you finally started to let go it was almost too easy. You fell into a new life and job. What exactly did you fall into?

It wasn’t so much falling into something, it was more the recognition of an opportunity. A job came open at Purdue protecting water quality in a grassroots sense, working with farmers mainly, based on their needs and concerns. I got an interview, wore a tie, emphasized that I grew up on a small farm, and got the job. On my first day I was told: “Here’s an office and a box of stuff, figure out what to do.” And I liked that. I have a lot of freedom and can use my creativity. I’ve been here a little over three years now. I’m very excited about our latest project because I wrote the grant, although I didn’t get my name on it--it had to go through the faculty system here at Purdue [laughs]. But I wrote it and it contains a lot of permaculture ideas that allow us to look at water quality from an integrated perspective. I really had to do some convincing with my supervisors. They were skeptical about whether it would get funded, but they eventually told me to go for
it. It did get funded by the State Department of Environmental Management based in Indianapolis.

So we got a three-year grant. I immediately brought in some radical folks who have done important work in sustainable agriculture as consultants, which made some at the university uncomfortable. We recently had a steering committee meeting and it was pretty interesting [laughs]. There was a mix of entrenched folks, who claim we have to use pesticides because that’s just the way it’s done, and then the newer folks who come from a totally different viewpoint. It opened up a lot of discussion [laughs]. But some common ground was found. We all agreed that farmers are facing similar problems. They’re all facing the possibility of not farming next year because of economic hardships. So we’re using this common concern to figure out how we can connect economics with quality of life, community, and the environment—the principles of permaculture. We’re trying to help farmers combine these other elements with their monetary concern in order to help them find possible solutions.

A big part of the solution is having a local community food system—a kind of market. At first a lot of farmers are resistant because they don’t want to deal with other people. They’re commodity producers—corn, soy beans, hogs—which makes things very difficult because we’re essentially asking them to change their identity. We’re asking them to say, “I’m a farmer” rather than “I’m a hog farmer.” But if they can make that shift it opens up possibilities. So basically we’re saying that instead of producing a single commodity that gets trucked away—which gives corporations most of the money while you make a pittance--
perhaps there's a more integrated, locally focused solution. For example, there's a huge dairy with twelve thousand or so cows in a nearby county and all the milk gets shipped to Georgia. The few smaller dairy farmers can't compete. So we're suggesting to the smaller diary farmers that they might find that people are willing to pay a premium for organic milk products—yogurt and cheese—which you could market locally without a middle person.

There's a small twelve generation Swiss diary in southern Indiana that is going to be a part of our project. They've already begun producing all kinds of organic cheeses and everybody loves them. They're making a lot of money, more than they would as a single commodity producer. So we're bringing in a lot of different principles, but also an understanding of marketing products. I hate to think of food as a product rather than a means for making your community a healthier place, but that's part of the practical reality. But more people are realizing that food equals health, and that what happens to the land effects people and the larger environment. I'm encouraged that more people are becoming aware of where their food comes from.

The thing that is most impressive to me is that you're able to get involved in all these diverse areas through working to improve water quality.

You could use water to drive the process, or soil, or food, they all take you to the same place. Water quality can easily be tied to everything. Some of it is farther away—like marketing your food—but that's part of the challenge. I've had
to convince people on the committee to look at the whole picture rather than just the parts. We need to honor the permaculture idea of the interface between food, soil, and water. When small farmers puts these elements together they have a basis to succeed. The focus of my job is to improve water quality in Indiana, but the project I’ve proposed takes us into multiple interconnected areas. I’m trying to expand the program from protecting drinking water to a whole farm approach that values quality of life and a healthy environment. We’re starting with a few pilot farms that are close to being sustainable, but still have a few steps to take. We’re exploring the process together with the farmers, which we hope will provide models that will work for others.

So would you call yourself a facilitator of this process?

Yes. There are several farms interested and I’m going to help them to do it. But I need to be careful. I need to find out what’s important to the landowner and the family. I need to know how they see their long-term future and work with them. And they need to be fully involved and excited about new possibilities for their land. I don’t know if it will work, but I’ve got some great help from folks who have already made it work in their own lives as organic farmers. They have a lot of knowledge so I’m very hopeful. We have a great opportunity with this grant.
I have one last issue I'd like to explore. You went from growing up on a small farm, to being a supermarket meat-eater, to a vegetarian, to a hunter-gatherer, and now to participating in a community food network, which includes various forms of sustainable meat and vegetable production. That's quite a progression. What are your current views on vegetarianism and meat eating?

Everything comes down to energy. One great sacred cycle of energy! It cannot be created or destroyed, only channeled, I think. We, all of us, are inextricably bound up in this great cycle of energy flow. It’s said that Americans take more than their fair share of available energy. This probably includes most of us, despite our efforts to have a sustainable diet.

When it comes to food, especially killing and eating animals, passionate people can really become evangelical about the whole thing. I try not to fall into the “only one right way” trap. Sometimes, one gets involved in these arguments, and being in the middle of the road leads to the risk of becoming road kill [laughs]. I think that many people who become vegetarians for ethical reasons do so via a “black and white” premise. “Black” due to the fact that agribusiness is inhumane and destructive, and “white” because they feel becoming a vegetarian will fix everything. What about gray? There are animals that are being cared for humanely and raised with wholesomeness at the center.

I’m not talking about some large agribusiness company that got their chicken labeled organic just because they opened a door and threw a bale of hay into the total confinement area where their chickens are kept. Some “organic”
food is just the same old agribusiness practice with loopholes to make a buck. I'm talking about people who really understand the nature of chickens, cows, pigs, goats, rabbits, deer, fish, turkeys, and who allow for their true natures to be expressed. Such people provide animals with their true diets, as well as clean air and water, and everything is done in a manner that does not pollute. The meats and other gifts from properly treated animals carries a wholesomeness of energy and nourishment not found in factory farmed animals. And by supporting this way of farming and animal keeping you are not supporting agribusiness and factory farming. But you can really only understand the difference by visiting a local farm family that conducts energy flow in this manner. You will be able to see with your own eyes and this will help you to reconnect to the food you eat.

I think a lot of diet-related problems have come from people who are increasingly disconnected from their food. Wes Jackson said it best when talking about reconnecting with food: “Make the distance between the soil and your mouth as short as possible.” Start with the first step. Go slow. Pick something you can learn about and monitor your efforts, something that will fit into your schedule. Try growing your own sprouts. They will be fresh and delicious and healthy and you will feel good about it. Or maybe learn four edible wild plants: Where they grow, how they taste in different soils or locations, what recipes they will work with, if they have medicinal value, how they make you feel when you recognize them during walks. This is nourishment for the body and the soul. Or you could just as well learn the habits of the deer. If you prepare yourself well, you could hunt for some of your nourishment and make your own clothes to boot.
Again, your soul will be nourished. The distance between the land and your mouth will decrease and everything that takes place in the energy cycle of that particular plant or animal food becomes part of you. And you know it intimately. No one can escape the life and death cycle by diet. We all benefit through the death and life of other organisms. This does not have to lead to the eating of meat, though doing so can be done in a harmonious manner.

Do you think it’s possible to keep farm animals—for manure and other benefits—without killing them for food?

It’s true that animals can be kept for manure, and maintenance of grass, and for byproducts like eggs and milk. Inevitably, though, situations arise that when weighed ethically, the path of doing least harm will involve killing. For instance, this spring we discovered we had way too many roosters due to the natural balance of male-female hatch rates. Roosters can be hell on hens. Due to constant “roostering” many of the hens had no feathers left on their backs. Several hens had skin that was infected. Many of the hens refused to come down from their roosts in the morning and were spending most of their day without food, water, or exercise. Clearly we had to remove the excess roosters. We tried giving some away and had one taker. Still too many roosters. One option that would have avoided me killing them would be to let them loose. They would have been dinner for raccoons or coyotes. That didn’t seem humane to me. The path of least harm was to give them a quick, humane death, then carefully prepare them for the
freezer, which is what I did. I kept some of the feathers and wings to use for other purposes. The meat was used sparingly all summer in noodles and soups. Their life energy is transferred to my wife, our children, and me. We all know it and are thankful.

It is my belief that many of the foods that vegetarians are consuming are grown largely from non-sustainable modern agricultural methods and that this will most certainly lead to soil collapse. Of course, most meat-eaters are in the same boat. The energy waste due to transportation and the mechanization needed to support this diet is astronomical, and certainly involves indirect killing of animals through habitat destruction, road kills, and pollution. Still, a modern vegetarian diet has fewer deficits than a modern meat eater’s diet. But what about the gray area? I believe that sustainable food comes from somewhere in between, on small farms—small because not many humans are smart enough to sustainably manage large ones—where animals, plants, and land are in harmony. This is what I try to do and support.

What I’m trying to say is that to be a vegetarian in a truly sustainable manner, without recourse to the killing of animals, would involve dedicating oneself to a very finely detailed niche of growing food or supporting local farms. Even then there would likely be parts of the year where food could not be grown without ever-greater energy inputs. How many vegetarians pursue this? I have no problems with people who choose to be vegetarians. I entertain the idea myself and am always open. I only have problems with vegetarians who tell me the world is black and white.
I once went to a four-day academic conference and they asked all the participants for their dietary requirements. I told them I was a vegetarian and they responded by asking me what kind of vegetarian. I love that question. I said I was a twice-a-month fish eating, non-egg and milk but occasional organic cheese eating vegetarian [laughs]. So I completely respect where you're coming from. I have never considered our food choices to be a black and white issue, or an all or nothing issue. But I do think we can live more ethically and healthily by eating lower on the food chain, and by buying locally-produced organic food, which is what you have been articulating so beautifully.

I do imagine a place where one could have a sustainable life with vegetable gardens, greenhouse, a milk cow, and chickens. Where one never eats meat or kills, but rather allows the animals to experience natural death. I think one could pull this off with only very occasional intervention that would involve mercy killing in times of extreme sickness or predator problems. I can imagine my family attempting this at some point, though some meat eating will probably always remain a part of my diet. It's easy to get enmeshed in certain points of view such that the nature of life and death are rationalized away and only the ideals are left. I tried this for awhile, but I have come back to knowing that trying to escape from the taking of life is ludicrous. I also understand that each person has their own path and that there is no right way to live. But it's good to know why you live as you do and why you choose what you choose.
Chapter Ten

Deep Listening,

Syndee part II

"At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive. You empty yourself and wait, listening . . . you wait, you give your life’s length to listening."

-- Annie Dillard
I arrived at Syndee and Bret's place in Bloomington, Indiana on a summer evening just as the sun was setting. Syndee, Bret, and their four-year old child Mayan were still away visiting with family. Syndee told me they would probably be out late and that I should make myself at home. Their dog Wispy greeted me and we both walked down a wooded path to the "Turtle Hut," which is a small, domed structure Syndee uses for her therapy work and other gatherings. It also doubles as a guesthouse, so I went inside, grabbed a bunch of pillows and propped myself up so I could read before bed. I woke up the next day with the sun, took a step outside, and discovered Syndee taking her morning walk. We agreed to meet up at the main house for breakfast and to plan our day.

Syndee and Bret's home is not far from town, but it's completely surrounded by forest. There are no other houses in sight. I had not seen them for two years and we took some time to eat and catch up on each other's lives. I soon learned that Syndee had recently spent four days in a local tree-sit, so I immediately had another topic for us to discuss. We finished breakfast and decided to head out to a special spot in the woods overlooking a ravine. We brought some lemongrass tea that Mayan showed me how to make, and so we were well supplied for the day. As always, I had some specific topics I wanted to discuss, but I know that new insights emerge when conversations are led by the subject matter rather than the will of either of the participants. I didn't want to force things. But I was interested in guiding the interview to some of her differences with Brent concerning eating and animals. This led to a fascinating discussion on some potential
problems with long term vegan health. But I was once again struck by the fact that they have much in common in their support of community and organic living. And their ethic is essentially the same: educate yourself on important issues, connect with the unity of Spirit or the life force, listen for inner guidance, and respect diversity by always staying open. In other words, they are both responsive to the call of Spirit.

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I’d like to talk with you about your four areas of expertise.

Oh please tell me, what are they [laughs]?

Okay [laughs]. The interconnected issues of vegetarianism, or veganism, and animal rights, breath work, and your most recent endeavor, parenting, although I’m sure you wouldn’t describe parenting as an area of expertise. But let’s start with vegetarianism and veganism. I’ve never met anyone more free of animal products than you.

I drive a car.

Right. There’s no pure place to stand. But what I want to know is how you talk to others about vegetarianism and veganism. I’m only willing to talk about it when I know the other person is sincere and not just asking to be a pain in the butt, which, by the way, I once did many years ago. I made fun of a person who tried to explain to me why I
shouldn’t order a giant hamburger at a restaurant. So I’m totally sympathetic to being a pain in the butt [laughs]. But I don’t quite know how to respond to the few people who have told me that they used to be a vegetarian or vegan, but then they stopped because they didn’t feel right. They claim that their body metabolism must require some meat products. I don’t always believe them [laughs]. I think its true for some people. I do believe that we all have different body metabolisms. But I think in the majority of cases it’s just a psychological projection rather than a bodily need, or they didn’t educate themselves about nutrition, or they find it too inconvenient be a vegetarian in our meat-based culture.

Well, that’s so interesting because I’ve recently talked about this with my doctor and friend, Michael Klaper. Michael is known internationally for promoting a plant-based diet free from all animal products. He had a number of experiences in his medical career that led him to focus on vegetarian and then vegan nutrition. He was an anesthesiologist, so he witnessed many people in open-heart surgery having their arteries cleaned out. He saw the fat and cholesterol in people’s veins and arteries. It provoked such an interest that he started studying blood, comparing different samples from meat-eaters, vegetarians, and vegans. There was a dramatic difference, with vegans having the healthiest blood. But of course he’s talked to a small percentage of vegans who claim that something about eating solely from the world of plants wasn’t working for them—they craved some animal products.
Now, Michael sees no physiological, psychological, or spiritual reason for including animal products in our diet, but when I called him recently he said you'll never believe what I'm doing. He's studying people who have been vegans for fifteen to twenty years who are having problems--people who told him that their inner voice was instructing them to eat some animal products. They were freaked out, but many of them listened and started to eat some fish. And so he started studying their blood and comparing it to people like me. I've been a vegetarian for over thirty years and a vegan for over twenty and have never felt a physical or psychological need to consume animal products. So he asked me to go to a local blood clinic and have tests taken. Everything was prearranged and numerous vials of my blood were sent to a lab in Atlanta where they did the initial testing. Michael did extensive blood analysis and found out I was fine. But he is finding that some long-term vegans are low, not absent, just low in five areas—carnatine . . .

What about vitamin B-12? I know that can be a problem for some vegans and vegetarians.

Yes, if you're not eating foods that have been fortified or organic plants grown in nutrient rich soil, you do have to be mindful of B-12. I know people who take a supplement once a week, but I never have. But what Michael has found is that the vegans who are low in these areas are fine if they eat fish once or twice a
month, so it’s a small amount. And he’s also devoting himself to developing a supplement. So it’s pretty interesting.

How does this information resonate with you in terms of who we are as human beings and how we have evolved? Most people who eat a plant-based diet are extremely healthy, and yet it appears that there are others whose health requires some meat. Paul Shepard argues that evolution has made us omnivores and that we just can’t change our biological heritage. How do you respond to the complexity of the issue?

Well, for me the complexity requires that we sit in a peaceful place and make a loving decision for ourselves. I trust that process. If someone’s body-knowing, after being in prayer, guides them to eat animal products, then I would trust that decision and not judge them. I’m not into projecting or judging. But it continues to be a surrender for me. I have such empathy with the non-human world. And I see that so much of the non-human world has been taken with disrespect—that’s my issue. So if you feel that you need to take from the animal world, the question is how do you do it.

Your vegan lifestyle obviously comes from a spiritual understanding that includes an attitude of empathy and respect, but so does the hunter-gatherer life-way of many indigenous tribes. How do you feel about the claim that there is a spiritual dimension to the predator-prey relationship?
Well, it's all around us right here in nature. There's the predator and the prey. I see it all the time with this animal sitting here beside us [Wispy Wolf]. He's somewhat domesticated, but somewhat not. He's got his wild side, don't you Wispy? The other day Mayan and I were walking along a creek-bed and he happily pranced past us with a groundhog he had just preyed upon. But I can co-exist in this world with him knowing that he is being true to himself. Wispy was simply being his true self. And that's what's important to me—that we all create the space and time to listen deeply to who we truly are and then allow that to come forth. Animals are one-hundred percent who they really are. There's nothing fake about a dog, or a deer, or an earthworm. There's nothing in these creatures that's not fully grounded in the instinctual knowing of who they are and what their mission is here on earth. But that's not true of humans. We're a confused lot.

So my prayer is that we are open-hearted, while watching for signs and knowing that change is beautiful and good. But we also need to gather information that is relevant to the world today. It's possible that at one time on the earth all humans could have co-existed as hunter-gatherers, but not now that we are over six billion. I don't think it's the animals responsibility to feed what is often a superficial, conditioned, ego-driven need. So my prayer is that we stop in our tracks and listen and ask questions about who we really are and take action accordingly. I respect people. I respect that we are evolving creatures who are trying to find our way home. We are all capable of asking questions and listening
at different levels. And once we question the downward spiral of our conditioning, then true surrender, acceptance, and transformation can emerge.

So what advice would you give to someone who asked you about veganism or vegetarianism in a sincere way—someone who has unthinkingly eaten a meat-based diet their entire life? Let’s say they’ve been totally conditioned, but are beginning to wake up. What would you say?

That happens all the time [laughs]. It’s a common, almost daily experience. But my response depends on the subtle, nonverbal ways the person asks the question. I feel more permission to share my world view when a person has already made a decision for themselves. But prior to someone making a decision, I love to invite them to one of our potlucks so they can experience the culinary delights of vegan cooking. It’s foreign to most people. And then I try to support them in their own path. People are very capable of reaching their own decision. And these days I meet more people who are vegetarian than who aren’t vegetarian. Of course, that’s largely because I associate with that kind of crowd. But it’s very different than twenty and thirty years ago. I would hang out with amazing, progressive, enlightened people, but they weren’t questioning what they put in their bodies. But people are now, especially the young people I meet here in Bloomington. Frankly, there’s an extinction that’s occurring around our food choices with my generation and my parent’s generation. The times are a changin’.
The earth is a learning plane. A lot of life is going down unnecessarily because of human behavior, but I trust that we are evolving in a way that’s perfect. It’s okay. It’s all okay even though I might get caught up in the pain and distress of a moment. I have to intentionally take time to exhale when I think about animal suffering. I can plug into the animal screams so easily. I’ve heard so many of them in my life growing up on a farm and then visiting farms in my later life. My tribe would certainly be a vegan tribe. And yet I still trust what’s happening, although that doesn’t mean I don’t take action. But there’s room for diversity if it’s based on love, honor, and the truth of the moment—and quiet time in which we cultivate a deep listening to our inner voice, to God, to Spirit, to that creative life force that flows through all things. That’s what it’s all about for me.

Let’s talk about breath work, which during our first interview you described as being one of the major transformations in your life. I also know that you use breath work in your therapy work. So what exactly is breath work?

If you look at Mayan you’ll see that he’s been able to maintain his deep breathing—he’s a belly breather. But as we journey through our lives many of us become constricted in our breathing. We don’t fully oxygenate our bodies. At some level we are blocking the life force from entering every cell of our bodies. Breath work is designed to change that. The main principle is that the life force, or consciousness, travels on the breath. There are all kinds of physiological happenings when we are in our mother’s womb that develop our ability to
breathe, although we don’t because we’re using the conduit of exchange called the umbilical cord. But when we’re born the umbilical cord is cut and we transition to our breath. And when we die the breath ceases and the life force leaves our bodies. So breath is the conduit for life. It’s where our essence is held and moved. It’s where we experience the dance we have with the plants and trees, or the oxygen, carbon dioxide cycle—our inhalation, their exhalation, our exhalation, their inhalation. We are able to co-exist as mammals on this planet because of the breath we share. And it was my personal discovery of my own breath that got me through my d-time after I left Washington, DC.

You’re d-time of despair and all the other d’s—distraught, de-spirited. I love the way you describe it.

My downward spiral time [laughs]. I knew, without reading books or instruction, that I was constricted and not breathing. I wasn’t fully inhaling the life force. So I started breathing at my parent’s home in Iowa while they were away. I knew my path in Washington, DC was beautiful and purposeful, but it was time to reclaim parts of me that had been pushed aside because of my activism. The continuous lobbying, public speaking, studying issues, and educating people about the legislative process was so intense. So I started doing deep, intentional, engaged breathing. I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t know that many indigenous cultures had practiced a form of breath work or that
that there was a kind of modernized, New Age take on breath work. I discovered it through my own personal experience.

When we practice deep breathing we receive total permission for our hearts and bodies to commune with our soul. The mental part of us fades away, which was perfect for me because when I first left DC I didn’t want to think about another fact or figure dealing with the problems of the world. But breath work is a way for humans—no matter how shut down we may be—to rediscover a vivid, illuminating conversation with spirit within and around us. It’s a form of journeying, but not really to other dimensions because it’s home, here and now. It can become a fundamental part of people reclaiming their connected self, the self that’s connected to nature, to Spirit, and to our inner voice. And it’s a profound experience for most people, both mystical and grounding, that helps to guide them to what they really want their lives to be. So I believe in breath work as a practice for myself and it’s an important aspect of the work I do with other people. It’s a key element in the heartherapy practice I’m creating to help provide a livelihood for our family.

I’ve never done breath work before so I’m trying to imagine how it works. Do you do a particular kind of breathing practice for say twenty minutes? And then afterwards...

You just take off...
You just take off and that brings your deeper needs to your conscious awareness, needs that had been blocked. But then of course you have to work with what has emerged. So a big part of breath work, it seems to me, would be much more than the breathing. You need to have someone there to help people process what has emerged.

Yes, to help process, because it’s not a so-called normal realm experience. It’s a very real experience. It helps people to relearn reality. The world of boxes is not the real world. The real world is each moment that we can be in harmony with our breath and this exquisite planet.

The scientist Tyler Volk writes that his investigations into Gaia theory have caused him to feel as if he’s living within a giant metabolism and breathing with the biosphere.

Yes, that’s the real world. Sitting here overlooking this ravine and talking about these deep, interconnected experiences and perceptions is the real world. And once people have these experiences they can claim them as their real world. It becomes an intentional path. But the difficulty for many is integrating this new vision into their old life. This is where I think people really need help. They need to process their vision within the context of community. I was able to pretty much meander through our cultures’ many obstacles alone. My experiences with nature growing up and my underwater experience gave me a steadfast grip on what really mattered. But we need peers. We’re social beings. We need touch, we need
to feel, we need to be heard, we need to be listened to, we need to listen, and we need to share stories. And when we’re finally ready to spread our angelic wings and fly [laughs], there needs to be other people around who have experience taking that leap of faith. It’s not something many of us can do alone. We need to be supported, because if we leap and fall the entrenched habits of our consumerist culture--what it means to be a success, what it means to be a man or a woman--can get even stronger. The numbness and denial can go to yet another level.

So one of the things I focus on with the therapy work—which is really just sharing with people who choose to share themselves—is to help people create a support community in their lives. You have to find people who mirror back to you large parts of who you really are. If the people around you don’t do that, if they spark inner dialogue that is painful, hurtful, or negative, then you have to recreate community in your life. Most people need to let go of some relationships until they get grounded. And sometimes it means completely severing a relationship. But if you become more grounded, oftentimes you can return to an old relationship in new way. Parents are always the toughest. People often need to minimize contact with family for a few months.

Because you’re trying to create new habits, but your family just keeps dragging you back [laughs].

Right [laughs].
This would be a good time to segue into your own family life. We’ve been focusing on transforming moments in your life. I’m sure becoming a parent at the age of forty-three was one of those moments. That’s got to be a life-changing experience [laughs]. So what have you learned?

The biggest revelation is how children are physiologically designed to be exquisite beings who are fully alive and brilliant. Being a parent means having that constantly mirrored back to you. So there is a piece of being a parent that is incredibly selfish because it’s an opportunity to see how amazing we really are. The profound mirroring a child does for a parent can’t be replicated in any other way. It’s an opportunity to witness an unfolding miracle all day long, every day. And I’ve also never had an encounter that has taught me more about Zen, in every moment and in such a repetitive way. But no matter how practiced I may think I am, I can honestly say that after holding a loving space for Mayan for nearly four years, I’ve come to the realization that I know very little about Zen [laughs]. I’ve learned a lot about my impatience. It’s mirrored right back to me with Mayan. I’ve learned a lot about my control issues. Of course I’ve learned lessons about these things in my relationship with Bret. But twenty years of psychotherapy can’t compare with being a parent for a week—if you’re aware and awake.

A child demands that you’re in the moment of their world. So it’s been an incredible practice because as an adult I’m used to having my own agenda and I don’t have that anymore. When I’m in prayer or meditation or doing the dishes or cleaning his room, I try to stay true to knowing that God has created this little
being to be perfect. I try to be a responsible, caring, loving adult who steadfastly honors that commitment. But it's a huge task. I think we're doing a pretty good job. I believe that being a parent means holding a loving space where children can grow to be who they really are. And children are brilliant beings who want to experience the full array of blessings the earth has to offer. Mayan spends so much of his life outside. He's in his natural habitat and it's very apparent. He plays in the sand pile, or with Wispy, or in the garden—he loves getting lost in the garden—and he's a glowing, content, secure child, as long as he knows that Mom or Dad are within reach. But I've met three and four year olds who have already lost that wonder. It's gone because of how they're treated.

Bret and I have chosen a parenting path that our culture would judge as extreme because we are committed to always having Mayan with people who will be devoted to him. Daycare is not an option for us. Every child deserves to be worshipped for who they are, and we don't believe daycare can fully offer that. But there are many challenges that have come along with the way we have chosen to raise Mayan. Sometimes Bret and I are incredibly exhausted, and we desperately crave more time together. We miss the relationship we used to have. There are many aspects of our lives that have been put on hold. And from what we know instinctively and from listening to like-minded friends, we have a few more years of intense child-rearing. We're holding a loving space for Mayan so he can transition from the world of Mom and Dad to the larger world and to the earth where he feels so safe and secure. We have a few friends who adore him, so we get an occasional break, but most hours of every day either Brent or I are with
Mayan. It's a huge commitment, especially since we're presently without an active community in our daily lives or an extended family nearby.

I'm now in a space where I can wholeheartedly understand the breakdown of the American family. The nuclear family is dysfunctional and doesn't work. A couple's relationship becomes their children—the child sits in between. So of course Mom and Dad are going to grow apart because there's no time for each other. I'm very grateful for the bond and commitment Bret and I have because otherwise I don't think we would have made it through the early years. But it's getting easier. Mayan is willing to spend more and more time by himself. And we're not putting ourselves through guilt trips because we haven't been involved in community activism. Mayan is our activism right now and it's been the most beautiful gift. We feel good about where our time is going and blessed that we're raising Mayan the way we are. And more and more we're finding time to reconnect with our passion for community involvement and activism. It's very welcomed because that part of us has not gone away.

You told me earlier that you recently took a three-day and four-night break from parenting by participating in an ongoing tree-sit in the Bloomington area. That's an interesting way to take a break [laughs]. It's really very funny. Most people would not consider tree-sitting to be a break.

'Yes [laughs]. It's interesting that I married my ego-craving for a break from parenting with my yearning to express my activist heart in a constructive
manner. I definitely received divine instruction that it was something I must do. There was a strong voice, and even a frustrated voice, that said, “Hey, you have to create a break in your life,” and that led me to a platform in a tree. There have been five ongoing tree-sits to prevent logging in our community. I went up a tree in Yellowwood State Forest. I climbed up to the platform using ropes—not too high, about thirty-five or forty feet—in a tree that has been named Prometheus. But it was not an act of service being in that tree. It was a divine gift. I happened to be in Prometheus over the Fourth of July during a time of intense storms and high winds. It was a total check with myself on trust, because that tree was swaying. The downpour was more intense than anything I had ever experienced. But it was incredibly cleansing. I intentionally fasted and did engaged, deep breathing. It was like a vision-quest. I felt a lot of inspiration, creativity, connection, and purpose. I felt a sacred bond with that tree, and with everything that was part of my world while I was on the platform. I felt at one with the Big One [laughs].

Bret and I have wanted to put platforms in a few trees on our land for quite a while. Tree-sitting is a wonderful spiritual practice and we also want to teach people how to climb. There is something so incredibly rich about being able to pull your body up on a rope next to a tree that is supporting and loving you. So we’re in the process of deciding where we are going to put up at least one tree platform. And then we’re going to extend an invitation to everybody we know and everybody we don’t know to take the time to spend one or two days away from the earth and yet supported by the earth. There is something about being high in a
tree. It's difficult to describe. I felt grounded, but it was a groundedness that was also profoundly connected to Spirit because you're not directly grounded on the earth. It's exhilarating to be up there. Dreams and visions just happen. I think most people who haven't participated in a tree-sit think, "Wow, how did you do that? You're so amazing." But all of us who have been up in a tree here in Bloomington know that it's very life-affirming. It's a gift.

Was your experience in the tree in any way similar to your underwater experience, in the sense that the environments themselves acted as a trigger for new insights and awareness?

Yes, because our conditioning can cause the life force flowing through us to appear mundane. But when we lift ourselves out of a conditioned situation and plop ourselves into something new—it's life-altering, it's consciousness raising, it's profound. I certainly feel that way about my underwater experience. I couldn't even fantasize about that as a reality. And the same is true to a certain extent with being up in a tree.

I've climbed and napped in trees by entire life. But I've never sat up in a tree like Prometheus. I think there's a quotation that essentially states that we only truly discover ourselves in the face of adversity. But what that quotation really means is that we only truly find ourselves when faced with what is not familiar, when the mirror is something we are not habituated to. When you're in a tree you realize that you take having your feet on the ground for granted. The same was
true with my underwater experience, although in a different way. My legs were completely free in the water. All of a sudden I wasn't on the earth in the same way. I experienced another possibility in life. And whenever we experience new possibilities we become open to new truths about who we really are. That's what vision-quests are all about. If you put yourself in an alien, but enlivening situation, you may be graced with a mystical experience and a new direction for your life.
Chapter Eleven

Love in Action,

Andy part II

"The most telling and profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would undoubtedly be to trace the evolution of love."

-- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
Andy and I hadn’t seen each other since our last interview and so I was looking forward to spending time with him again. I was also looking forward to spending some time at his home, the “Lazy Black Bear.” The drive in takes you through back roads and parts of the Hoosier National Forest. The house eventually emerges, although it’s barely visible from the car. When I arrived on a late summer evening, I was greeted by the familiar peacocks and pack of dogs and cats. But I soon discovered some new additions to the land, including a flourishing vegetable garden on the main property near the house and a small organic farm on an adjacent site. Andy and Linda are allowing three young friends to work and live with the land. They are quite enthusiastic, with plans to become a positive presence in the community. I’ve visited Andy’s home about five times and it’s always a reminder that there are simpler, and just plain more interesting ways to live.

Andy gave me a tour of the organic farm that first evening and then I slept outside on a bed that hangs down from the porch. The next morning we headed out to the woods to one of his favorite spots to begin the interview. Heartwood had suffered some financial setbacks in the two years since he left forest work, but the core of committed activists was still in place. It seemed to me that Andy was quite content living the simple life he had always imagined for himself. I certainly wondered, however, if he had plans to eventually return to an activist life. I was especially interested in this topic because his current life reminded me of the times I have spent in solitude and contemplation. I know from my experiences in New Mexico and New Hampshire that it’s easy to forget the
world. It's a wonderful, healing thing to do, and puts you in touch with a spiritual awareness, but I would eventually realize that I needed to get more involved in the world. It's a question of balance. And it's why a spiritual practice is so important for the activist life. We eventually discussed this question, but I began our conversation with one of the themes of our first interview, love, or more precisely, the importance of loving yourself and self-acceptance. This need for self-love was also present in Brent and Syndee's interviews, but Andy's life has made him especially sensitive to this issue. Love seems like a sappy topic, but I've become concerned that love is too often overlooked when discussing the health of the planet.

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I know you have deep feelings about the importance of self-love, especially for those who are called to an activist life. Could you share some of your thinking on the need for this particular form of love?

How to love yourself is probably the biggest challenge a person faces. There are different kinds of behavior that can be characterized as self-love, and some of them don't fit what it means to learn how to truly love, like vanity and narcissism. True self-love connects us to deeper aspects of ourselves, other people, and the earth. There is something about sex, for instance, that people find overwhelming, powerful, and attractive, and I believe a big part of that is the dissolution of boundaries. In my experience, this dissolution of boundaries is a
reminder. The two parties involved in that brief instant feel that they are one being, or one set of sensations, and I believe that this is not just a perception but the reality. You experience the true nature of existence—it’s intensely joyful and not separate. It’s one reality and the nature of that one reality is absolute intense, ecstatic joy. Now, it doesn’t last [laughs]. It doesn’t last at all. But it does allow you to recognize that all the other boundaries out there—between people, places, experiences, the past and future—are often self-created. These are powerful creations that we live in on a daily basis, but learning to love allows us to transcend many of our self-created boundaries and discover that the universe is spiritually unified.

One of the great things about love is that once you’ve experienced it for a beautiful forest or a beloved friend, you recognize that love comes from within. So the challenge of self-love is to recognize that what you love on the outside—like spending an afternoon with a dear friend, near a beautiful river, eating great food and laughing and playing—is also an inner experience. And that experience, which comes from the inside, is available to you at all times. It’s possible for you to show the same degree of patience, tolerance, and loving friendship that you showed to your best friend to yourself. Most people I know are intensely critical of themselves due to their perceived inadequacies and failures, and especially their inability to live up to expectations. And yet, if in fact there is a God, then there is only God—that is the only way I can conceive of this notion of God. So, by extension, if there is only God, then everything that happens, including every thought you think, even the most horrific ones that you
would never want to share with anyone, are manifestations of God. The best we can do is to bring joy, goodness, love, compassion, and justice—which are all manifestations of this understanding of God in all things and experiences—to our unfolding human drama through our behavior and actions.

It's a matter of being patient with yourself for being impatient, tolerant with yourself for being intolerant, non-judgmental with yourself for being judgmental, and to accept that changes happen at a certain pace and it's not for you to determine what that pace must be. We need to accept that we are going to be imperfect and that we are going to know fear. I get frightened still. I frequently get a sense of my own inadequacy—my own inability to live up to expectations. But we have to be willing to explore our fear and know where it comes from, what it's all about, and that it will pass. We need to learn that while we have feelings, we are also more than our feelings, we have thoughts but we are more than our thoughts, we have bodies but we are more than our bodies, we have personalities but we are more than our personalities. We are loving, true, infinite Spirit.

One of the criticisms of mysticism is escapism and world denial, or living too much in the transcendent dimension. You're doing a lot of deep contemplation and self-work—experiencing who we really are in a transcendent sense—but how does this knowledge come back to the immanent? It never left the immanent, but how does it get back to activism? How does it get back to forest issues? I mean, the meditators often
think the world is doing just fine, while those on the front lines of activism think it’s going to hell.

That’s a very good question—one that I’ve been chewing on for quite awhile. My personal understanding—and what I’ve been articulating is my personal understanding, I’m not trying to convert anybody to any particular way of thinking—questions how attending to this being, this consciousness, compares with working to protect the living systems on the earth. It’s really a tough, challenging question. But I really believe that we have to be able to dream into existence the better world that we know is possible before we can create that world. I’ve done the political calculus and compared how much time I spend in cars political organizing, which sends exhaust into the atmosphere that is destroying forests even as we protect them. I’ve considered how much time I spend on the computer, which is a very poor human artifact compared with the richness, diversity, and splendor of creation. How much value is the political work if you miss the experience of your own life in a magical, wonderful, perfect universe? This is not to say that I won’t do the political work. But what I’m looking for now is the opportunity to do the political work that requires the least amount of technological infrastructure, which means I’m much more likely to be housecleaning at home rather than in the larger world.

Sometimes the best thing you can do as an activist is to simply clean your desk—actually get to that bare surface—in order to have a certain amount of peace of mind, a certain opening and clarity in order to pose a larger question and
actually hear an answer when it comes to you. The need for this peacefulness is
the reason we retreat to wild places—places where the background noise of
modern industrial society falls away and you can pose a question and have
enough stillness in your heart to hear an answer. I am reminded daily of this larger
reality when I casually look upward and there is a space in the canopy of trees
through which I can see a star shining brightly or the planet Mars. Or in the
daytime when I suddenly gaze across the horizon and catch the moon rising or the
sun highlighting a passing butterfly. We are here to experience this pleasure,
which includes loving yourself. There is no reason to think that we are born to
suffer.

Many activists do suffer. There’s that great statement by Aldo Leopold that an
ecological consciousness leads to living in a “world of wounds.” That’s a tough
emotional burden to bear, but this suffering also makes people aware and awake. So
aren’t emotions other than love important to the activist life? What role do emotions like
anger, rage, and love play in activist work?

I had an emotional reaction to seeing that first clearcut in the forests near
my home. I knew it was wrong. There was no amount of science they could
produce to tell me that the clearcutting of the forest was right on any level. So I
set out to stop the clearcutting. I was seeking an outcome. I wanted to achieve a
specific political end. But to the extent that I can claim that I now have a greater
understanding of activist work, I don’t believe it is primarily about outcomes. It is
about outcomes for many of the people I’ve worked with in the environmental community. Especially for those who have anger as their primary motivating force. I’ve heard people talking somewhat jokingly about eliminating people as a way to protect the forest. I’ve never felt comfortable with that even on a joking level. I have never felt that the ends justify the means. And as my spiritual awareness has grown, I have come to absolutely understand that this work is not about achieving a specific objective. It’s not about arriving, it’s about traveling. It’s about engaging and being transformed as an individual.

But in terms of emotion, there are some fundamental issues at play. One is the extent to which emotion is the impetus that propels people into a life of activism. Many of the people who I have had the good fortune to work with have come to activist work from a deep personal basis that can be described as emotional. Often it is an emotional attachment to a specific place. And you can look at two sides of that: one is the deep sense of connection and affection, and the other is a primal reaction to the threat posed towards the health of the beloved place. In this case, the emotions I have seen most often serve as the impetus to action are anger and fear. Anger at the destruction that is taking place and fear at the sense of impending destruction. These are powerful emotions. They can get people out of apathy or cynicism or despair. They can cause people to take that first tentative step towards a course of engagement. Oftentimes it seems like the odds are enormous and the opportunities for success—however they are measured—are quite limited, but despite the long odds those emotional reactions can really get people involved.
But while anger in particular can sustain a course of action for a fairly extensive piece of time, it cannot, in my opinion, be the basis for a sustained course of action because it’s a fuel that eventually consumes the host. No organization or individual can sustain itself indefinitely on anger or rage. It’s certainly an understandable reaction, for young people in particular since they may feel that their options have been limited for them by events that have been unfolding for some time and over which they have little control. You see a growing sense of frustration on the part of young people that comes out in some very strange ways. I can’t help but feel that the current fascination with multiple piercings and tattoos might be seen as self-mutilation or some sort of expression of anger. I don’t know that that is true, I just feel it on a deep level that what we are seeing is an expression of frustration. Once again, this is understandable. The forces of history and political circumstance in which we find ourselves could lead people to despair or cynicism, or a narrowly focused effort to try and take care of oneself. But while my spiritual awareness leads me to feel that in some sense everything is okay, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t an appropriate response to the destruction of the natural world, and that response is engagement. The real question, therefore, is how do we engage?

I used to think that love and power were at opposite ends of the spectrum. To the extent that you surrendered to love in your life you would not have power, and to the extent that you sought power you would not have love. But through a life of activism I’ve come to completely reevaluate that perceived duality. My life of activism demonstrates for me with great clarity that love manifested through a
course of action yields unimaginable power for the individual choosing that life of activism. It’s not power for its own sake, or power over anything, but the power to speak truth, the power to bring the deepest expression of what we value in life to the political arena. What I have experienced is that the power of love engaged, and the power of collectively harnessing the energy of individuals into a group effort, can be absolutely transformative. It can withstand the repression of state authorities and ultimately transform political realities. Now that has not totally happened, but I have seen it happen enough to know it can happen. I believe in the ability of individuals to change their circumstances through an act of will, and that act of will is based on love.

Love is one of those terms that is particularly difficult to discuss because it has such different meanings for different people. Its universality is both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. People love their jobs, their television shows, their wife or husband, their cigarettes, they love God, they love Doritos [laughs]. There is a presumption that different people mean the same thing when they use this word, but that is not always borne out in their actions. And yet, I do believe that there is a fundamental core to human experience that is about love. I think that the absence of love, or feeling and being loved, is the cause of so many of the problems we see in the world. When children are not brought up in a loving environment—when they are not cuddled and touched and appreciated—it gets manifested as these enormous insecurities and a sense of incompleteness that makes people want to accumulate great wealth and power. But neither the wealth
nor the power fills the void inside that comes from a lack of existing in a loving world, and being loved for who we are.

We need to transform this culture into one in which love is a fundamental value. People need to feel loved and valued, and they need to recognize and feel the connections we have with the human family, and with all the living creatures, with the elements that form us and form the whales, that form the trees and the rocks, and that form the cosmic dust, stars, and galaxies. We are of the same material. There is an underlying spiritual connectivity expressed as all these material forms, forms that then act as clues and hints. In those clues and hints, when we see something that resonates deeply within us, we remember our connection and our core emotion of love, and that emotion gets people engaged. I know that there is something inside of me that feels that there is some source, some timeless and eternal core that is completely connected to all that exists. And this core is the source of all love, the source of all satisfaction, the source of all well-being, the source of all happiness, and the source of all engagement.

In our initial interview you said that all you really wanted was to live simply and do no harm, but then your love for the forest called you to activist work, which then turned into fourteen years of your life. That’s an amazing commitment. But now it seems that you’ve gotten your wish for a quiet, simple life. Do you see simple living and the self-work you’re doing now as forms of activism?
I don’t consider the work I’ve done recently to be activism per se. I mostly consider it to be battery recharging, or being open to the fact that when something becomes too familiar to you, perhaps that’s a sign that its time to do something else. It’s very tempting to keep doing a craft you’ve finally mastered. But one of the lessons I’ve learned is that once the job is mastered, you should probably stop doing it. It’s easy to stay with something once you’ve learned how to do it—whether its installing a tile floor or electric wiring—and that’s how people end up with a career or a profession. But I’m not persuaded that it’s my responsibility to find a career or a profession. My responsibility is to find a path of service. It became clear to me during my time with Heartwood that a lot of what I was doing was based on something I had already done, rather than based on an immediate and compelling need, either internal or external. I had to re-examine whether I was continuing to provide service to the larger world or operating out of a fear of not being ready to figure out what else I need to be doing. It’s very easy to stay with what’s comfortable, especially if you’re like me and take a long time to take that first tentative step into a new arena. I don’t feel comfortable taking that next step until I’ve studied and studied, and tried my best to make sure I’m not making a mistake. Of course, the whole nature of life is making mistakes. If we didn’t want to make mistakes we would have stayed pure Godhead Spirit [laughs].

And that brings us back to self-love. A true sense of self-love is based on a full and thorough sense of who this being is—not just the parts you like, but seeing the whole being with all its pimpled, dark, shady, sad, and pathetic attributes [laughs]. You either take the whole thing or reject the whole thing. You
don’t get to pick and choose. We have to be prepared to accept our life as it is, which includes a lot of stuff that we probably wouldn’t include if we were designing ourselves. But guess what, from a certain perspective you did include it [laughs]. You chose this moment in time to manifest in this body and set of circumstances, which you can either work with or ignore, waiting until the next life to address whatever it is that called you into being.

It helps to be patient with yourself, which I learned from years of going through crises. But that first major crisis, when you’re looking at yourself and not seeing anything of value because you don’t know any better, like that little kernel of goodness you spoke about in our first interview, well, that’s really difficult. What you just said really resonated with me because of my crisis when I was twenty-five. I was so fortunate to meet Rafael at that time. He saw something in me I didn’t see, which I believe is the prime role of a mentor or teacher—they see potential in you that you are unable to see.

That’s exactly right, but I didn’t have that teacher. Everybody is a teacher to the extent that they hold up a mirror to you, but I didn’t have anyone quite like Rafael to help me to galvanize a reappraisal of myself.

You may not have had a specific teacher, but wouldn’t you say that your path led you to a sense of place and a relationship, which then acted as steppingstones to a deeper understanding of yourself and your abilities?
Yes, but place is not just a physical landscape. It includes people and animals—the birds, squirrels, the occasional deer or fox. It once again comes back to love. We start out by loving our sweetheart in high school, or our parents, but learning that you can translate that love to a greater sphere is one of life’s greatest lessons. The same is true with place. You might start out with a little patch of sacred ground, but from there it can grow, including the bats that occasionally come into the house, the insects at night and the rooster in the morning, the mailman at one thirty, the trip to town and the check-out at the grocery store. Or in my case, an old alcoholic welder friend by the name of Novy Wells.

Novy was a kind of teacher for me. He lived on the other side of the woods and I used to go talk to him all the time. He was an amazing guy. To most people he was just an old drunk, but to me he was an amazing teacher. He was willing to accept my humanity and not judge me because I was different. He didn’t hold me up or hold me down, he was just a friend because I was another human being. He had his burden to carry and I had mine, but during the time we spent together there was a deep friendship. He was from a poor hillbilly family and worked hard for everything he had, and I was from a sort of privileged, educated background. I felt completely out of my element when I first moved down here from a college town. But Novy accepted me without judgment. I could see clearly the goodness in him, and I felt he saw it in me. Novy had some pretty horrific experiences during the Second World War that had a profound impact on him and probably contributed significantly to his decision to drink to excess from
time to time. But we were just two beings connecting, regardless of the
circumstance of our separate lives.

It’s amazing how much we can learn from simple things like place, friendship,
and not being judged. One of the things that strikes me about our discussion is your
process of continual learning. Self-love is a major theme of our talk, but so is your
process of self-questioning and learning.

In many ways I’m back to being a student again, which is not the most
comfortable position to be in at my advanced age. I’ve spent a lot of time
becoming aware of my limitations as a human being and then figuring out what
that means for what I should do next. There’s lots of work I could be doing in
forest protection but right now I feel I need to engage my heart and mind as much
as possible to develop alternate models for human interaction. There are three
arenas of meaningful engagement. First, the political process of trying to
recognize injustice and remedy it—alleviating suffering, healing the hurt,
uplifting the downtrodden—those are the fundamental inspirations for progressive
social movements for reform and change. Second, building communities that are
cooperative, compassionate, loving, just, and gentle on the earth. And the third
way is more a path of contemplation. It’s more personal, focusing on our own life
experience and how we do what we do.

To be fully engaged in your own life experience means that whatever you
are doing—whether its political work or permacultural work or doing the dishes

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or accepting the Nobel Prize or designing a utopian community or cleaning the toilet—you are responsible for the emotional involvement you bring to that experience. And there is no reason why doing the most mundane housekeeping task can’t be as richly fulfilling an experience as getting the highest recognition society has to offer—if you bring the same degree of loving, attentive care to the work. And that’s a little bit of the lesson I’ve been trying to learn over the past year and a half. That doesn’t mean I won’t be engaged in the political process again. In fact, I think a lot of what I am learning now is how to marshal available energies, skills, and talents in the most efficient way possible.

What I hear you saying is that rather than being an activist just because you feel you’re supposed to be an activist, the real key to life is being where you feel you need to be. And if you really find it, then whether you’re cleaning the toilet or trying to save the forests, you’re doing what you should be doing and eventually this will lead you to make a contribution.

Well, it’s tricky. The idea is that the universe is integrated. It’s entirely internally self-consistent. And that means that the most profound change you can bring to the universe, as you experience it, is the one that comes from within. Now that’s really tricky.
Chapter Twelve

The Habit Body

"The world's definitions are one thing and the life one actually lives is quite another. One cannot allow oneself . . . to live according to the world's definitions: one must find a way, perpetually, to be stronger and better than that."

-- James Baldwin

"You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves . . ."

-- Mary Oliver
Brent, Syndee, and Andy obviously practice thinking beyond mere calculation. They are critical thinkers with an impressive base of knowledge in their particular areas of interest, but they are also meditative thinkers, open to mystery, connections, and new possibilities. Their life-paths challenge the conditioning of our consumerist culture, whether through learning the importance of letting go, listening to our inner wisdom, or expressing the deeper meaning of love. But what I find most interesting is how their thinking and life-paths are informed by the interplay between circumstance and spiritual experience. Brent continues to play out his upbringing on a small farm and insights from his hunter-gatherer experiment. Syndee continues to play out her childhood empathy with animals and underwater peak experience. And Andy continues to play out his early imprinting on the hardwood forests and teenage discovery of the absolute necessity of self-acceptance. Spiritual experience often gets us out of our cultural boxes, but that doesn’t leave us hovering over the planet. We live our spiritual awareness through material circumstance and the body.

However, there is a danger that our circumstance will take over our life. Brent, Syndee, and Andy are grounded in the interplay between their spiritual and critical awareness and cultural circumstance, which has allowed them to create their own definitions of success. Many are grounded in a much more limited awareness, which often leads to an unthinking embrace of the dominant culture’s definition of success. This troubling truth is exacerbated by the fact that we are habitual beings. Habits are intrinsic
to human action, and thus without them we would not be able to function in the world. They are especially handy when driving a car or doing some other mechanical task. However, according to Wilhelm Reich our habits may lead us to participate in our own oppression, or more precisely, in the limiting of our potential.

Reich argues that the tendency for people to unthinkingly limit their potential is closely related to the ways in which our identities are formed by social structures. Economic institutions, family, work, church, and school all operate to structure our identities, and as a result our character traits are often "functionally identical with certain factors of our social structure and ideology." Reich's view is similar to Althusser's argument that we are interpellated by language and meaning systems that by their very nature attempt to speak for us. In other words, when we are interpellated by societal institutions, we are predisposed toward constrained behaviors that serve these institutions. Our freedom, therefore, is often far more limited than we had imagined.

But Reich takes the reality of interpellation one step further by arguing that we incorporate our lack of freedom into our body's habitual tendencies. Our bodies have learned the lessons of the dominant culture all too well, which leads us to "armor" ourselves through bodily rigidity, inhibition, and a failure to open ourselves to new possibilities and passions. Armoring closes down our body's natural empathy with our surroundings, as well as emotions, deep listening, and meditative thinking. It's truly amazing how often humans are unreceptive to bodily empathy. We are the only creatures capable of disregarding what lies before our senses. This lack of receptivity is often a defense mechanism before the harshness of our human created environments. Whenever I go to New York City, for example, I usually feel assaulted by the jarring sounds of
traffic, endless gray concrete, and sharp-angled buildings. It's always exhilarating at first, but I eventually feel overwhelmed and start to shut down the receptivity of my senses.

On the other hand, I have a quite different reaction when I visit my parents at the lake house in upstate New York. When I first arrive I'm also overwhelmed, but this time by the soothing sight of rippling water and the scent of pine. My senses overlap and awaken as I begin to feel more and more connected to my surroundings. Of course, many people love urban environments. I, too, am drawn to the excitement and beauty of cultural life in cities. I truly love New York City. A great concert, play, or piece of art also enlivens our senses, as does the collective energy of unique and interesting people. Still, most urban locales fail to fully liberate our bodily empathy and sensuous imaginations. And I fear that we begin a downward spiral when we don't make sensuous connections on a daily basis. We tend to get lost in our abstractions and ignore the most fundamental of ecological principles: when we pollute the lifeblood of the earthbody—the air, water, and soil—we are poisoning the wellspring that makes possible and sustains our lives.

For Reich, the concept of armoring reflects the existential reality that our unconscious is lived through our bodies, which is why it is so important to consciously listen to and integrate daimonic forces. Otherwise, we often fall prey to our shadow-side expressed as ingrained habits and addictions. In *Wild Hunger: The Primal Roots of Modern Addiction*, Bruce Wilshire states that addictive behavior is a misguided attempt to recover feelings of erotic energy, or ecstasy, which were common for nature-based tribal groups. This assertion leads to a troubling question: If we destroy nature, and therefore our source of ecstasy, who are we then? I would argue that we become
desperate for some kind of connection. In the modern world this desperation is expressed as addiction to sex, drugs, gambling, alcohol, money, consumerism—anything to experience, at least for a moment, a substitute for the ecstatic wholeness that defines life within nature. But our need for connection and erotic energy is not only sated within wilderness. Culture is also a product of daimonic forces, or our innate desire to evolve, create, and grow in the direction of increased wholeness. Culture, therefore, is certainly not the problem. Rather, it is an armored culture, alienated from the creative energy of the daimonic, which leads to unhealthy addictions and environmental destruction.

In her essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” Iris Marion Young provides another example of armoring, specifically as it effects the habit-bodies of women. Young argues that women often lack opportunities to use their full bodily capacities and fully engage with the world. As a result, women often do not have the same confidence as men when it comes to doing physical tasks. This results in doubt, self-consciousness, frustration, and a restriction of movement that manifests itself as a failure to make full use of the body’s potential. This restriction in bodily flexibility and movement is not due to some type of female “essence;” rather, it is a result of interpellation within patriarchal structures. Young writes: “Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified.” Of course, not all women are physically inhibited, but Young argues that this is only the case because societal interpellations have been overcome, whether through accident, good fortune, or conscious work.
Perhaps the most extreme example of the habit body and armoring is our unthinking complicity with the greed of agribusiness. Brent’s hunter-gatherer experiment and Syndee’s veganism have already questioned the destructive practices of agribusiness. In *Eating with Conscience: The Bioethics of Food*, Dr. Michael W. Fox makes an explicit argument. According to Fox, there are four main areas of concern: suffering to animals, long-term environmental disasters, unhealthy food production, and the loss of economic independence for the developing countries that support America’s meat-eating habits. I do not have the space to discuss each one of these concerns in depth, but my interviews with Brent and Syndee have led me to outline some of the disturbing details.

The immense suffering experienced by animals includes extreme confinement, warehouse-style, such that their natural proclivities are completely frustrated. As a result, many animals become crazed and tear at their own flesh or the flesh of other animals. To solve this “problem,” the “brain-trust” of agribusiness chops off the beaks of chickens and the tails of pigs (frustrated pigs bite at the tails of those in front of them). The condemned animals are then often fed unnaturally—including discarded parts of slaughtered animals and excrement—in order to cheaply fatten them up for maximum profit. They are also kept disorientated via a lack of light in an attempt to fool their natural cycles in order to increase production and forced to sit in their own excrement, causing painful lesions and infections. And finally, after they have barely survived this torture, they are tied up by their hind legs—many suffering broken limbs in the process—and then driven along a conveyor system until their throats are cut, often while they are still alive.
The long-term environmental disasters include deforestation and soil loss due to clearing land for cattle (before they are put into confinement at the slaughterhouse/factory farm) and ground water pollution—which gets into our streams and lakes—due to the impossibility of dealing with one-hundred and fifty-eight million tons of animal manure each year (in the United States alone). Also, there is an increase in greenhouse gas due to the release of methane from all this manure.

Healthy food production is endangered by the immense amount of antibiotics that are used to keep animals alive long enough to get them to slaughter. The antibiotics are only needed, of course, because of the horrible conditions in which the animals are kept. These antibiotics are transferred to the meat-eater’s diet, causing potential disease, as well as a resistance to antibiotics as cures. There is also a class bias to unhealthy production: poorly paid factory farm laborers have the highest accident and sickness rates of all other industries.

And finally, so-called Third World countries lose their economic independence, and their precious resources, as they cut down rainforests as well as use already available agricultural land in order to graze cattle to supply meat for the so-called developed world. In contrast, a plant-based diet requires less land, while providing more calories. Unfortunately, since Third World countries are so poor, and the potential of the land is wasted—or exported to wealthy countries—they often cannot afford to adequately feed their own people. Fox writes: “... in Guatemala, over half the children under five are starving, yet their country exports tens of millions of pounds of meat each year to the United States.”
To make matters worse, the animals, the environment, food production, and developing countries suffer all these indignities to sustain eating habits that are often not healthy. Many studies have claimed that industrialized meat, egg, and dairy products contribute to cancer, osteoperosis, strokes, and heart attacks. We cannot deny the cycles of life and death, but agribusiness is clearly expressing the shadow side of food production. This has created a vicious cycle in which the abuse of animals for food has led to eating habits that compromise our own health.

Agribusiness is such an extreme example of armoring and the habit body because it’s completely based in calculative thinking. When we close down our senses, bodily empathy, emotions, and meditative thinking, and then treat food production as a mere numbers game of profit and loss, it should be no surprise that the results are not healthy for ourselves or the planet. It truly frightens me when I consider how indoctrinated we are within our meat-based culture. Many, including myself at an earlier time in my life, prefer to live in denial about the realities of factory farms and our meat-based diet, or have simply never thought about it. Food production and consumption is not an all or nothing issue, but less destruction and harm is more responsive to suffering and thus more responsible. Animals exhibit more consciousness than plants, which is clear from the fact that they can be knocked unconscious. Thus, they experience more sensation and pain. But, as my interviews with Brent and Syndee have revealed, some of us do require meat or just plain enjoy it. Eating locally and organically or hunting with respect are then ethical options. We need to listen to our own bodies. However, the misguided habits of our dominant meat-eating culture infiltrate our thinking and ability to listen to our body knowledge. Albert Camus wrote that we get in the habit of living before we get in the
habit of thinking. Agribusiness is massacring the souls of animals and polluting the earth while making millions from this sad truth.

Our disconnection from the earth and our senses, addictive behaviors, the patriarchal positioning of women, and agribusiness all provide disturbing examples of interpellation, armoring, and the habit body. Freedom is obviously not a given, it's a process that must be continually reaffirmed and practiced. It takes work to recognize societal determinations and individual habits and the possibilities of transcending them.

In my own life, the dominant culture’s definition of success has always been the most troubling. I just don’t measure up. In my younger years this was a continual source of tension. I still live with this tension, mostly by struggling to pay the rent, but over the years I’ve found a deep sense of satisfaction from following my own path.

When I began teaching at Purdue, however, I was once again confronted with this tension in a big way. It was immediately apparent that the greatest barrier to learning is that students are addicted to a very limited conception of what really matters. I even had one student tell me that she was taught that success meant attaining the five “c’s:” career, cash, credit card, condominium, and country club membership. I know that the majority of students come to college in pursuit of a high-paying job, but I had never heard these materialistic goals articulated so specifically. I told her that the material aspects of life certainly have importance, but that her model left out a few other “c’s” like callings, commitment, creativity, compassion, and community.

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In 1959, the British academic C. P. Snow gave a lecture on a growing problem in university education: the ever-widening gulf between the “two cultures” of the sciences and the humanities. To Snow, the sciences and the humanities had become so overspecialized that there was little, if any, dialogue between differing fields of knowledge. This failure to dialogue tends to lead to poorly articulated solutions to ethical dilemmas, which, in 1959, included the danger of nuclear destruction. Not much has changed. Specialization in education is certainly necessary, but institutions of higher learning still lack an integrated vision. University classes rarely celebrate a poetic basis of mind that celebrates the interplay between unity and diversity. And if students have had any spiritual experiences, they are not explored and legitimated. Instead, the myth of success within the limited sphere of our economic system pressures students to relegate transpersonal insights to a utopian fantasy that has nothing to do with the “real world.”

As a result, we often fail to seriously address the most important questions of our time, which are ecological and urgent.

The current university structure was formed during the modern period’s success with specialization in industry. This structure has provided an explosion of knowledge in individual fields. The modern period has also given us other successes, including the values of human equality, freedom, justice, and rights. Wilber argues convincingly in his many books that modernity’s separation of science, art, and morals gave these fields the freedom to flourish. In other words, scientists no longer had to risk being burned at the stake in order to present their discoveries. This clearly represents a huge step forward. However, modernity has a dangerous dual edge—while it has liberated us from much religious superstition and inhumanity, a compartmentalized, assembly line approach to
education threatens to destroy our freedom to evolve into whole human beings. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder writes that it is people “excellently educated at the best universities” who are “orchestrating the investment and legislation that ruin the world.”

Purdue is a large, “Big Ten” university of approximately forty thousand students. It has numerous majors to choose from, but the departments with the most students are engineering, business administration, agriculture and agribusiness, and forestry. The students from the largest major, engineering, are only required to take three basic courses in the Liberal Arts, two in English and an introductory Communication course, which is the class I taught. Given my surroundings, my course often felt like an afterthought. Once an engineering student passed these requirements, he or she were free to specialize in their particular branch of engineering, graduate, and be considered educated. On the other hand, those who majored in the Liberal Arts were supplied with little to no impetus for taking courses in the sciences. They were free to graduate and be considered educated without any foundational knowledge in how the ecosystem works. There are courses in Earth Science at Purdue, but only biology students had it as a requirement. The rest of the student body would have to decide to take this course on their own.

The main content of my course was structured by the Communication Department and included a small group project and three speeches, but to me it was always a course in ethics. I usually taught between three and six sections per semester and I began every class with a simple question: why are you in college? After a few typical responses from the more vocal students—money, career, learning a specialty so they could have money and a career—I would share my tale of seven years, three colleges, and four majors. I told my students that I began college as a computer science major because I had done well on
the math SAT's. The field also had a promising future with numerous job opportunities and a substantial salary. I then continued by stating that these were understandable reasons for choosing the field of computer science. There is certainly logic present. But then I asked: what is the logic? Where did it come from? And who is responsible for legitimating this logic? My point, of course, was that my choice was based on an outer, cultural logic, and not an inner logic. I told the students that I really had no idea what I wanted to do with my life when I first started school. And that given the continual pressure in our society to be “successful,” the fact that I was so clueless was an extremely logical result.

While I spoke—and I spoke with the passion of having lived it—many of the students shook their heads up and down in acknowledgement, especially when I used the word “pressure.” They knew exactly what I was talking about. I began my classes in this manner for many reasons, but the main one was because I imagined myself as a seventeen-year-old freshman, sitting in the back row, and needing to hear someone speak as if they knew what was in my heart. After my passionate talk, a class discussion would ensue with students sharing their concerns, fears, and stories. Some claimed they knew exactly what they wanted and defended their desire for money and material comfort. I replied that I was happy for them, and even a bit jealous of their certainty. But I also added that the university is a wonderful place to explore diverse fields of knowledge and that if they were open, new interests might emerge from within. My goal was to make the clueless students feel at home.

I had never considered being a teacher. I was too shy when I was younger and couldn’t imagine standing in front of a classroom. But that was no longer a problem,
thanks to getting older and the years I had spent meditating. The students were all unique expressions of Spirit to me. And it didn’t take long to realize that it was my existential struggles and adventures that made me of use to the students. Book knowledge was only so relevant. It was my life experience that mattered the most. My time living and learning with Rafael, hiking the Appalachian Trail, living in solitude in New Hampshire, and even working in New Jersey at the print shop, gave me perspective, understanding, and compassion. A handful of students would always run up to me after that first class with their eyes shining, seeking advice and to talk in more depth. Some were more ready than others to receive what I had to offer. There always seemed to be three or four students who were enrolled in each of my classes for reasons far deeper than the standard course material of Comm 114.

One of my first experiences as a teacher included a student, Jeff, who challenged most everything I said. Whenever I discussed a topic that smacked of care, responsibility, or cooperation, he responded with a competitive, survival of the fittest, winners and losers mentality. His face would turn red and he always spoke in a loud, “those are fightin’ words” voice. His classmates often challenged his views in class and avoided him before and after class. I just asked him if the world he described was really the world within which he wanted to live. To me, he was a seething stew of discordant energy sitting at a desk. I didn’t know what his issues were, but he sure had some big ones. Vocal students and disagreements make class interesting. The last thing you want in a classroom is for everyone to agree. But he was disrupting the flow of the class. A one-on-one conversation was overdue, but I refused to single him out by forcing him to speak with me after class. I knew a confrontation would seem like a lecture and he’d just
become more defensive and entrenched. However, at the midpoint of the semester, I required all my students to visit with me in order to discuss their persuasive speeches. Jeff and I were forced to meet.

My students did speeches on complex social issues—alternative energy, abortion, school violence—and I wanted to make sure they had considered all possible views. Otherwise, they would likely get hammered with tough questions from the sharper students in class. I held our meetings at a woodsy café on campus. The walls were covered with black and white photos of Purdue athletes from their glory years, which created a fun, collegial environment. I used the cafe because I was an adjunct faculty member and I didn’t even have an office. But I would have chosen the café’s more relaxed atmosphere anyway. I knew from my undergraduate experience that a stuffy office didn’t lend itself to deeper conversations. I wanted to really talk with students, especially if an idea was bouncing around inside of them, quietly rearranging the way they understood themselves and the world.

I expected a battle when Jeff arrived at the café for our late afternoon meeting, but to my surprise he was nervous and receptive. He was planning to do a speech on alcoholism. I encouraged students to find a topic they felt passionate about, and I soon discovered that his passion was due to his father’s drinking problem. This revelation was the opening we needed. He began talking about his home life, which included physical and emotional abuse. He also told me that he hated his major of engineering and that his father had pushed him into the field because of its money making potential. Things were becoming clear to me real fast. His comments in class were a throw-up of his pain. He was like a tape recorder, replaying the lessons he had learned so well at home. Jeff’s
admissions felt like a mix of confession and apology, as well as an explanation for the previous two months. He knew he had isolated himself and had the courage to begin making amends. But I also sensed that he had reached a breaking point. I asked him what his true interests were and he said psychology. He was becoming more fascinating by the minute. We had lots to talk about but other students had arrived for their appointments. I told him that we had to stop but we would talk the next day in class and set up another time to chat.

When I went home that evening, I couldn't stop thinking about our meeting. He was clearly in despair and our conversation had ended too abruptly. I decided to call him at his dorm to see if he wanted to go for a walk. He was surprised by the offer but he immediately accepted. It was a gorgeous, clear night and we began to stroll across the manicured lawns of the Purdue campus. I asked him what he had been doing when I called and he said sitting in the dark playing with a knife. I just nodded my head. It didn't bother me that he might be suicidal. I felt it was an understandable reaction considering the circumstances, even a sign of health. We continued the conversation that we had started earlier in the day and I learned more about his overbearing father. I listened attentively, but I was also cognizant of the night sky. It was expansive and beautiful, while Jeff was completely oblivious and constricted. The comparison allowed me to see, with great clarity, a truth I already knew. He had all kinds of problems, which he was going to have to work on for years, but he would never make much progress unless he opened his awareness.

The topic turned to his interest in psychology. I told him that despite his father's demands, he had a responsibility to his inner process to explore this interest and
potentially change majors. I also told him that the struggles he was going through were a
tremendous opportunity to learn about his own psychology, which would help him to
skillfully counsel others later. The idea of transforming his crisis into an opportunity got
his attention. But what really woke him up was when I asked him if he was thinking
about suicide. He nodded yes. I paused before responding, making sure I didn’t add more
weight to the burden he already carried. I wanted to share a sense of peace, not panic. I
smiled, looked him in the eyes, and then pointed to the night sky and told him that if he
committed suicide he would rejoin the energy of the universe. However, he was already
the energy of the universe, and thus he had a responsibility to find a creative way to
express it. He stared at me with a dazed look, unable to utter a verbal reply. It was pretty
clear that no one had ever spoken to him like that before. But slowly, a hint of
recognition emerged in his face, as if he felt an intuitive resonance with my words that
also went beyond them.

The rest of the walk was mostly silent. When we reached his dorm, I asked him if
he was all right. He assured me that he had no intention of hurting himself, and then he
thanked me and said he would see me tomorrow. On my way home, I recalled the time I
walked around the Rutgers campus after my first meeting with Rafael. My mind was on
fire with new ideas. By the time I got back to my apartment the sun was coming up and I
had to prepare for another day at the factory. I figured Jeff was going to have an
interesting night.

The next day in class he was a changed personality. He was quiet, attentive, and
humble. He also treated me with deference, which I certainly didn’t need but it was
sweet. He soon gave a personal and passionate speech on alcoholism, which endeared
him to his fellow students. At the end of the semester, he filled out his class evaluation by writing three words, all in capitals, with an exclamation point: BEST TEACHER EVER! I later learned that he changed his major to psychology.

And so it went. My job, in big ways and small, was to help students to transition from the house of the parents to the home of the world, and then to pay attention to their inner life. I often worked closely with engineering majors, since they filled nearly half of my classes. Purdue is a top engineering school and draws high SAT scoring students from all over the country. They’re a smart bunch, but they tend to have a bias towards calculative thinking. They especially excel at taking multiple choice exams. And many of them, like Jeff, chose the major for its future monetary rewards. I had nothing against engineering students, or their desire for money, as long as they also had a real interest in the field and in being whole, ethical human beings.

One student, Ken, was especially bright. He was in the engineering program, but his deeper interests were literature and philosophy. After I gave my first-day spiel, we struck up a semester long conversation. He was troubled because the specialized focus of his major didn’t provide room in his schedule for exploring other fields. His senior year would supply some freedom, but that was still a few years away. Before entering college, he had considered a career as an English teacher, but he decided that teachers were too poorly paid. I couldn’t argue with him there, but I suggested that it wouldn’t be a terrible thing to take an extra year to finish school so that he could explore more of his interests. He didn’t find that idea very appealing. His family would view a delay as a failure. Of course, if his family was right, he couldn’t have found a bigger failure than me.
Ken was really struggling. It pained him to not have a diverse education and he began to consider a move to the English department. But then I cured him. I also worked part-time at a local bookstore. One night, he came up to the register with a book and was shocked to see his teacher working as a minimum wage clerk. I tried to start a conversation about his purchase, but his response was awkward and stilted, as if he couldn’t handle the sudden switch in roles. The next day in class, he told me that he had decided to commit himself to engineering. Our bookstore meeting had taught Ken that following your inner process doesn’t necessarily lead to financial security. I was happy to help him to learn that lesson. We should make our life choices with a clear view of the potential consequences. To me, however, working part-time was of no consequence. It was a super independent bookstore, which was a great place to meet people and make some extra cash for beers and books. I thought I was doing pretty well for myself. I was Ken’s source for discussing philosophy and literature that semester, and he gave me a heartfelt thank you when it ended.

Not all my dealings with students had happy endings, although they always provided lessons. My teaching style was sarcastic and playful. Sarcasm allowed me to have fun while being critical, and playfulness removed the invisible wall that so often arises between teachers and students. I played with my authority, which made the students respect and like me. This, in turn, gave me authority, although now it was a willful act on the student’s part and not an act of coercion on my part. However, there were still times when I felt I had to demand respect. My class had a mandatory attendance policy that was created by the department. One of my favorite students, Sarah, missed a lot of class and was getting dangerously close to the automatic fail-the-class
number of absences. I went out of my way to excuse many of Sarah’s absences, even though her reasons were often no better than having to pick someone up from the airport. But as the semester progressed and her absences increased, I felt that she was taking advantage of my kindness.

Sarah was thoughtful and buoyant, as well as very sensitive. She did her first speech on the author Sark, who writes creative books on surviving sexual abuse. Sarah courageously told the class that she was a survivor of abuse and that Sark had been a great help in her healing process. I worked hard to create a comfortable space in the classroom where students could take risks, and Sarah had taken a big one, teaching others and empowering herself in the process. I had helped her with her speech, which is why I was especially bothered when she didn’t respect my well-devised teaching style. I was supposed to teach, but also play with my authority, be a good listener and friend, and in return she was supposed to want to come to class. I hated having an attendance policy. I told students that they should come to class of their own volition because they never knew when someone might say something that they needed to hear. When I first began teaching, I also made a conscious decision to trust students. If they lied to me about absences or late papers, that was for them to deal with. I didn’t want to question their character. I felt that if I treated them with respect, the majority would do the same in return. But I decided I had to confront Sarah.

She finally came to class, and I asked her to stay afterwards for a talk. I was teaching six classes that semester and I was feeling overwhelmed by too many student requests on that particular day. Instead of asking her where she had been, I started accusing her of treating the class and me poorly. For all I knew she had a good excuse,
but I didn’t find out because she completely closed down as soon as I raised my voice and used an accusatory tone. I looked at her face and knew I had made a big mistake. I tried to change my tone and start a dialogue, but it was too late. I had neglected to take into account her years of abuse from male authority figures. She never came back to class. I tried calling her at home, but she didn’t return my calls. Sarah had her issues and was wrong to continually miss class, especially since I had already given her many breaks, but I hardly felt like the “best teacher ever.”

The inner lives of students are ignored. The sciences focus on calculative thinking and the humanities focus on critical thinking. Both are necessary but neither is final because the daimonic is absent. University education would change dramatically if it acknowledged, respected, and worked with each student’s inner creative intelligence. Grades and testing are all too often outer measures that create inner turmoil that further separates students from this intelligence. Those who do poorly are filled with self-doubt. They feel judged, and they have been by a cultural standard that mostly measures calculative thinking. Meditative thinking eludes such limited measures, as does our character. The students in my classes were often excellent calculative thinkers and decent critical thinkers, but they had barely begun the process of understanding their inner intelligence within the context of a healthy culture and earth.

An interdisciplinary ideal is expressed in various classes at Purdue. I have many friends who are wonderful teachers. And meditative thinking is often central to classes in the Liberal Arts, especially philosophy, theology, and literature. And yet, even when students are exposed to interdisciplinary ideals and meditative thinking, the structure of the university does not challenge them to synthesize and embody their knowledge.
Students live a narrative every moment of their lives. When the habit body of the university emphasizes specialized majors and physically separates the sciences and the humanities in buildings on opposite ends of the campus, the narrative that student’s live will be constrained. They will continue to live their family story, or a cultural story of monetary success and status, rather than the integrative, and therefore more ethical earth and universe stories. They will continue to be concerned with making a living before they even know who they are.

The biases of the modern period are still dominant because they have become institutionalized within the business of education. Universities are one of the few utopian spaces in our culture, where deep thinking is nourished and practiced, but they are also driven by the “bottom line.” Our educational institutions are expected to supply the next round of trained workers for our techno-industrial societies. When this training— not educating— is limited to calculative and critical thinking, while ignoring integrative modes of thought, the daimonic, and a larger vision, the potential of the university is greatly reduced. After all, the ultimate question for education is not why are you in college, but why are you here on earth.

I was often frustrated when I tried to fit this question into the structure of my class. I especially struggled with having to give grades. I wanted to honor each student’s inner process and not force a process on the student. But my students wanted the grades. They clamored and crowed for grades. They begged and pleaded for grades. They fought, cajoled, and whimpered for grades. They never stopped talking about grades. What matters? Grades, that’s what matters. Sometimes I would tease them. They were such easy marks. I once came into class and declared that I’d give an “A” to anyone who stood
on their chair. The majority immediately did so. I laughed and said, "just kidding." They
groaned and then complained that I had manipulated them. I replied that they had been
manipulated long before my false offer. I knew that their habit-bodies would lead them to
enter class with their responses already prepared.

I ended up teaching at Purdue from 1992 to 1999, with a year break in 1996. It
was great to settle in one place for awhile and participate in a community. Along with
teaching, I gave numerous talks around campus on environmental and spiritual topics,
worked with the Environmental Action student group, traveled on weekends with a folk-
rock band that played benefits for non-profit organizations, and met all kinds of
interesting people, including Brent, Syndee, and Andy. I also had a few relationships,
which were gloriously imperfect. But teaching was the biggest revelation. I felt like I had
discovered the deeper meaning behind my struggles and wanderings. I found a niche at
Purdue that only someone with my experiences could fill. And while the money sucked,
teaching, as they say, was its own reward.

After a few years, I often ran into old students who would thank me for the
influence I had on their lives. Most times I couldn’t even remember them. We would
have a pleasant little conversation—they loved telling me how they had changed—and
then I’d rack my brain trying to figure who they were. I would eventually flash on their
name and the particular class. It was a gift to play a role in their growth. But I didn’t feel
like I was doing anything special. I was just passing on what Rafael had done for me
years earlier. However, I gradually started to burn out during my last two years at Purdue.
I wasn’t growing as a teacher and my excitement faded. I had taught the same course
over and over, fifty times total, with no opportunity for advancement due to my lack of an
advanced degree. I distinctly recall the day I knew I had to quit. I was walking to campus after an extended weekend break, across the neatly manicured lawns, and I felt my energy drain out of me with each step. My habit body had led me to traverse the same path too many times.
Chapter Thirteen

Silence Speaks:

An Interview with Rafael Catala

"In envisioning the way things are, there is no better place to begin than with modern science. Equally, there is no worse place to end."

-- Huston Smith

"Poetry does not fly above and the surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling."

-- Martin Heidegger
Rafael Catala was born in Las Tunas, Cuba in 1942. He had a fine childhood and his hometown provided him with many learning experiences for which he is grateful to this day. However, he also grew up during the tumultuous times of the Cuban revolution, which led him to move to New York City in 1961. He ended up going to school at New York University and receiving a Ph.D. in Latin American Studies. Since this time he has published five books of poetry, numerous critical essays, and three books on the mystical life. In 1987, he was instrumental in starting the Ometeca Institute, which is designed to provide academic forums for exploring an integrated vision of education. The Institute has organized several international conferences that have allowed scholars from divergent fields and countries to productively dialogue. To date, there have been six conferences, most recently in Cumana, Venezuela, in the summer of 2000.

Rafael has also included the integrative outlook of Ometeca in his literary career as an influential poet. His sciencepoems weave scientific principles into the poetic process, providing a creative vision that does not separate science from the humanities, theory from creation, reason from experience, or Spirit from matter. Rafael describes sciencepoetry as a continual “praxis of integration” in which the sciences and the humanities become “a spontaneous and everyday occurrence in our lives.” For Rafael,
this integrative process is more than an academic endeavor; it represents an ethic expressed as a conscious constant of our daily lives.

In 1993, Rafael was invited to teach in Costa Rica. The result was the establishment of the Ometeca Foundation in the town of San Ramon. The foundation provides free after-school activities and educational projects to the community. They teach all the usual subjects—math, biology, literature—but they always connect two or more fields. As a result, they teach basic subjects, but also unifying principles. In this interview, I wanted to discuss the educational principles of the Ometeca Institute and Foundation, but my main goal was to simply get Rafael talking with me. Rafael travels all over the world giving talks and spiritual workshops on the creative process. I knew this creative process would take over in our conversation. Sure enough, my initial questions spiraled into a discussion on education, the environment, and the mystical life.

Sitting down to talk with Rafael brought back many memories for me. The interview took place at his home in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where we first met fifteen years earlier. When I first arrived I discovered he already had a visitor—a young and exuberant teenager from England who had been going through a difficult time. His mother had sent him overseas in the hope that he would be positively influenced by Rafael’s presence and thinking. Rafael spoke with him passionately, but there were no stern demands or warnings. The young man was heavily into rap music, and so he simply used rap to talk about poetry, creativity, and his responsibilities to his inner process.

I enjoyed witnessing their interaction because it reminded me of how Rafael spoke with me all those years ago. I was amused and amazed to see that he was still at it. But Rafael has changed considerably over the years, and so has our relationship. For me,
he has transitioned from a teacher and counselor to a friend, and along the way I’ve come to witness his faults (he can talk too much) and periods of depression (he occasionally goes into a funk in response to the state of the world). It was very important for me to see these sides of him. It’s easy to get caught up in glorified image of your teacher, which causes you to see right past the human being. I did that for awhile with Rafael, but those days are long gone. He’s a close friend with whom I can discuss absolutely anything. Our times studying and meditating together have given us a deep connection that will never go away. Rafael has a great sense of humor, as well as a poet’s flair and openness, and it’s not unusual for us to go from discussing Heisenberg’s “Uncertainty Principle” in one moment to our sex lives in the next. But if I had to describe what drives him, I’d say that he is a testament to taking the experience of unity seriously.

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Let’s start with your own waking up process. I know you went through some tough times in Cuba, but how did you end up getting interested in spirituality?

Waking up is a long process. We usually just remember the highlights, but waking up is a long process. As a child I would ride my bicycle out into a field, and then sit in the middle of the fields and commune. I didn’t know what I was doing, but I felt a presence. I didn’t know how to say it back then. I was just being “with it.” Everything was alive. I remember that very distinctly. But I think I really began waking up around the time of the Cuban revolution. When I was
fourteen, after the revolution had broken out, I saw a corpse riddled with bullets lying on the side of the road. I was overcome with a feeling of despair and hopelessness. But at the same time, it was in that moment that I felt an overwhelming call to serve humankind.

After this experience, I ended up working for the revolution for a few months, until I realized that the revolution wasn’t what we had idealized. But in the beginning I helped with a census to find the unemployed in the countryside, and this thrust me right in the middle of nature. I used to work on that census twelve to fourteen hours a day, going from farm to farm, and at the end of the day I was dead tired. One night I ended up sleeping in a hut all by myself. The hut had no doors and the windows were just holes. The walls were made out of the bark of palm trees and the roof was made out of palm leaves. It was a very interesting night because the bed was filled with bed bugs. I had to decide whether I was going to sleep and disregard the bites or get up and not sleep. But I was too tired and went to bed just as the sun set.

Around midnight I woke up and the thatched ceiling was filled with fireflies. In Cuba we have a firefly that is not intermittent, but has two permanent green lights on its head. And so I woke up to a few thousand of them on the ceiling--it was like Alice in Wonderland--something that you’re not quite sure is true because it’s so absolutely beautiful. I got up and went to the door and there was a tree containing at least ten or twenty thousand fireflies. The whole tree was lit. It was one of those experiences that is hard to believe. I just stood there, watching them for hours, totally silent. It’s impossible for me to say how beautiful
It was incredible. So I stood there for hours and felt an inexplicable beauty that is full of mystery. I stood there until I got so sleepy that I had to go back to bed. This experience gave me a deep sense of oneness, but I didn’t know how to explain it. In those days I did not have the vocabulary to explain it. Even to this day I cannot fully explain it! I always say oneness, or a communion I feel inside me that has neither words nor thoughts.

I ended up spending months traveling with the census, across forests on my way to another farm or hamlet, and every time this sense of mystery would come up—a deep sense of mystery and awe. I specifically remember another time when a student and I traveled to this little hamlet and there was no place to stay. We went to the jail and the guard was kind enough to let us sleep in one of the cells. So I had experiences with people and with nature, and every time I felt this mystery. In many ways, instead of partaking in the census I was partaking in the lives of people and nature. And this gave me a sense of empathy. I can’t quite explain it. During this whole experience I was more of a listener than a talker. I asked my questions for the census but afterwards I was very quiet and just listened and observed people and everything. It was marvelous.

During another trip I was very thirsty, but I had no water with me. I was in the middle of nowhere. I saw a pond and went over and started drinking from it. Well, for two or three days I got very ill. I couldn’t go anywhere so I just lay in a hammock, almost hallucinating with fever. At the end of three days it disappeared just as suddenly as it came. I thought to myself that I was probably very close to death. But the amazing thing I discovered is that it didn’t really matter. Perhaps I
felt this way because it was my first experience and I had nothing to compare it with, or perhaps I felt this way because death really didn’t matter. All I know is that I had no fear afterwards. This experience made me more fully aware that I was part of everything, and so I have never considered it to be a horrible experience. It was a very beautiful experience. I hardly ever talk about it because it’s so integrated in my life. All of these experiences—these experiences of beauty beyond anything I could imagine—gave me a mystical awareness. All I could do was surrender to them.

What can you tell me about your move to the United States? Things didn’t go so well when you first came to live here. You told me years ago that you were so stressed that you actually attempted suicide by jumping in front of a car. What brought you to such despair?

When I first came to New York I completely lost my contact with nature because I was in a sea of concrete. But I reconnected spiritually after I attempted suicide. I was in terrible psychological pain from not accepting myself. I was always trying to fulfill images, which were the result of pressure from my family concerning becoming rich and all that nonsense. It also had to do with being an exile, with my parents in Cuba, and having to work two jobs in order to support both myself and them and then go to school. So I spent years sleeping two or three hours a night. And so all that built up and I eventually collapsed. It finally broke my back. It wasn’t fun. It was very painful. But I don’t regret it because it
brought me to where I am. You certainly don’t have to attempt suicide in order to
wake up. I would not recommend it to anybody. But after my attempt at suicide I
decided that I would have one job that was my joy to do—play. I found myself by
discovering a different kind of connectedness. It’s the same connection, the same
oneness, but experienced inwardly. And that’s how I truly discovered spirituality.
I was twenty-four then and I’m fifty-seven now.

We are brought up in this society to live up to an image and not be
ourselves. I was in college but I wasn’t studying for the joy of it. I was studying
just to fulfill a requirement of society. The falsehood of our educational system is
that you are studying for grades and not to learn. But after my suicide attempt I
dropped all of that nonsense and studied for my own enjoyment. And that’s when
I discovered that I am very creative. I discovered a freedom within myself. I
discovered what it means to be fulfilled, without having to explain anything
because there is no explanation. It’s not logical. It’s being content, just because
you love what you do. So I realized that fulfillment was the greatest form of
wealth. If money comes, that’s fine, but it’s not the main source of fulfillment.
Ever since I made this realization I have had no regrets, including the mistakes I
have made, because I learned a lot from them and so they were worth it. I
discovered my higher self in this way. I accepted myself finally. I realized who I
am and fully entered the adventure of life.
Let’s take another leap in time. I’m interested in hearing how you came to start the Ometeca Foundation in Costa Rica. But first, could you explain the purpose of Ometeca?

The so-called “first,” “second,” and “third” worlds are limping because they have not developed an integrative outlook of the fields of knowledge that make up our intellectual cultural wealth. The integration of science and the humanities into a holistic outlook is an existential problem. We will have to face it sooner or later. The survival of humanity is at stake. How is it possible that two products of a system, whose very end is the knowledge of this system, can be perceived as opposite entities? This seeming paradox was bothersome to me even as a child, and began to take form through the years. Our task at Ometeca is to integrate and correct the false impression that there are two or three worlds and “two cultures.” We intend to carry out this task in order that future generations may arrive at a fuller and saner understanding of a much more integrated outlook than ours. The outlook you have is the outlook you manifest. Ometeca provides a forum where this project may be carried out so that we may express the holistic ecology of our minds and lives. I’ve never understood people talking about separate academic fields. I don’t differentiate between intellectuality and life. My academic work has always been about finding myself, and waking up to the needs of the world.
Great. So tell me about your move to Costa Rica in 1993 and the establishment of the Ometeca Foundation. Why did you leave your then life in New Mexico?

In the spring of 1993, I was invited to participate in a conference in Costa Rica, but then I got a call saying that my mother had been hit by a car. I had to drop everything and go to New Jersey to take care of her for a week or so. In this process, I totally forgot about the invitation to go to the conference. And so on the day I arrived back in New Mexico a fax arrived that basically said: are you coming to Costa Rica or not? So I went within myself and got a very definite, “you must go.” I always go to what I call my innerness and there I discern whether I should do something or not. My innerness speaks in many ways; it’s always different. Sometimes it’s an intuition, but also in other forms. I know when it is my innerness talking, or communicating with my ego. Anyway, I got a very definite and absolute “yes,” and that meant I had to buy the most expensive ticket because it was only three or four days before I had to travel. I went to the travel agent, got the ticket, and arrived in San Jose on a Sunday. I delivered a paper that people loved and the next day the director of a program at the University Nationale and a professor from the University of Costa Rica said to me: “would you like to do that here?”

I committed to go to Costa Rica for six months, starting with the next semester in August of 1993. I facilitated two workshops for university professors, one on the relationship between science and the humanities, and a second on how to generate theory from your own environment, from your own culture. Those two
workshops didn’t quite work. I was thinking about leaving Costa Rica and not even finishing the workshops, when it occurred to me to go to the people who invited me and say, “Look, this is not working. I am willing to give workshops at your university, but I also want to give workshops for the community.” So I began a workshop on the creative process for the community. Things eventually got better with the university professors, but there was still something missing. But the workshop for the community really clicked. There were students, housewives, secretaries, family men . . . just regular people who had nothing to lose, for themselves or in the eyes of the community. So these community members began to grow and embody a more integrated vision.

The vision is a process of transformation, to jump from thinking linearly to thinking globally and then becoming creative, or what I call the liberation of the creative process within you. In order to get the vision, there has to be a transformation within you, which only occurs with commitment and work. And so we began to study, and to practice a kind of meditation that made us aware of our being one with everything. We also practiced being one with ourselves and not being divided—to listen to yourself, to trust yourself, to trust your own intuitions, to trust your own thinking, to dare to think, to have a critical mind . . . we practiced all of these things. They jumped from being followers to following and becoming themselves. They got excited. They got to a point in their own process where there is no way back. When you have a degree of consciousness, to go back is more painful than all the pains you will have while going forward.
And so I began to work with this community group and eventually it got to
the point where I told them that they had to generate their own projects, either
personally or as a group. I had no idea what they were going to do. They decided
to teach children about the creative process. I volunteered to come back for
another semester to work with them specifically on this project. I did so and the
project began to emanate. They had to study and at the same time teach. But it
was no longer vertical teaching, it was horizontal teaching. Vertical teaching is
when you tell them what they should know—they are like a piggy bank and you
put the coins of knowledge into their head. Horizontal teaching is when we all
learn together and we all teach together. The teacher becomes more like a
facilitator. Everyone works on different books and then the students share what
they have discovered through critical thinking, and if they have gone beyond and
discovered other things.

The group in Costa Rica began to work on their intuition—on the creative
process—and then they began to teach it to their children, from husband to wife,
and vice versa. The ones who learned became teachers themselves and taught it to
the others. But the real proof that the process was working was when the children
began to teach it to other children. We observed how they taught, how the
principles were transferred. We could tell when a kid had the vision because the
whole process is driven by the principle of giving. You have to pass it on in the
same loving way that it was given to you. Also, your student must always be free.
And your student must come back with a contribution. Your student has to prove
that that he or she has arrived at a place that was not in the books they read,
because you use the books as a bridge to go to another area. As a result of this process, two interesting behaviors emerged: the kids became more responsible and more independent.

As I see it, the principles you teach are really rather simple—explore and trust your inner creative process, practice a holistic awareness by integrating different disciplines, and commit to expressing your intellectual and spiritual vision via creative projects—but these principles are powerful when they are embodied. So how did you get these young kids to embody these principles?

One of the first principles we worked with is that we are all part of a universal Intelligence, or whatever you want to call it, which is impersonal. It is not a personality up somewhere creating this world, it is the Intelligence we live in, are a part of, and are one with. And I also talked about how we normally say “nature,” or point to nature, without realizing that we are also nature. You have to point both ways when you say nature—you point towards yourself and you point towards the trees, and all the animal, mineral, and vegetable life. To help them understand this insight we designed a workshop on nature, mathematics, and literature. But we also went to the garbage dump and showed them that what was garbage to us was a banquet to the turkey buzzards and the bacteria, which helped them to see that life is a continuing process. And then we showed them how to start a vegetable garden. This allowed them to realize how everything grows and how everything is a part of you and how you are a part of everything. Slowly the
children began to understand that they had a relationship of oneness with nature. Once this was understood—and integrated into their being—we decided that the children needed to express this relationship.

We asked them to take this principle—the interrelationship of the ecosystem—to their homes, to their relationships with their parents, sisters, and brothers. They then came to the workshops and talked about what they observed and whether their home life was balanced or unbalanced. This helped them to realize that everything is constantly changing, and that everything is constantly seeking balance. We then gave them a novel based on ecological principles, which they all studied and turned into a play in which they applied the principles to their own lives. They learned the play, acted, and finally presented it to the community. The whole process lasted about two years.

The foundation is trying to meet the needs of the community. They are trying to offer what is lacking in the town—whether it’s remedial courses, preparation for college entrance exams, or classes in music, dance, biology, or math. But they are also practicing and promoting the principles of balance and integration, and the awareness that you do not live in a town, you are the town. The town is you, and whatever happens to the town happens to you.

When you look at things from a more holistic perspective, you realize the interconnectedness between you, the community, and the environment, and you begin to see the environment in a different light. Before it was an ‘it,’ now it is a ‘thou.’ A beautiful example of how this awareness was put into action came from a fourteen year-old girl. The local university campus had a little pond next to it
that was full of garbage. So this girl saw it and without thinking twice she went immediately to the director of the campus and said: “Either you clean the pond, because it is your responsibility, or we will do it. I’ll get the kids in the community to clean it. But then you will feel very bad because we are doing it when it is your responsibility. So what are you going to do?” Things like this began to happen, and the adults also got involved in it.

Some of the adults worked at the university—a few were union leaders—and we worked on the principle that they and the university are one. We then asked: what is the main project of the university? They realized that the answer was to help the student grow. So one time, the lawns needed mowing and the buildings needed painting, but there was no money. There was enough money to buy paint, but not for labor. But instead of having a fight between management and labor they got together and mowed the lawns and painted the buildings. They did this until there was enough money in the budget to pay labor. But when they didn’t have the money, they didn’t fight. They came to an agreement and began to beautify the campus because it is theirs. You have to become aware that it is yours, the institution is yours—it’s more than yours, you are the institution. The institution is a manifestation of your consciousness. Therefore, if you want the best you must express the best.

And many other things have happened. It is absolutely beautiful to witness what this little group has done and how the ripples have begun to touch other people. Yet, there are some who are critical of what we are doing because a lot of people want to come to Ometeca, but there is a requirement: If you come to
Ometeca you have to work. You don’t come as a passive person; there must be a give and take. If you take a workshop, eventually you will have to give a workshop. And you have to work on different projects. We have a library and a house. Somebody has to take care of the library, somebody has to be there when groups are meeting, somebody has to be in charge of the building. We are most proud of the library. It is very small, but it’s on the cutting-edge of things. We have a few computers, CD-ROMs—we have material that is nowhere else in Costa Rica! Also, when we discover that kids are beginning to have an advocation—to become a marine biologist or mathematician or this and that—we begin to get material for this child. We put it in the library so she or he can study it. And then they have the responsibility of passing it on to the other kids.

You have to teach others. Teaching is the best way of learning. It’s how you prove that you really know the material, and that it has transformed you. And if a child does not know how to teach, we teach them how to teach. We’ve had ten to thirteen year-old kids delivering a lecture about their own experience. When the group rented a house and it was opened to the community, a thirteen year-old gave the opening lecture. People came afterward and said: “Is she a college student?” We said: “No, she is barely entering high school.” They couldn’t believe it. They said: “How does she know these things?” And we said: “Well, that’s what the workshops do.” You don’t only learn, you have to learn how to deliver what you know. You have to learn how to carry a dialogue about what you know.
You know, I’ve never met anyone that has a stronger commitment than you, in
terms of helping others to learn and wake up to a larger vision of life. It’s really rather
exhausting to witness [laughs]. What fuels this deep commitment?

Let me tell you a story. During the time of the original workshop, I
happened to go to a region of Costa Rica and there I met a man. We talked and I
told him about the workshop we were doing. He asked if he could attend and I
said, “Of course.” He was a poor man and he had to travel seven hours to get to
the workshop. He had to walk two hours from his house to the road, take a bus to
San Jose, and then take another bus from San Jose to San Ramon. He had no
money to stay at a hotel and so we got together and gave him room and board for
a day or two every week. His growth was incredible. But then he had a problem.
His wife got jealous because he was learning a lot and she had to stay home with
the kids. So he talked to us about his problem. We ended up having a workshop
about it and we came to a conclusion. We told him: “As soon as you get home,
regardless of the hour or how tired you are, drop everything and teach her what
you have learned.” Peace and harmony were restored. He got his knowledge, his
intuitions, his growth, and then he would pass it on to his wife. So she became
part of the process. That was an incredible lesson.

And his commitment to travel seven hours! It’s not like in this country
where we just take a car. I mean, to walk two hours just to get to the road to take a
bus. With that kind of commitment, arranging room and board was nothing. And
because of his commitment he had a beautiful transformation. In the beginning, I
couldn’t believe it. You must really have a desire greater than anything else if you are willing to travel seven hours to take a three-hour workshop. We complain if we have to travel one hour by car, but for him there were no obstacles. We don’t appreciate what we have. And then he had to travel back again, sacrificing work, sacrificing all kinds of things. But he used to tell us: “This to me is more important than working. I am able to give my wife and kids enough food, and a roof over their heads. I need this more than anything else.” So, the workshops were his food. I guess that is one of the reasons I stayed. When you witness a commitment like that, it touches you and it is a pleasure to give because it is received in good hands. You are really passing it on.

But there are others who have come to my workshops and they’re like tourists. There is no commitment and it is just one more workshop, a form of entertainment. But this is not entertainment—it’s a deep commitment! It’s your life! It’s not my life, it’s your life. If you respect your life you desire transformation, to grow and grow and grow. It is up to you. You have to walk your talk. There is no other way about it. It’s not talking. It’s walking your talk. It’s expressing and it’s bringing the creative process into being. Otherwise, your words have no power. But once you begin to walk your talk, your life changes, because life as a whole is a learning process filled with many joys. But until you transform you are not aware of these joys. And they are so precious. Nobody has enough money that they can buy it. You cannot buy it! You can only express it. So in the creative process your life changes and this is what I’ve witnessed with the group in Costa Rica. When I see today the people I began to work with in
1993, when I listen to the depth of their conversation and how they know where they need to go—it's like night and day. It's one of the most pleasurable things in the world just to watch them on their own. And now when I come to visit, we share and teach each other. That is one of the greatest joys to me, and it is the fulfillment of what Quintillian said about teaching: "The purpose of an educator is to become unnecessary." And so now we share as friends.

There is nothing like being a conscious creative person on this planet. Nothing! There is nothing like living a conscious life with a purpose. Life becomes worth living. It is an incredible adventure—even with all its problems—but you work with these problems and it becomes a very creative and dynamic process. To live consciously is to know that the environment and you are one, to really know that what you are doing to the environment you are doing to yourself. If you pollute today, in a sense you will be the killer of your own children, because they will eat and breathe the pollution you've created. But if you know you have done something about it—even if you have not fully succeeded—but you did absolutely the best you knew how, that brings an incredible sense of peace and joy. If at the moment you are going to die, you say: "I did everything I could." That must be the greatest joy of a dying person. Then life was worth living. You see, that's the thing: being on this planet was worthwhile. Jose Marti said: "Men and women should be like comets. Wherever you go you leave a trail of light." That's it! That is what life is all about. You have touched others, but not only others, *everything*, the environment, everything has been touched by your actions. And that is where Silence speaks.
This leads us to the big question. Why do think many people fail to express their inner creative process?

That is something I have pondered about a lot, and I still ponder about it. Sometimes I think it is their fault—they don’t want to do it. And sometimes I think of evolution—they just have not evolved to a point in which they are willing to make the leap. They are more interested in material things. They are more interested in “success” as our culture defines it. And it isn’t because they have made a choice. Their environment has made a choice for them. Or their own psychological make-up has made a choice for them. Many are simply not aware and they cannot wake up until they have a major crisis. But many people have a major crisis and don’t wake up either [laughs]. Or they only wake up for a little while. So, I don’t know. I think it’s evolution. Many times I have had students and have had to accept that they are not ready. They are just not ready. And so we each go our own way. I have sowed some seeds and I hope that some day they will grow. I have seen many bright students who are not creative. I always wonder why this person with so much intelligence cannot come up with creative ideas. That is another mystery. People who have incredible intelligence, but they are not creative. They are just the opposite! You see it in politics all the time. It is very painful to witness.
Many of these politicians have attended our finest universities. The same is true of corporate heads who pollute the planet.

I guess there was no one to educate their hearts. You need someone to teach you how to appreciate life, and to teach you how to appreciate your fellow man and woman—and the beauty of giving, the beauty of recognizing yourself in others, and the beauty of making a difference in your community. To have these principles is the education of the heart. My fifth and sixth grade teacher taught me principles that guided my whole life. This was a man who really loved what he was doing. Each class he taught was a masterpiece. He taught me that education is not simply for jobs, it’s to temper your soul for life. He also said anyone can train, but only those who truly educate are a living gospel. He repeated these things many times in fifth and sixth grade and I never forgot them. Never. So when my crisis came when I was twenty-four, these principles came back to my awareness. They were buried, but the crisis brought them to the surface. I remember thinking, “My God, that man is still teaching me.” And so at that moment I found his address and sent him a letter thanking him for what he had given me. These kinds of teachers teach from their heart. They teach something that no amount of money in the world can pay for. It’s priceless.

In your book, Mysticism of Now, you state that service is the highest degree in the mystical life. What do you mean by that?
When people get into mysticism, or into meditation, it’s only for themselves. They don’t think of projects, they don’t think of service and the community. But when you begin to pour what is within you into the community or the world, you realize that we are the love of God, we are the peace of God, we are the mind of God, we are the hands of God, and then you just pass it on. When we realize that God or the Intelligence of the universe—whatever you want to call it—pours itself through us, we realize our true nature. And then we are not afraid to experience life. We are not afraid to make a mistake, and we are not afraid to succeed. But this only happens when we truly realize the meaning of “love your neighbor as yourself,” because it’s in that loving that you realize what oneness is, and it’s in that loving that you attain the transformation you need to take a step higher in the mystical life. The more you practice this love, the more you realize we are one. But again, you don’t realize it with thought, you realize it with the depth of your being beyond words and thoughts. You know in the depth of your being what oneness means.

We express oneness in acts of giving, with no expectations. When you give a gift the person that received it must have the freedom to do with it what they wish. But if you expect from the very second you send the gift that the person give you thanks, then you haven’t given a gift because there are strings attached. This is the way that most people give gifts. They expect gratitude, but a true gift has no strings attached. When you give a gift in the spiritual life, there is no demand for anything in return. None whatsoever. It is a gift. But if the person who receives the gift does return gratitude, then it comes with energy, as a
surprise, as a return gift. We usually fail to understand such things. We are always trying to get something. We want a return. We have codified in our behavior that when we give, there must be a return. This reminds me of when I was a kid. I would pray and say rosaries, but then I didn’t see a return from the old man upstairs so I would get upset [laughs]. But this very behavior made me think: I’m expecting something from the so-called God. Is this why I should be praying? Is this why I want communion with God? Or is this communion just a realization of the Being that I am? When you finally realize this you stop having a transaction. There is no business transaction in realizing who you really are.

We often fail to ponder the principles behind our actions. We must question whether we are giving in order to get something in return or if we are really giving. We must give in the name of that spirit within you that is also in the other person. We need to really ponder about that, just like we have to ponder what Spirit is all about. I began to have results spiritually when I had no expectations. When I gave just for the sake of it. When I stopped trying to have transactions with God or the universe. I had no more transactions. I was doing things “just because.” This is a major step because it frees other people. You are free and they are free. If someone gets sick and you decide to take care of them, you just take care of them, with no expectations of gratitude. We do it just because we love to. If they are grateful it is fine. If they are not grateful it is also fine. But again, if they are grateful it comes as a great gift. The process of serving makes you grow. There is your gratitude.
Service is an aesthetic action, an action of beauty. I don’t see a difference between beauty and life. Even things we think are horrible can be made beautiful. The one who proves this all the time is the artist. An artist can take a person that has been rejected by society and discover the beauty within them. The artist can bring it out. I mean, dying could be an extremely beautiful experience if you know how to die. It is your attitude that doesn’t make it beautiful. But it’s still beautiful because even when you have an experience that’s so bad that you hit rock bottom, when you begin to come up you are thankful for the experience because it made you grow. And that act of growing is an aesthetic experience. It’s a matter of how we perceive reality. In the mystical life it’s said that you have to get rid of the opposites, which is true but only after you have experienced both opposites [laughs]. Otherwise, how could you walk the middle path? You cannot walk it ignorantly. How could Buddha walk the middle path unless he had experienced great joy and great pain, great wealth and great poverty? Only after you experience the opposites can you walk the middle path. And then you realize that good and bad hold the same charge of energy. You also realize that there is nothing like being open to experience, which is very different from seeking experience. Being open to experience gives you the capacity to really ponder and learn from your experience. When an experience reaches us, we learn from it—and that’s how we grow. It’s as simple as that.
Some mystically minded people argue that the world is growing spiritually—that we are living in a new millennium, with a new paradigm, and that there will some day be a critical mass of spiritually minded people [laughs]. What do you make of these claims?

Terms like critical mass, new paradigm, and new millennium are figures of speech, but that’s all. There must be action behind the words. Personally, if I could I would build a research library in every country on the planet regardless of ideology. I mean a good research library, a three-million volume library [laughs]. That has been my fantasy for many, many years. I would love to be able to give that as a gift because it gives opportunities to people. So, if I had lots of money the first thing I would do is to get a housekeeping service because I like a clean house but I don’t have time to do it [laughs]. But I would put libraries all over the world, and the Ometeca Institute would become a full-fledged university, from kindergarten to post-graduate degrees. These are the things that fill my mind. These are my dreams. I compare them to sex fantasies [big laughs]. They really turn me on. I get thinking about it and my imagination just goes. It really turns me on and it is very beautiful.

Those are my basic fantasies and I’ve had them for forty years. The difference between now and when I first had them is that in those days I felt very impotent. It used to make me desperate to think these things and not be able to fulfill them. Now, I think I’ve mellowed and they don’t make me desperate anymore. It’s rather enjoyable. And the fact that I have been able to experience a drop of this vision and know that someone will be able to continue it is very
powerful for me. After I die somebody will continue the idea. I know that the institute will continue. It is a great joy to have a few kids get it, because if they can attain this at seventeen, what's going to happen when they are thirty-four? They will progress light years. That to me is a great source of joy.

I have great joy just thinking about it. They are my fantasies and I love to have them. When we began there was nothing and now there is a little, so who can say? And can you imagine having first-class research libraries in all countries for those who are willing to go further? I think of people going to those libraries the way I went to libraries when I came here from Cuba. It was such a privilege to be at the New York City public library. In those days it was open every day of the year except New Year's Day. It was such a privilege to always have millions of volumes at my disposal. Where you can let your imagination go wherever it wants to go and the books are there! I get an effervescent feeling when I think of people wanting this and finally getting it and then being able to sit there and spend ten hours working and reading and thinking and dreaming. I feel this way because I see myself in each of them. I remember the days when I would go to the library when it just opened. I would leave for lunch and then come back and stay until they closed [laughs]. You know when the librarian calls on the microphone: "The library is closing in fifteen minutes." I would rush through the last pages, the last paragraph, and then make a note and go home.

I loved those days. All the time my imagination was flying, discovering new worlds, new things. I would love to be the instrument to supply this to others, because I am them. And one of the things I ponder deeply is the many religious
leaders who don’t teach these types of things as conscious union with God. God is always an abstraction. Why be consciously one with an abstraction when you could just look around and see God right here? But they don’t teach this and people end up being destructive rather than creative. It bothers me to no end to walk in New Brunswick and see Rutgers students breaking branches off the trees. They don’t realize that these trees make a contribution to them, not only in terms of beauty, but in terms of oxygen, and energies, and many things. There were students just two nights ago breaking bottles in the street just for the sake of it. And these are not ten-year-olds, they are twenty-year-old men and women. They have still not left the family home. They don’t realize that this whole town is their home, even if it’s only for four years. This whole earth and universe are their home.

One last question. Are you willing to call yourself a mystic?

The very moment people call you a mystic and you believe it, it becomes a profession and then you are in business. To me, mysticism is an attitude towards life. And it is very natural, very down to earth, very normal, and I don’t see why you should separate yourself from everybody else by saying you are a mystic. I even have a hard time saying I am a writer. I try to hide it because when I talk to people and say I am a writer, all of a sudden people separate. They treat you with a deference that I don’t like. The same is true with the label “mystic.” I mean, a lot of people think of mystics as having supernatural powers and all that nonsense.
Mysticism is an attitude towards life and that’s it. And you shouldn’t put yourself on a pedestal, or let others put you on a pedestal. I look at the human landscape and see all the mystics—they think they are so “special” [laughs]. I think it’s a bunch of nonsense. I am simply a human being who is enjoying life. And I don’t see why anyone needs to be put on a platform. I think you do more harm than good by doing that. It’s not conducive to growing. You cannot grow once you’re on a pedestal, and you don’t allow other people to grow, because people look at you to approve their behavior. They look at you for everything. But the very second you make decisions for them they are not growing and you are not growing either.

Everybody must make their own decisions. You have to let people struggle with their problems and solve them. If you solve the problem for them there is no possibility of growth. The only possibility is for them to rebel against you and leave you so that they can grow. And the teacher must not be a cozy place for students to rest. You can empathize, you can have compassion, but you are not a permanent resting place. You are not a hotel where souls can come to have a vacation. People should have their own struggles and their own intuitions. If I give you an answer, it’s my answer, not yours, and that can’t help you grow. What you can teach and pass on is the attitude, not specific answers to problems. With the attitude you have that spark which will allow you to answer your own questions. I don’t want to be called a mystic. I don’t feel I am a mystic. I am a person in this world, enjoying conscious union with that “thing,” that “something” which has neither words nor thoughts that some people have decided to call God.
Chapter Fourteen

Home

"The truth of our divine identity is not a luxury for a few adepts but is essential now for the survival of the human race. At a time when all other visions have failed us, the mystical vision offers hope for a great transformation that is the destiny of the human race if we now have the courage to reach it."

-- Andrew Harvey
My father was born in Staten Island, New York, and lived in a house that his Norway-born father built in 1925. After his parents died, he inherited the house, married my mom in 1955, and they had three kids, myself the youngest. The neighborhood didn’t change much over this time. It was a close-knit community filled with other Scandinavian immigrants. Most of my parent’s friends had names ending in either “son” or “sen”—Anderson, Fredrickson, Hansen, Johansen, Johnson, Syvertsen, Swanson—the “son” signifying a Swede and the “sen” a Norwegian. They all went to the same Lutheran church, they all had blue-collar jobs, they all had children. We had many large, multi-family parties, and I quickly formed friendships with a smorgasbord of kids. But these friendships didn’t last like the friendships between my father and his childhood buddies.
He still hangs out with some of his friends from the old neighborhood—the same friends he played ball with in empty lots, the same friends he built tree houses with in the woods.

When I was seven years old my family left Staten Island and moved to New Jersey. It was not easy for my dad to sell the house that his father worked so hard to build. But if my grandfather had been alive, I'm sure he would have understood. The large oak trees that surrounded the neighborhood, some as high as sixty to seventy feet, were plowed down by bulldozers so that developers could squeeze duplex homes and condominiums onto forty by one-hundred feet lots. The way my dad tells the story, he was sipping a cup of coffee on the back porch when he heard a rumbling noise. He then watched, heartbroken, as an army of bulldozers razed the land, including his favorite tree, not an oak but a seventy foot tulip tree that had a circumference of ten feet at the base and was the straightest tree he had ever seen, not a crook or a bend. But there was nothing he could do. It seems that more housing was needed for the growing population of another island, Manhattan. Staten Island was a logical choice for this development, as it is only a half-hour commute on the ferry to the big city and is a much cheaper place to live. Along with commuters, Manhattan also sent us another product intrinsic to its daily operations: tons and tons of trash, every hour of every day. My parents surveyed the worsening situation and promptly moved our family to a small property in New Jersey, which, we were happy to declare, contained twenty-six trees.

Our new neighborhood had woods and small farms nearby, as well as a lake across the street from our house. It was a beautiful place to grow up, even though we weren't allowed to swim in the lake because it was filled with brown, polluted water. But that didn’t keep my friends and me from spending whole summers searching under lily
pads for Painted turtles and Bullfrogs. And in the winter it was paradise—the polluted lake froze over, leaving a glistening surface for ice-skating and hanging out with friends. When it snowed, our neighbors quickly grabbed their shovels and created an interconnected web of ice rinks. Some were used for intense hockey games, others for general skating. I especially loved the post-holiday time. We would collect discarded Christmas trees and build huge bonfires on the thick, frozen lake. The fire reached out towards the starry night in bursts of flame, cracking and popping like tiny firecrackers. The scent of pine filled the air, invigorating my nostrils and permeating every inch of my clothes. I would stay out until my scrunched, frozen toes became too painful to ignore, forcing me to head home for the comfort of warm blankets.

Our family lived in New Jersey for over two decades, but once we kids got older, my parents decided to sell the house and head north. After thirty-five years of work—Dad at the factory and Mom as a secretary—they retired and moved to the lake-house in the Adirondack Mountain region. My sister bought the Jersey home and we still gather there to celebrate the holidays. Things have changed, however. The small farms are gone, turned into mega-supermarkets, shopping malls, and prissy-named housing developments like "Willow Estates." If you can avoid it, it’s best not to go anywhere in your car between four and six o’clock—traffic jams, commuter hell. Still, relatively speaking, it remains a pleasant place to grow up. Most of the woods are standing and the lake still has turtles and frogs. But something has happened to the winters. When I was a teenager we would always have at least a month of solid, skate-worthy ice. Today, my sister’s kids are lucky if they get one or two days.
My parents bought their future retirement home in the mid-seventies. It was a paint-peeled summer cottage at the time, but in the ensuing years they gradually fixed up the place, first replacing the worn exterior with dark brown wood paneling and then building a large deck overlooking the lake and mountains. They chose the location because we vacationed at a cabin camp on the very same lake for many years. In fact, my family first vacationed at Toni and Alf's Cabin Camp on Beautiful Lake Vanare when I was one-year old and we continued to go every year after until I was fifteen. When I was a toddler, we only rented a cabin for one week, but we were eventually able to stay for two when my father finally earned a second week of vacation time from the factory. I can vividly remember Mom and Dad scurrying about the night before the big trip, packing the car with coolers, suitcases, tennis rackets. Then at four in the morning, which was my dad's usual early-shift waking time, they would round up my brother, sister, and me, direct us groggy-eyed to the car, and have us at Toni and Alf's in time to check in by ten.

The Adirondacks and the cabin camp were a foreign world to my childhood eyes. They seemed to have everything there: a beach nestled quietly within the pine trees and mountains, a dock filled with old wooden rowboats, horseback riding just down the street, and a whole slew of games—tennis, ping pong, shuffle board, horseshoes. My brother and I waged many mighty battles with Dad, hoping to finally beat him at something, anything. We eventually succeeded in shuffleboard and ping-pong, but I suspect that this was due to my father's generosity rather than our budding talents. But it was much more than the games that made this place so alive. The deep, soft piles of randomly placed brown pine needles were a stunning contrast to the meticulously mown lawns of suburban New Jersey. The water was clean, the first clean body of water I had
ever seen, and it was okay to swim in, as well as fish for bass, perch, and bluegills. And the air was a fragrant, intoxicating presence, which led me to the amazing early-age discovery that all air was not the same.

Earth, water, air, and also fire. At night, everyone staying at the cabin camp—including friends we knew from vacationing during the same weeks year after year and some of our Scandinavian buddies from Staten Island—gathered down by the pavilion near the lake. We brought up chairs from the beach and sat around the outdoor fireplace, roasting marshmallows, talking, laughing, and definitely drinking. There was plenty of Miller High Life and Utica Club—a cheap beer from a brewery in Utica, New York. The cabin camp was a playground for the kids, but its function for the adults is difficult to measure. They had come to Toni and Alf’s to leave their jobs behind—carpenters, phone company installers, firemen, secretaries, factory workers—all looking for two weeks of freedom and peace. And sure enough, as the nights gently progressed, cragged, tired faces began to shine along with the fire’s glow.

My family’s progression of moves kept me close to the natural world. The Adirondacks are my home. But, like many others, I had to leave home to shed my childhood identity, have new experiences, and mature, which led me to the flat land and cornfields of the Midwest. It took some time for me to experience an empathy with the Indiana landscape, but thanks to the generosity of friends, I discovered a deep connection by living for two years, from 1994 to 1996, in a small cottage fifteen minutes from the university. My friends, Al and Faye, owned seven acres surrounded by woods and fields. The property also had a large, rickety red barn and main house. I did landscaping work in exchange for rent, which made my adjunct salary go a heck of lot farther (more books
and beer). The cottage, which they called the "Caboose" because of its shape and red color, was extremely rustic, with rattling windows and Virginia Creepers poking through cracks in the wall. I thought it was a perfect place to read, think, and write. And the autumn sunsets throwing shoots of purple over a horizon of decaying, golden brown soybean plants and corn stalks weren't bad either.

I helped put in a brick patio, mowed the lawn with Al's ancient Gravely tractor, and created all kinds of plant and flower gardens under Faye's guidance. My specialty, however, was free standing rock walls. There was a huge pile of rocks in the woods, which farmers had taken out of their fields, and we decided they'd make a fine wall. Rock wall construction was a Zen practice for me, just as it had been years earlier at my parent's place. I ended up building sixty feet of wall, three and a half feet high. I had plenty of time to do the work because I wasn't teaching during the fall semester of 1995 due to low enrollment. I was the first one to lose his job when classes were cut. I was upset at first, but staying out in the country without having to drive into town everyday was a luxury. Al and Faye went away for a few months, and so it was just the land, the Caboose, one adult cat and four kittens, and me.

Before they left, Al and Faye told me to make sure I spent time with the kittens so they didn't turn feral. I decided to begin a ritual. I would lie on the grass and they would lie on me—one on each leg and two on my chest. They looked like two sets of twins—two were charcoal colored and two were orange—and we were all perfectly content. Little things were special during this time. Another highlight of my day included taking a walk up the gravel lane to get the newspaper and the mail, and then sitting outside in the autumn air with a cup of hot coffee reading the newspaper and mail. I went into town.
every few days for food supplies or to hang out with friends at bars and cafes, but I was mostly living with the land.

In mid-November, I invited twelve friends to a bonfire party on my birthday. I had been enjoying my solitude, but I wanted to share some of my experience in the country. My guests were a mix of undergraduates, graduate students, and professors, including Aurkene and Inaki, a grad student couple from the Basque region in Spain. It was a clear and brisk night, but we were warmed by a large fire, sweet potatoes cooked on red hot coals, and then a concert of old folk tunes. Inaki played the accordion and Aurkene played fiddle and they persuaded us to dance like they had growing up at their home in Spain. Some of the guests were a little inhibited at first, particularly a young poetry professor, but we were soon holding hands, jumping to the accordion beat, and weaving a path like a snake. There was a tangible feeling that a barrier had lifted and it was clear from our collective laughter that we all knew it. The lightness that lies underneath our inhibitions was suddenly free to dance. We probably looked like silly idiots. It was wonderful to be silly idiots. The poetry professor thanked me profusely every time I ran into him after that night. I think he experienced what Walt Whitman meant when he wrote: “I am large. I contain multitudes.”

I lived a profound truth during that fall: everything is enriched when you play and work with the land. The winter approached, however, and I decided to leave Indiana. There was a wood-burning stove in the Caboose, but it wasn’t the warmest place to be in cold weather. I would have had to spend the coldest days with friends in town or in the main house. But I also had other reasons for leaving. Rafael was back living in New Jersey and I felt an intuitive need to stay with him for awhile. I didn’t know exactly why.
I just knew I was without a creative project to animate my life. I hoped we could discuss books together and that our reunion would result in new discoveries. I was not disappointed. On the day of my arrival I was looking through his bookshelves and a copy of Gregory Bateson’s *Mind and Nature* caught my eye. I took it off the shelf and began perusing its pages when Rafael came around the corner. I asked him about the book and he immediately said that we should read it together.

Bateson was an anthropologist and scientist, although of a unique type. He studied the interdependent processes of the universe as a communicative exchange of information, which he called “the pattern that connects” or “Mind.” Bateson argues that we are socialized to recognize isolated parts of our world rather than interrelationships among them. We are sadly unaware that we are immersed in an evolving system of communication, pattern, and beauty. I reflected on my recent experiences building the rock wall, dancing under the stars, and communing with the kittens, and realized that they all could be understood as silent forms of communication. Building the wall by paying attention to the sounds of the rocks and then allowing the structure to emerge led me to experience a nonverbal exchange of harmony. Dancing under the vast, starry night with friends led to a nonverbal exchange of freedom. And communing with the kittens led to a nonverbal exchange of comfort and care. Bateson’s metaphors and ideas stimulated my imagination. I realized that our communicative habits often lead us to have a one-way objective monologue with nature rather than an intersubjective two-way dialogue within Mind.

My trip home was highly successful. After four months, I returned to Indiana with the initial seeds for this book firmly planted in my consciousness. I wanted to explore
how living within a larger communicative system influences our life-paths. However, there were other consequences to my visit that I had not expected, emerging from the fact that I had returned home, to the place where I grew up and went to college. I had been away from New Jersey for six years, except for short visits during Christmas, and I rarely thought about my past. But now I was flooded with memories wherever I went. There was a story attached to each place I visited. I tried to resist being nostalgic, but reading Mind and Nature sensitized me to these stories. Bateson argues that our ecological crisis reflects a crisis of perception. We fail to perceive that our personal stories are intimately connected to larger patterns. This argument led me to wonder how the stories of my past had influenced my perceptions and growth.

I recalled all kinds of memories, including my childhood connections with nature while searching under lily pads for turtles and frogs, as well as moments of disconnection during my high school and college years when I wondered how multiple choice tests were going to prepare me for anything of importance. But these were mild memories compared to what happened when I took a walk in the same park where I fell to the ground, violently crying, ten years earlier after my practice commute to New York City. I found the exact patch of ground, sat down, and stared at the barren branches of the lilac trees. My breath immediately became short and anxious, as long ignored images came back to me. My body remembered everything: the lifeless train trip with seasoned commuters, the imposing physical structure of the giant office building of Olgivy & Mathers, and then the next morning in the park, lying face down in the grass. I thought I had left my past behind just because I had physically left home, but the memories I revisited still held a charge. They sensitized me to all the times I felt hurt, lost, and
alienated, as well as to all the times I experienced the joy of relationship. I realized that my early life was largely led by an unconscious desire for this joy, while in my later life it had become a conscious pursuit.

One night, Rafael and I decided to take a walk. We stood on one side of the street waiting for a break in the evening commuter traffic so that we could make it to the park. We attempted to cross many times, but we were invisible to the drivers. We waited and waited, and then simply watched an endless stream of blank faces behind steering wheels. After about five or ten minutes, we noticed a small break in the traffic and made a dash to the other side. Our walk in the park was far more peaceful. We stopped to look at ice that had formed around a series of branches. The ice connected the branches while the moonlight shone through it, creating a crystallized web of sparkling light. Rafael and I had just finished discussing a chapter in *Mind and Nature* and were both struck by the display. It was as if the earth was instructing us about the aesthetics of relationship. I thought to myself that there are connections and disconnections everywhere.

My return home elicited still deeper revelations when I made a springtime trip to visit my parents in upstate New York. Every time I visit my parents I feel like I am coming home to both my family and to the natural world that first nurtured my sensitivities. However, when I first arrived I felt that my parents and I weren’t really communicating. But then I realized my parents were just talking with me like they usually did. I had changed. My parents have always loved and supported me, even when they didn’t understand why I wandered after I graduated instead of finding a career. But they grew up in stoic Norwegian and German households where you just didn’t express
your emotions. Not surprisingly, I had never been comfortable with expressing emotion either. And now there seemed to be an unspoken emotional block between us.

I soon realized that this block was greatly exacerbated by the fact that they were getting older and we had never talked about death. Somehow, it was a taboo subject. My parents were not very old—they were only in their mid-sixties—but all my grandparents had died in their late fifties or early sixties. I was concerned that they would die without us really talking and connecting. It was an intolerable thought. Here we were—participants within the pattern that connects—but we could not even express it in our family. I stewed about all of this for a few days, without my parents knowing that anything was wrong. Our habit of not talking about such things was tied to our habits of identity and I didn’t know how to break free.

I didn’t have to figure out a way to break through our barriers. It just happened. My parents and I were watching a news report on TV about the hungry and homeless and I suddenly became overwhelmed with emotion. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, I started to sob. I was a huge crier when I was a young kid. I would hyperventilate, taking immense gasping breaths. I even passed out once after I fell out of a tree. I was fine physically but the loss of control made me hysterical. I gasped and wheezed until I was unconscious. A neighborhood man carried me home to my startled mother. Soon after, my father advised me that big boys don’t cry. This wasn’t the worst advice because I often cried when things didn’t go my way. But like many males, I managed to turn this silly phrase into a creed. I refused to be vulnerable. I did not cry in my teen years, not a drop. I didn’t cry again until my final semester at Rutgers at the age of twenty-five.
When I first started to sob in front of my parents I was embarrassed, but it also felt incredibly right. They were in shock. They had no idea what my tears were all about. I got up from the couch, said I was okay, and then walked outside amid the pine trees and continued to wail. It was a strange experience because I was totally in control. The part of me that would usually stop such a tearful display emerged, but a deeper part of me also emerged and it said, “don’t stop, keep going.” Every time the sobs started to recede, another wave appeared and I just went with it. I made a conscious decision that I was not going to stop crying until I was completely empty. My parents came outside and watched from a distance. I once again assured them that I was fine and that I just needed to do this. At one point my father came over to me--his deep concern written clearly on his face--and he wrapped his big arms around me. This caused another giant release as the distance between us disappeared.

I sobbed for at least fifteen minutes, if not twenty. I couldn’t believe how much I needed to cry. And it felt absolutely right to be outside, in the natural world that had schooled me in my childhood. I was safe and at home amid the pine trees. It was okay to be vulnerable there. My sobs finally subsided and I went back inside and got hugs from my Mom. There was a brief silence as we all looked at each other, and then we started laughing as I tried to explain what had happened. I told them that every time we visited I wondered if it would be the last time that we would see each other. And they talked about reaching a point in life where you accept the reality of death. We ended up having a great conversation. It was easy to talk about anything and everything. After things calmed down with my parents, I went back outside to where I had been sobbing and sat down in a bed of brown pine needles. It was dusk and the last rays of sunlight scooted along the
surface of the lake. There wasn’t a thought in my head as I took deep breaths, inhaling the sweet scent of pine.

Notes

Page 19  The book of Joel Goldsmith’s that Rafael and I first studied together was The Thunder of Silence. I don’t feel comfortable recommending Goldsmith’s books since I read them so selectively. On the other hand, I learned and grew through using his books. I do wholeheartedly recommend two of Rafael’s books on the spiritual life, Mysticism of Now and Sufficient Unto Itself is the Day.
The transcendent dimension is often poorly interpreted. Monists tend to claim that this dimension is the one true reality, which makes the manifest world an illusion. This has the obvious negative consequence of world denial. Pantheists focus attention on the immanent dimension by claiming that humans and nature are identical with God without also being diverse expressions of God. This leads to an inability to make distinctions. And theism states that there is a transcendent God who is essentially separate from the world except as a personal guiding presence. This presence is alien to nature, however, and thus the existential plane is essentially a fallen world that lacks divine immanence or sacredness. Panentheism, which is the vision this book reflects, combines the true aspects of these three views—that there is one reality, but with transcendent and immanent dimensions. In other words, Spirit unfolding as matter, life, and mind.

I discovered the quote by Krishnamurti in Ken Wilber's *Grace and Grit*, p. 99.

The daimonic is a prominent theme in James Hillman’s *The Soul’s Code: In Search of Character and Calling*, as well as Hillman and Michael Ventura’s *We’ve Had A Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World’s Getting Worse*. See also Rollo May’s *Love and Will*.

Jung was distinctly aware of the tension between daimonic forces and our conscious awareness. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* he writes: “we are a psychic
process which we do not control, or only partly direct” (4). He then reveals his own struggle with this process:

“Somewhere deep in the background I always knew that I was two persons. One was the son of my parents, who went to school and was less intelligent, attentive, hard-working, decent, and clean than many other boys. The other was grown up—old, in fact—skeptical, mistrustful, remote from the world of men, but close to nature, the earth, the sun, the moon, the weather, all living creatures, and above all close to the night, to dreams, and to whatever “God” worked directly in him... The play between personalities No. 1 and No. 2, which has run through my whole life, has nothing to do with a “split” or dissociation in the ordinary medical sense. On the contrary, it is played out in every individual... In my life No. 2 has been of prime importance, and I have always tried to make room for anything that wanted to come to me from within. He is a typical figure, but he is perceived only by the very few. Most people’s conscious understanding is not sufficient to realize that he is also what they are” (44-45).


Page 26  Hillman, p. 252.

In order to better understand Brent’s vision, I turned to Stephen Foster and Meridith Little’s fascinating book, *The Book of the Vision Quest: Personal Transformation in the Wilderness*. Foster and Little explain the diversity of discovery available to those who seek visions:

The vision you seek, and need, can be many different things. Vision is wisdom. Vision is insight into the nature of things. Vision is the ability to see the future. Vision is the ability to dream. Vision is the surging upward of personal creative energy. Vision is one’s life work. Vision is a marrow-deep feeling, a knowing, a recognition of self, a realization of what you can do. Vision is transcendent, mystical knowledge—cosmic consciousness. Vision is the sight of the sun rising in the east to answer the hope that another day will come. Vision is a series of “ahas!” about what your life has been and could be. Brent’s vision included many of these characteristics, and as a result he explored the three stages of rites of passage that Foster and Little document in *Vision Quest*: severance, threshold, and incorporation. Severance requires that we take our vision quest alone and psychologically die to the negative attachments of our previous life. In the threshold stage we fast and practice rituals within a sacred spot in nature to which we feel called. The threshold is entered via struggle and humility, which then leads to a rebirthing
of dormant aspects of our soul and perhaps a vision of our future possibilities. During the incorporation stage we return empowered from our sacred site ready to express our soul growth back in our communities. Brent clearly went through the first two stages, and the second half of our interview showed how he incorporated his discoveries into his life.

Page 64 Harry Harlow’s maternal deprivation experiments with rhesus monkeys are described in John Robbins’ *Diet for a New America*, pp. 38-39. Robbins’ book provides a strong argument for changing our meat-based diets. However, one of my favorite parts of this seminal book is when Robbins tells a bit of his own story:

I was born in the heart of the Great American Food Machine. From childhood on it was expected that I would someday take over and run the world’s largest ice cream company—Baskin-Robbins. Year after year I was groomed and prepared for the task, given an opportunity to live the Great American Dream on a scale very few people can ever hope to attain. The ice cream cone shaped pool in the backyard of the house in which I lived was a symbol of the success awaiting me.

But when the time came to decide, I said thank you very much, I appreciated the kind offer, but “No!” I had to say no, because *something was calling me, and no matter how hard I tried, I could not ignore it* [my italics] (xiii).

Page 97 A thorough representation of Maslow’s thought can be found in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*. A brief but useful history of the four main forces of psychological study (depth psychology, behaviorism, humanistic psychology, and
transpersonal psychology) can be found in Warwick Fox’s “The Emergence of Transpersonal Psychology,” which is an appendix in *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*. Wilber has distanced himself from transpersonal psychology, promoting instead his own integral psychology, which integrates personal development with individual biological and collective cultural and societal development. For Wilber, the focus of transpersonal psychology is too limited has not had enough of an effect in transforming consciousness and the world.

**Page 97** Einstein’s short essay “Cosmic Religious Feeling” and the quotation from Schroedinger (p. 96) appear in Wilber’s *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World’s Great Physicists*.

**Page 98** Wilber’s model of psychological development is described in numerous books. I relied on *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. See also *Integral Psychology*.

**Page 115** Franklin Jones/Adi Da’s autobiography is titled *The Knee of Listening*. It’s truly a fascinating and insightful book despite his misdeeds.

**Page 116** The problematic behavior of Chogyam Trungpa is documented in Mick Brown’s *The Spiritual Tourist*, (p. 199), which I highly recommend because of Brown’s mix of openness to and criticism of spiritual teachers and experiences.
Page 117  Martin Heidegger's description of meditative thinking is explored in *Discourse on Thinking*, pp. 43-57.

Page 118  Althusser's arguments concerning interpellation come from his essay "Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy*.

Page 119  Robert Greenway's informal study of hikers returning from wilderness trips can be found in his essay, "Healing by the Wilderness Experience," in *Wild Ideas* (David Rothenberg, editor). Greenway's study includes the following findings: seventy-seven percent of participants described a major life-change upon return (thirty-eight percent of those changes remaining after five years); sixty percent incorporated at least one ritual or contemplative practice learned on the trip into their daily life (seventeen percent were still doing these practices after five years); and ninety percent stated that they were able to break an addiction (cigarettes, unhealthy foods, etc.) However, the most profound change he documented was in dream patterns. After three days in the wild, seventy-six percent of hikers had dramatic changes in the frequency and vividness of their dreams, and eighty-two percent reported that their content changed from urban and busy scenarios to some aspect of the wilderness. This suggests that our cultural patterns are only about three days deep (128-129).

Greenway is an authority on the effects of wilderness experience because he has taken people on excursions into the woods for thirty years in association with a course he taught at Sonoma State University in northern California. He says that it usually takes about three days for people to cross the boundary from physically inhabiting wilderness
to the psychological experience of wilderness. He also states that while there is a plurality of responses to these excursions into the wilderness, participants invariably speak of discovering a primal sense of community with nature and their fellow hikers that seemed to have already been within them. In fact, wilderness experiences can be so powerful and life transforming that hikers often go through a mourning period when they leave the wilderness and attempt to reacclimate themselves to their cultural lives. The real danger, however, is that they will fully reacclimate without any change in their spiritual and aesthetic awareness.

I'll never forget one of the thru-hikers (as opposed to day-hikers) I met out on the Appalachian Trail. He was a fifty or so year old vice-president of a bank who had already been out in the wilderness for some four months (with periodic town stops). I asked him what he was going to do once the trip was over. He responded in a very serious tone that he was going to start getting rid of stuff because "you just don't need it." It seems that his wilderness experience cured him of his addiction to over-consumption.

Page 120 The quotation from Walker Percy comes from The Message in the Bottle, p. 60.

Page 142 Dr. Michael Klaper's views on veganism and health are available on his website (www.vegsourc.com/klaper).
Page 147  Tyler Volk's comments on Gaia theory and "breathing with the biosphere" are included in Connie Barlow's fine book, *Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science*, p. 212.

Page 167  Wilhelm Reich's comments and quotations on the habit body and armoring are taken from his essay, "Character and Society," in the Journal of Orgonomy, pp. 116-129. However, most of my knowledge of Reich's thought comes from conversations with my friend Eric Ramsey and via his book, *The Long Path to Nearness*.

Page 168  Iris Marion Young's comments and quotations on the positioning of women in patriarchal societies are taken from *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 145-154.

Page 169  Dr. Michael Fox's comments on agribusiness and animals are taken from *Eating with Conscience: The Bioethics of Food*, pp. 21-49. I chose not to enter into the animal testing debate in the main text due to space limitations. However, I do think that most testing is unreliable and unnecessary, especially since testing is often used to look for cures for the diseases our poor eating habits have helped create.

In *Lethal Laws: Animal Testing, Human Health, and Environmental Policy*, Alix Fano is also concerned about this vicious cycle:

> It is apparent that our society's endorsement of inhumane and ineffectual toxicity tests, in which live animals are essentially poisoned to death, has fostered a lack of respect for life--in science, government and industry--which has predictably boomeranged (2).
Fano argues that “humans have become the ultimate ‘guinea pigs’ in a increasingly polluted world” (2). Animal testing, rather than safeguarding human health, is used to legitimate the deterioration of our environment due to the piling up of millions of “safe doses” of chemicals in our food, air and water. In other words, companies have a vested monetary interest in “proving” via testing that their products and practices are safe. Fano’s study has led her to expose the unreliability of animal tests sponsored by the corporate establishment that profits from our ignorance concerning this unreliability. And her arguments are based on scientific research, as she wanted to refute the claims for animal testing without recourse to ethics. She feels this is important because many have come to see testing as an unfortunate, but necessary evil.

The arguments in favor of animal testing raise some interesting contradictions. Some argue that animals should be used for testing because they are so similar to humans and thus the results of testing will be accurate. In fact, Chimpanzee and Bonobo DNA differs from human DNA by just over one percent. But Steven Wise argues in his book, *Rattling the Cage: Toward Legal Rights for Animals*, that this very similarity should afford animals the right not to be harmed: “... using raw power to exploit nonhuman primates because they are like us rests on an argument that is arbitrary, unprincipled, and corrosive to equality, which at bottom demands that likes be treated alike” (252). On the other hand, Fano argues that despite our genetic similarity with animals, there is enough of a difference to make testing unreliable. Therefore, either way you look at it—we are similar or we are different--these authors make arguments that question the legitimacy of animal testing.
Interestingly, these arguments question the logic and reasonableness of animal testing without appealing to emotions, or emotional intelligence, which is another dimension of the critique of testing and agribusiness. For example, in Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Susan McCarthy's well-received book, *When Elephant's Weeps: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, the authors thoroughly catalogue what we all know to be true: animals have feelings. In fact, I'm sure the reason this book was on the best-seller's list is because we can all identify with its thesis. Anyone who has ever lived in proximity with animals knows their emotional lives well. It is why we love them and why they love us.

Page 172 The quotation by Gary Snyder on education can be found in *The Practice of the Wild*, p. 119.

Page 172 My thoughts on education and modernity are supported by C. A. Bower's fine book, *The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools*. Bowers thoroughly catalogues the destructive biases of the modern period: an anthropocentric view of the world, the privileging of "high status" forms of knowledge such as computer technology over a knowledge of relationships, the understanding that all technological change should be viewed as progress while ecologically sustainable traditions of indigenous cultures are viewed as irrelevant and as inhibiting progress, a secular rather than a spiritual world view that holds the rational process of the individual as the ultimate basis of authority, an understanding of social development in economic terms that promotes the
commodification of community life, a reliance on machine metaphors to guide our understanding of life processes, and the hegemonic sway of scientific knowledge over all other kinds of knowledge (7-9). There are certainly challenges to these biases within the university, but they are still quite dominant. In fact, Bowers states that these cultural biases are learned early and often in both liberal arts and science education.

Page 209 Rafael and I also read Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, where he explains the relation of “Mind” to the concept of God:

... there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem. This larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by “God,” but it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology... Freudian psychology expanded the concept of mind inwards to include the whole communicative system within the body—the autonomic, the habitual, and the vast range of unconscious process. What I am saying expands mind outwards. And both of these changes reduce the scope of the conscious self. A certain humility becomes appropriate, tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger. A part—if you will—of God (461-462).

Bateson goes on to state that the evolution of “Mind,” or the pattern that connects, is characterized by both order and randomness. As a result, he argues that rigid knowing (or order) is antithetical to continual evolution because it closes down the dynamic interplay between order and randomness (or stability and flexibility, rigor and imagination, knowing and not-knowing) that is required for creative emergence. I believe we need to respect the interplay between these twin principles if we are to explore an
open and creative life-path. Those who see no order in life are existentially lost. They feel that there are no guidelines to evaluate anything and that nothing has meaning. On the other hand, those who ignore the randomness of life often project their preconceived interpretations onto events. This rigidity of thought then leads to dogmatic morality.

References and Recommendations


