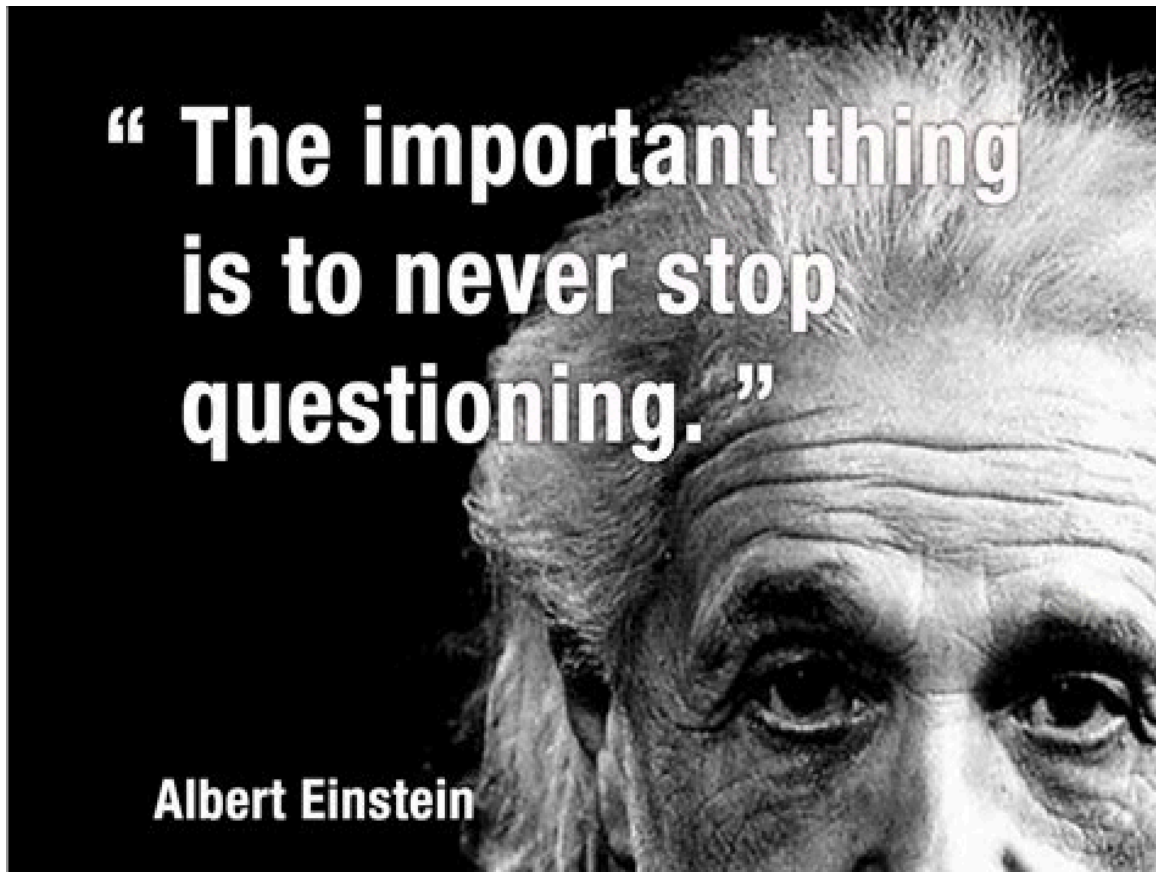


My Life as An Alt-Epistemologist



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IT STARTED WITH MY TEACHER

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From 1967 to 1972 I was under the influence of my major professor in graduate school.

In his mind, my teacher was a skeptic, and proud of it. Emotionally, however, he was a positivist. And it was this dynamic discord within him which excited me, which vibrated in tune with my own.

A skeptic is a searcher, he would tell me, over and over again, as I blundered into one dogma after another. A skeptic never stops searching, he believes nothing of what he hears or sees, but forever looks between, within, behind, beyond.

So far, so good.

But his emotional positivism had stopped him in his search. Unable to live out his ideals, he had become cynical. He could see/feel into the nature of reality only with his five outer senses. Thus was most of reality closed to him.

As a skeptic, his colleagues considered him radical, irreverent; a gadfly, even a pest.

But his skepticism ran skin-deep. That irreverence was only a token. Emotionally, he was a member of his generation of professional philosophers, each of them divided in two, body and mind.

Descartes said that body and mind are separate and independent entities, meeting only at the pineal gland. This gland is said by mystics to be the physical location of the spiritual “third eye,” that “sixth sense” within the body, not one of the original five.

Professional philosophers today agree with Descartes on the separation of mind and body. Indeed they live that separation in their lives. I think, therefore I am. Therefore only my thinking is me.

Professional philosophers ignore Descartes’ remark about the pineal gland. They see only bodies, they feel only their minds. Their spirits, their hearts, have been cut out from them.

Despite his skepticism, my teacher had final standards, those of his five outer senses. He was doomed to seek the “facts”; doomed, as a skeptic, to sniff around, discovering what was “false.”

I was with him for seven years.

It took me seven years to grow beyond him — something he told me in the beginning I must do.

“Do you want to be like me?” he asked, impish, as I came to him finally, begging for his help.

“Yes!” I cried, eagerly.

“*Wrong!*” he thundered. “You must go beyond me, you must stand on my shoulders.”

And when I did he rejected my philosophy, accusing me hotly: “You are an absolute relativist!”

I thanked him.

For if the spiritual world exists, then both mind and body are bathed in its aura and there need be no separation between them. Once we climb back into our bodies, our minds will assume their rightful place as servants to the spirit, and we will begin to appreciate the mystery, the utter relativity, of the movement of the spirit in the world.

The usual problem with seeing things relatively (and I mean absolutely relatively, i.e., everything is in motion, reality is a process, not three merely dimensional) is that we can't; we can't postulate it and know what we mean. We can only point to it, live it, live in it.

To establish the meaning of anything we must compare it to something else, itself regarded as "fixed" (i.e., not relative). "Absolute relativity" then is, once spoken, only an empty phrase. It refers to nothing, no thing at all. So we settle for a relative relativism.

We measure relative value by assuming a fixed standard against which any other two things (ideas, values, people, nations) are measured as for their relative value via-a-vis that standard. So when we say "everything is relative" we are only meaning, in effect, that there are different standards by which to measure things. Or, things have value relative to standards. *Whatever standard we pick, however, tends to degenerate into dogma.*

So far I have been talking mere philosophy. Its consequences, however, are very real. For what is happening today is that our standards are being pulled out from under us.

This frightens us.

Our world is falling apart.

The sky is falling in.

Why do I say this? Because, it turns out, absolute relativity pulls the rug of civilization out from under us. Here, I offer two examples of how absolute relativity is degrading society as we know it; both of these examples are among the most important human considerations/institutions. These are gold and marriage.

Gold was the universal standard for 2000 years until 1971. In that year the Feds said that the amount of money extant would no longer bear a fixed relationship to gold. That the gold standard was old, outdated, unnecessary.

Economists do not understand the relationship between economics and the human psyche, between economic and emotional security. For once that fixed relationship was broken, the Feds were free to print as much money as they liked. By pulling the rug out from under economics, the stage was set for rampant inflation and devaluation of the dollar.

Interestingly enough (for those who take note of coincidences), something happened to pull the rug out from under the long-standing institution of marriage too — and at about the same time (late '60s). No longer can we say “til death do us part” — and know we mean it. Each time we divorce and marry again, we are de-valuing the traditional standard of marriage.

Many people say we need a revaluation of marriage — but these studies are still, by and large, confined to various descriptions of the changing rights and duties of the individuals within it. Nowhere have I yet seen a revaluation of marriage itself as an institution and its changing relationships to the rest of society. The proof: when we divorce, we still think we have, in some fundamental way, failed. We vow never to marry again. Or we vow that “next time it will be different.”

As with marriage, so with gold. The collapse of both of these as fixed standards is ushering in new kinds of wars, economic and emotional wars, where everyone fights to preserve his or her own security by grabbing money and the “things” it buys — including gold; by grabbing partners, one marriage after another, then another . . .

We still rush for seats on the see-saw, but its pivot is cracking. Soon both ends of the board will come crashing down.

Nobody wins in an economic/emotional war. Everybody loses, once the pivot breaks.

The question is, what is the standard that shall replace the gold standard and its hand-maiden, the “free” market?

The question is, what is the standard that shall replace marriage and its handmaiden, the moral majority?

Either we will create other standards — and treat them too, as gods — or we will once and for all recognize the relativity of all standards, all value-systems, save those of the laws of our own nature and our environment. These laws, however, we cannot “know” in the end — even relatively! For they interpenetrate one another, they swallow one another, there is no single perspective to which all other views are to be reduced.

The laws of nature are natural, and therefore mysterious to the mind. They emerge from the spirit. They cannot be contained.

Absolute relativity in our thinking *could* encourage spiritual compassion, absorbing all in all, a movement of the heart of humankind.

That is why, herr professor, I am an (absolute) relativist. This does not mean I’m amoral, that I have no values. On the contrary. My standards are subject to change, as my perspective enlarges to admit as much of reality as I possibly can at any given moment into consciousness. If everyone did this, the lines of division between us would melt, dissolve, and we would realize: there are no “facts.” There are only miracles. And we are one.

Whatever my current standards, they are ever subject to a law higher and deeper than my conscious knowledge of it. This law I regard as a vanishing point for my constantly growing awareness; for its mystery, its utter relativity, is that against which I measure my life.

Essay

QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS May Yield A Genuine Common Sense

Chapter Six

MY SECRET LIFE: Ten Tools for Transformation

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Shut Down in First Grade

Soon after entering first grade, I was having trouble with arithmetic. It wasn't that I couldn't add or subtract or multiply or divide. If I memorized and followed the rules, then I could get correct answers. But what if I forgot the rules? They seemed so arbitrary. The entire subject unnerved me. It felt weird, unreal. Like it was "out there" somewhere, floating in space, and I couldn't grab hold of it, smell it, taste it, chew it, digest it.

Being only six years old, there was no way I could articulate this feeling, or even consciously know that this was how I felt. But something did make me raise my hand one day, during arithmetic . . .

"Yes, Ann?"

“But what . . .” I asked, suddenly scared, like I was jumping off a cliff — “But what is . . . a *number*??”

Sister Bernita turned around from the blackboard, and she looked sort of startled. My question had interrupted the flow of the class. Now she was staring, and the boys and girls ahead of me and on either side of me were turning to stare, too. My ears were burning . . .

Finally, she opened her mouth and said, quietly, mouth puckering: “That is not a question, dear.”

That is not a question, dear. What you asked *does not exist*.

I made sure I never asked such a question again. And throughout my school years, mathematics remained a floating world, disconnected from reality.

I look back and see what it must have been like for Sister Bernita to have one of her 60 squirming first and second graders ask that question. She had so much material she had to get through in one hour. And so many children to teach it to . . .

My question stuck out from the flow. It was not factual, but philosophical. I wasn't asking “how?” but “why?” I was wondering about the whole endeavor of mathematics, trying to get a handle on it, rather than just memorize and follow rules. Had Sister Bernita been able to follow me into where I had gone, had she been able to say, “Thanks, Ann, that is a very good question. That is an *important* question. What is a number? Are numbers real, like sticks and stones, only invisible? Are numbers something else altogether in another kind of ‘reality,’ like our dreams? Are numbers something we make up, out of thin air? Or were they always there, before anyone was born?”

And then, oh! If only she had gone on to say she didn't know the answer to my question. That she doubted anyone did. That philosophers have been discussing this question for centuries. That it is one of those questions which leads us to new places, that those who ask such questions are explorers, that they make discoveries . . .

But she didn't say that. And of course, such a response might have shocked me as much as her denial of the question. For of course, at six, I was already socialized to look for an answer, one answer, *the* answer, to this question, just like any other; questions *always* had answers, didn't they?

And if Sister Bernita didn't know the answer, my doctor father probably did. He knew everything. I had never heard of a question that had no answer.

Imagine what it would have been like to have such a discussion in first grade. To have been encouraged to conjecture, dream, imagine, think of various alternative ways to look at numbers and what they might mean, why we work with them in our lives, why and where they are or are not important. Imagine being introduced to Plato's point of view on numbers, or that of Pythagoras, or Heraclitus.

But that did not happen. Sister Bernita did not follow me. Perhaps she was too busy. Perhaps she didn't know how to answer me. In fact, during those minutes while she was staring at me, she might have been trying to figure out how one *could* answer such a question. She too, was accustomed to thinking that every question had an answer. She too might have felt like she was falling off a cliff when she tried to imagine the type of space within which numbers exist.

Like most adults when confronted with the extraordinary questions of small children, Sister Bernita found herself dumbfounded, uneasy. She was accustomed to remaining within a universe of discourse as defined by rules of arithmetic. Most likely, it had never occurred to her to ask about the significance of that universe, what its context was, or just what kind of reality it had. Like other adults, she was inside the loop, and like most small children, my natural exploratory mind had not yet shut down, so for me, no question was impossible . . . not until she told me that one wasn't. Not until I saw how she looked at me. How everyone looked at me . . .

So this question, and her denial that this question existed, was perhaps the most important lesson in socialization I ever received. Certainly the most memorable one. If I thought about my question, and thought also that it didn't exist, then how could I have asked it? Did that mean I didn't exist? Rather than come to terms with my question —

and her embarrassed response to it, and my classmates' nervous giggles — I shut down memory. That question did not exist. I had not asked it.

As a human being, I wanted to be accepted. To be included in the group. So I put my question away, and diligently memorized and applied the rules of mathematics all the way through high school. Never, during all those years, did it feel comfortable. Never did I feel I knew the subject. I knew I didn't know it. That I was a fake.

Which was worse, to feel like a fake or to be excluded from the group? At that young age, the latter, most decidedly.

My school career was successful. I graduated as co-valedictorian with my best friend Mary. Mary was smart, funny, original. I was a plodder, memorizing for tests, doing exactly what the teacher wanted. My successful career continued in college, at Catholic University, where I became so good at what we called “psyching out” teachers that I would distribute to my friends lists of questions I figured they would ask on tests — and be 90% correct. I ended up Phi Beta Kappa, graduating Magna cum Laude, and hadn't learned a thing.

What was there to learn? I was simply following the rules. My mind had been socially constructed into the normal grid, that grid functioning, in my case, like a sieve, through which “facts” were poured, and disappeared.

What Is Guilt?

By the time I was 23 years old, I was a graduate student in philosophy at Boston University, married to a narcissistic husband, and chafing under the constant care of two small children. At that time I was confronted with a very disturbing situation: the Catholic doctrine on birth control. The position of the Catholic Church on this matter bothered me so much that it started to undermine what I had been taught to call my “faith,” that unquestioning acceptance of what I did not understand. The rule said one thing, but my very deepest being was demanding the opposite. I *knew* I wasn't meant to have more children, that to do so would endanger my mental and emotional health. And yet my church forbade birth control. The contradiction between my gut feeling as to

what was good for me and this particular rule was the wedge that began to separate me out from the Catholic Church.

Final severance came as the result of an experiment that I conducted with myself. (Odd that I should have “conducted an experiment” — not exactly good girl behavior.) Here was the experiment: The rules said that I had to go to Mass on Sunday, “under pain of mortal sin.” Throughout my childhood, of course, whenever I “committed a sin,” especially a “mortal sin” (like French kissing my boyfriend in high school), I felt terrible afterwards, wracked by guilt. Now I wondered, “What if guilt is merely a conditioned response?” I.e., what if the only reason I feel guilty is because I have been taught to feel guilty? What if guilt is not, after all, the result of original sin, not God’s revenge, an innate response for “sins” committed through our own “free will”? For if guilt is merely a conditioned response, I reasoned, then if I don’t go to church for several Sundays in a row, the feeling of guilt should lessen, as I gradually “re-condition” myself to new behavior. I decided to test my theory.

Well, lo and behold, after the very first Sunday without Mass I didn’t feel guilty, not at all! This floored me. I was dumbfounded to think that I had been following all these rules, thinking that God had made them, with guilt to remind us when we were going astray, when in fact, if my feelings were any indication, I had been wasting my Sunday mornings! I felt both exhilarated — to discover this — and disgusted — to think I’d been fooling myself all my life!

Given the amazing and compelling result of this first small experiment, I instantly generalized, began to wonder, *What if I made my entire life an experiment?*

Not going to Sunday Mass was the first time since first grade that I had dared to question an assumption which had been handed down to me by others. In first grade, my question did not feel like a dare, but this one did. I knew full well the consequences of “disobeying the rules” of Catholicism: the price was ostracism from my own family.

Something in me had shifted. No longer could I look at “rules” — or my “roles” in life — in the same old way.

From then on, the enculturation process, which had shaped me, little by little, began to unravel. I had got hold of the end of a thread, and like Ariadne, just started to pull. The result, from then on, was a process of — at first, imperceptible, but continuous (what we now call) “transformation.”

I was wondering theoretically what it would be like to conduct my entire life as an experiment, and yet I had little idea what that would entail in practice, and had I been aware of the gathering momentum of such a project — not to mention the price I would pay — I would have been too terrified to begin.

At first, I experimented with my personality, trying out different masks, to see how they fit. This was the ‘60s, remember, so in these experiments I was aided by marijuana, a drug which I had first tried out at parties, but which I much preferred to smoke alone or with one other. I wasn’t smoking for entertainment; I wanted to change myself, to let go of my shy, nervous, uptight “self” and when I smoked, I was able to relax into the present moment and respond spontaneously. I remember saying to a friend that my goal was to have my stoned personality become so comfortable and automatic that it would continue even when I wasn’t stoned — a goal which I achieved within a few years. Eventually, my socially constructed personality disintegrated, to reveal what I can only call mystery, magic, miracle. For if personality can become a problem to be solved, then what personality conceals is a shining presence.

For me, an even more fascinating property of marijuana was that it made me more aware of my thinking process, and helped me penetrate more deeply into whatever I chose to focus on.

However, though I now began to consciously question my assumptions, I was not prepared to take on all of them at once. Assumptions are not like dominos, ready to be tipped over, one by one. Assumptions are more like the air we breathe, invisible, but necessary — not for life itself, but for interpretations, positions within life, attitudes. And when they change, the process is not so much logical as bio-logical. Once the beginning is made, after a certain point, at least for me, there was no stopping it.

Yet, as anyone who has ever conducted this same experiment knows, the weight of family, cultural and religious tradition is so heavy, so thick, so congealed, that pushing in the wedge to free oneself can only be accomplished gradually, millimeter by millimeter, by marshaling enormous focus, determination and endurance. There is no end to it. The process of freeing oneself up from unnoticed prejudice is endless.

Mercury turns Retrograde

Within a year or so of that first experiment, I began to notice a peculiar thing: my mind, which had been focused on the outside world, was turning around, looking within (see also Chapter 4, pp. ____). As a graduate student in philosophy, I had been interested in “metaphysics,” ultimate questions of Being, a subject that, I had been taught, was located outside me. Now I was interested in the workings of my own mind, wondering whether I could know anything, and if so, how would I know that I knew? How could I be certain, how could I justify or prove it? Philosophers call this subject “epistemology.”

I can remember being puzzled by this 180° shift in the orientation of my mind; I wondered what it meant, how it could have taken place. Again, the change was not logical, but biological, a part of the natural unfolding of my own nature. (This shift had taken place prior to marijuana; so marijuana was not the “cause.”)

Later, when I began to study astrology in 1974, I discovered an uncanny planetary correlation to that mysterious inward turning in 1969: that was the year when my “progressed Mercury” (symbolizing the thinking process, the conscious mind) turned to go “retrograde,” i.e., to travel backwards. Progressed Mercury’s retrograde motion continued for 21 years, turning to go “direct” again in 1993. So I had a good long time to explore the inner workings of my own psyche.

Back then, as Mercury turned to go retrograde, my mind turned, to focus back on itself. I became bored with “pure philosophy,” and gravitated towards psychology and sociology. I was interested in the evolution of consciousness, both in the species and in the individual. Jean Piaget, and his developmental study of the evolution of the child’s framework for comprehending the world, drew me like a magnet. (We now call this framework a “paradigm,” and glibly toss the word about it, as if to move from one

paradigm to another is like changing towns, or jobs, or tossing a coin.) And I began to read the radical British psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, and sense his meaning, the feeling behind his words.

But it was not until my second summer in the commune at the Hotel Idlewild, in 1970, that I was initiated, like so many of my peers, into the holy of holies, the ordinary natural world as experienced under the influence of LSD. This was nine months after my near-death experience in the hospital, two months after I separated from my husband. The ghostly figure I had presented the summer before had evaporated. I was new, raw, and ravenous — for experience of any kind.

That first LSD journey, as we all say, “blew my mind” wide open. Whereas the Sunday Mass experiment had taught me that guilt is a conditioned response, and that just because I felt “guilty” for something did not necessarily mean it was inherently “bad” or “wrong;” and though my mind had now turned, to be more fascinated with the inner than the outer world, LSD opened me to the inner/outer world as one, a continuum, to the endless richness of creation, to worlds within worlds, exploding into light, to my own body dissolving into rivers of color.

Post-LSD, no longer did the world consist of objects in space; rather, it was obvious that the world is composed of continuous, multidimensional transformations of energy. It took only one LSD trip to shift me from Newton to Einstein, from the 17th century to the 20th.

The Catholic Church had taught me that there was One True Church, and One True Way to look at the world. That assumption had been exposed as fiction, but I was not prepared for the sheer glory, the endless wordless splendor of the natural world as experienced under LSD. Now not only was the old world deposed, the new world was so much larger, so much more mysterious.

I, like millions of my peers, was inducted into the mysteries of the universe through this and other organic substances, long sacred to primitive cultures, and so long hidden from ours. From now on, my enculturated fundamentalism would be continuously challenged, and transformed, into an endlessly creative relativism. For how could one

hold any one position, and be certain, have proof that it was the “right” one? There is no right and wrong, there is only this endless proliferation of wonder within wonder upon wonder . . .

So did LSD dissolve the boundaries of left-brained consciousness into the spectacular ongoing symphony of music and images and symbols of the right brain.

A note of caution here: relativism signifies an open mind, not necessarily an open heart. Relativism is amoral; it did not teach me how to be a human being. In order to act ethically in a world of other people, I had to undergo another initiation, this one long, demanding, and ongoing; it involves learning from my daily interactions with others, how to respond with love. Relativism, not compassion, is gained through “tripping.”

My Encounter with Wittgenstein

Later that summer I took my second (and final) LSD trip, with Tracy, my new boyfriend, a young philosophy professor who was as interested as I in the philosophical implications of hallucinogenic drugs.

During this experience Tracy became frightened at the vastness of things (we were tripping on the beach, during a spectacularly starry night), and laid down on his stomach with his head in the sand. Once in a while he would raise his head, try to turn on his back, and look up. Instantly, he would become dizzy, then nauseous, and have to turn over again. I, on the other hand, lay beside him on my back with eyes open. And, like those childhood years when I had slept out in the backyard in my sleeping bag all summer long, I surrendered to the universe, streaking out to the stars and beyond.

The next morning I picked up a book by Ludwig Wittgenstein, a 20th century Austrian philosopher. The book had been sitting on Tracy’s desk, and now I told him I wanted to read it.

This surprised him. It surprised me, too. Tracy had made numerous attempts to get me to read this book, saying that Wittgenstein was interesting, even fascinating, that I would probably like him. But I had resisted, since my mentor Agassi had told me never to read Wittgenstein, that “he was confused, and” (whispering dramatically) “a

subclinical schizophrenic.” Though I was now in that summer when I had told the chairman of the department that I couldn’t accept the dissertation fellowship, because I had to learn to think with my guts rather than my head, I was still the “good (enough) uptight graduate student” to believe what my favorite teacher had told me about Wittgenstein. And now here I was, wanting to read this particular philosopher, the morning after my second LSD trip. Why?

I sat there all day at my desk, reading Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. This was unusual; I have always had a hard time concentrating on difficult intellectual matter for a sustained period. But this was different. I was rooted to the spot, mesmerized, slowly absorbing, page by page.

Just as I finished the book, Tracy popped his head in, and asked, “How did it go?” The look on my face must have held him, because he walked in slowly, and formally, deliberately, sat down on the bed opposite my desk chair. Only then did he look at me. “Well?”

It was as if I was under a spell, and Tracy’s demeanor both recognized and honored it. Then, suddenly, out of my mouth, without knowing what would come, these words: “This book is true. But I don’t know what it means.”

Shock followed, then terror. “Oh my God, what did I just say? What I just said is impossible, can’t be said.” For how could I know that this book was true, unless I knew what it meant? In the canons of western philosophical inquiry, one must know what something means *before* deciding whether it is true or false.

This rule was obvious. This rule was one of the methodological assumptions not only of both scientific and philosophical inquiry, but of ordinary common-sense! And I, in my thoughtless and impulsive way, had just reversed it. I had claimed the truth of something before I knew what it meant. *How is this possible?*

I date my decision to devote myself to investigating my assumptions to that moment when I said something which I didn’t understand but which I knew, in my heart, to be true. I knew that the particular type of “meaning” in Wittgenstein was true in the sense

that it held great value, even though it seemed impossible to understand in any kind of rational way.

I had suddenly shot down beneath my common-sense, beneath even my scientific and philosophical assumptions, to encounter my own intuition, and though I couldn't epistemologically "justify" or prove what I had said about Wittgenstein, it no longer mattered. From that point on, I no longer looked for certainty, or proof. LSD had taught me that there is no ground to stand upon; that all is energy ceaselessly combining and recombining, and the very next day, reading Wittgenstein, I was now applying this new way of thinking to my own philosophical tradition.

Within a few days I went to see Agassi, telling him that I had read Wittgenstein. "Oh?" he looked up from his desk, curious, expectant. "Yes. And you're right. He is confused. But his confusion is *important*." He cocked his head, raised his eyebrow, and responded, "You may read Wittgenstein."

I had shifted from thinking with my head to thinking with my gut, and could now accept the fellowship. Returning to graduate school that September, I enrolled my younger son in a morning nursery school, and hired one of his teachers to baby-sit him in the afternoons. Then I bought an electric typewriter, and every morning sat down to "work," until the children returned home mid-afternoon. Every day, for six hours, investigating my assumptions.

The procedure I followed was first, to smoke a few puffs of marijuana, and then open up the *Philosophical Investigations* or another of Wittgenstein's later works, and read through a paragraph or two. I was not so much interested in what he actually said, as in the feelings, which would come up in me when I read him. Wittgenstein was my foil; I used the peculiar intellectual and emotional torment I felt in him to access my own. I recognized this man's words, despite his attempt to keep himself on a philosophical level, as coded messages, symptoms of acute loneliness, depression, confusion, pain. His confusion was important because I sensed that Wittgenstein, unlike any other philosopher I had ever read (the closest to him might be Nietzsche) was experiencing emotionally the contradictions of the world-view of western culture. His analogy of "the philosopher caught in the fly bottle, who only needs to turn around to

see his way out,” was for him, real. He was caught, suffocating, slammed against the inside of the bubble of scientific “rationality,” and desperate to escape.

In my first few years as a graduate student, I had attended the Boston University Colloquia in the Philosophy of Science, composed of students and professors from all Boston area universities. Like other shy, aspiring graduate students, I would diligently take notes on the lecture given and the arguments afterwards, seeking to understand what they were saying in their own terms. Wanting to be able to argue myself, one way or another, but feeling too shy and ignorant to either hold a position or defend it.

In those years, I had arrived with my hair in a neat bun; now my hair was flying loose. I was still attending the colloquia, but my purpose had changed. I was looking upon these events from an anthropological/sociological point of view. What were these professors’ arguments revealing about them? Now, rather than trying to understand and either mentally defend or critique the points they were making at the tops of the logical chains they were presenting, I was following those chains back, way back, to attempt to discover the assumptions behind them. I wanted to notice what they took for granted, what was obvious, what they agreed upon with a casual shrug of the shoulders, or nod of the head, an “of course!” For I knew that the points I took for granted were the ones I did not question. That these assumptions of mine, and of theirs — for I knew we were all the same, had all been raised to breathe the same intellectual air — were precisely the problem.

My purpose was to understand the common-sense of philosophy, by investigating my own and others’ philosophical assumptions. I saw that common-sense as a net that had been thrown over us all, preventing us from seeing beyond. We were all caught in the fly bottle, and there didn’t seem to be an opening.

My gut was guiding me to pinpoint certain crucial nodes of what we take to be common-sense in philosophy in order to begin to gain an overview of that common-sense as a whole, as a sort of map. The map itself, I was beginning to sense, was itself the abstract version of ordinary common-sense, and had no referent in actual reality. Ours was a common-sense where we had no senses in common! Not only did

this so-called “common-sense” keep each of us in a certain place or space, it was decidedly pathological: witness the lonely torment of Wittgenstein, witness my own.

For years, I had felt that my mind was stagnant, that it was like a grid, into which facts were stuffed, or through which they passed into oblivion. “But what is learning, *real* learning?” I would cry, mostly to myself, but once in a while to some teacher or other. They would look at me mystified. (The woman is hysterical. What is her problem?) Though I didn’t fully realize it then, Nietzsche’s strange dictum, “to learn is to change,” was becoming my own.

Wittgenstein talked endlessly about solipsism, the “problem of other minds,” about whether or not we could know that other minds exist. Whereas this problem was one that had been earnestly studied for centuries as a part of epistemology (it is still there in course curricula of university philosophy departments, titled something like “The Problem of Other Minds”), it was clear to me that for Wittgenstein, this problem was real. That he felt alone and isolated, trapped inside his brain. That he could not get out.

The famous philosophical maxim of Rene Descartes, “I think, therefore I am,” had by this time, in the late 20th century, become a psychiatric symptom: *I think, therefore I am, therefore only my thinking is me.*

I was discovering how philosophical ideas gradually embedded themselves within society to finally precipitate out in daily life as “common sense.” The Cartesian mind/body split, theoretical in his time, was now real. And Laing’s book, *The Divided Self*, showing the meaningfulness of the so-called nonsensical remarks of schizophrenics, was the end result of our much-vaunted “scientific” world-view.

By the time that year was over, I had so thoroughly dissolved the structure of my own thinking process, that I had no “hold” on socially constructed “reality.” If I had to endure Sister Bernita’s and my classmates’ stares back in first grade, imagine how others were viewing me now. Imagine my loneliness. I had diagnosed solipsism as the logical/biological result of the scientific world-view, and I knew that I too, was trapped within it.

But the converse held true as well. I saw everyone but me as trapped within his or her own solipsistic stance. I saw them, their personalities, their egos, as defenses against a reality which they had not yet encountered. That shining presence, what I was communing with, in secret. And knowing, intuitively, that it was ours. That our common-sense could be a sensing in common. That if I could transform, then so could the entire world. We are one. One plus one is one. That's the kind of mathematics I could recognize.

Newsletter

CREATING A NEW FOUNDATION OF VALUES FOR OUR LIVES

Saturn in Taurus, One More Time

Celestial Navigations #9, November 2000

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During the six months from October 17, 2000 through April 20, 2001, we are undergoing the final retrograde period of Saturn (the planet of discipline; of making decisions; of getting down to the nitty gritty; of the social order and one's relationship to it) in the final degrees of Taurus (the sign of matter, manifestation, the body, Earth herself). Saturn will not again be in this section of the zodiac until the year 2030.

During this six-month period we will experience one final slowdown, one more opportunity to rework what grounds us, to appreciate our own self-worth, to recognize real values. Our challenge is to truly ground ourselves before the quicksilver liftoff that awaits us in the Spring of 2001 when Saturn enters Gemini to join Jupiter, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto in explosively expanding fire and air signs.

I write this as the snow falls. Winter begins to close in on the Tetons. Winter is a time to tell stories. Here's a story from my own life. A very "Saturn in Taurus" story. A story about "values." About the values we need to create a secure "bottom-line."

I dedicate this essay to all those, especially women, whose energy does not translate easily into money, whose worth, for others, in this materialistic culture, is largely invisible, whose self-worth is at risk.

The year is 1977. I am in my mid-30s and newly divorced from a short sweet marriage with the man who had been my high school sweetheart. I have \$3000 to my name (we emptied out our savings account for me), and am just beginning to practice as a consulting astrologer. In order to make ends meet I also work as a “go-fer” for a friend in the construction business and as a house painter. All very part-time. As part-time as I can make it. What I want and need is time to study astrology. My free time is what I value most, and I make it my priority. I live simply, in a tiny apartment in my home town, wear second-hand clothes, and walk or ride my bicycle for transportation and health.

Within a few months, I begin to date David, an ophthalmologist with a large practice and little debt or overhead. Since I am a strict feminist, whenever we go out I pay my own way. And yet, since I am “poor,” our nights out are limited to movies, dessert and coffee. On weekends we hike or cross country ski.

One evening my new friend says to me as we each pull out money for movie tickets, “You know, Annie, we are using your survival money and my luxury money. Why don’t we just use my luxury money?”

I am astonished — and thrilled! In one stroke, David has transformed our perceptual framework for looking at money. Because he assigned two different categories to the money that flows through his hands and the money that flows through mine, we are now able to expand the recreational possibilities which his “luxury” money affords. Now, rather than a movie, coffee and dessert, we can go out for dinner, attend a concert, go on downhill ski vacations, travel to the King Tut exhibit in Seattle.

About six months later, we are eating yet another luxurious restaurant dinner when David says, while concentrating on cutting his steak, “You know, Annie, it’s great that we are using my luxury money to be able to do all these things . . .” He pauses, then looks up at me, “but you *could* say thank you once in a while.”

I am stunned. So stunned by his remark — it came out of the blue and in such a matter of fact manner — that it feels like he just plunged a knife into my heart. First, my

utter astonishment. And hurt, that he should feel that way. Then, almost immediately, a throbbing in the solar plexus as pain warps into fury. Fury. RAGE!

HOW DARE HE!

Instantly, like whiplash, all my conditioning as a “good girl” clamps down. It is as if I am locked into a straitjacket, suffocating into a sickening, poisonous fog. The fires of my fury dampen to an icky, yucky confusion: guilt.

Suddenly the mind kicks in. “Why does he feel that way? Am I not of any value? Doesn’t he realize how unfair this is?”

Finally, calling up through the fury and guilt, the perplexed questioning, a little voice from below, calm, quiet and absolutely sure: *“If I should say thank you, then he should say thank you.”*

But why? Why do I feel that way? WHY was his remark unfair?

(Though I slow it down here for the purpose of describing it frame by frame, that complicated internal process was over in less than one minute.)

Meanwhile, David sits across from me, watching me struggle to control the play of feelings across my face. He is waiting for my response. But I have no words. All I have are these terrifying, inexplicable feelings.

Then, suddenly, my body takes over, propels me up from the table, pulls on my coat, and marches me three miles home in flimsy shoes in a raging blizzard.

The next day when he calls I refuse to talk to him. I refuse again the second day, and the third. For three long weeks I refuse to speak with him. Not because I am punishing him. This is not manipulation, not the usual power play between lovers. No. This is an internal meltdown. That one seemingly innocent statement of his triggered something inside me so profound that it felt like I have been flung into a boiling cauldron. Swirling feelings hurl up memories — of other times when I was furious at unfairness, of other times when I felt guilty, unworthy, of the position “money” occupies in our society.

Looking back on it now, decades later, I see my process during those three weeks in 1977 as an alchemical transformation. Lifelong feelings of defensiveness, paranoia and victimhood — as a woman, as a person who carries a different set of values than the mainstream, as one who was educated in a field (philosophy) not valued by society — were pressing up from below, demanding attention.

Meanwhile, I was looking also at my relationship with David, at the energy I had put into it. Energy which he didn't even notice, much less recognize the value of! Why not? As was usual in my relationships back then, besides being his lover and companion, I was functioning as his psychiatrist. Through my patient listening and questioning, he was learning to look inside himself, and wonder what was there.

I was doing the work that women have done for centuries, invisible work, soul work, work that has to do with the human spirit, with the connections we have with one another, and with our own inner lives. But that, obviously, wasn't of value, or he would have realized that if I needed to say thank you, then so did he.

(Bear in mind that I don't mind thanking people for favors done. I realize that the human community is fueled by the grace of this remark between those who appreciate each other. However, in this case, given our culture's assumptions, had I been saying thank you to him without his reciprocation, it would have put me in the usual subservient position.)

I had taken in what he was saying with my mind and heart and solar plexus, and during those three weeks his remark drifted down into my bones, where memories are stored . . .

Like the time when I was a young adult and my father took me up to his study to show me the books he kept on each of his eight children. He wanted to congratulate me, he said, for costing him the least money. In other words, the less he spent on me, the more value I was to him. But since money seemed to be his most important value (or why congratulate me? And why compare me to my siblings?), then he was also saying that I was worth less than the others. So confusing.

Like the times, as a teenager, when I would show my report card to my parents and receive \$25 — \$5 for every A, straight A's. That was a lot of money back then, and my academic “success” separated me from my brothers and sisters (I was the oldest), who were understandably jealous of the money and upset to have to follow me in school. Then, to drive me further from them, I would flaunt my “superiority” by pretending money didn't matter, squandering the money or losing it. But it *did* matter, or wouldn't have had such an attitude. Again, so confusing!

Confusing especially because, deep down, money *didn't* matter to me. Not the way it should have, according to my father. When I was a high school senior he bought a new car. And instead of trading in his old one he generously gave it to me. But I kept leaving the car door open on the street side, and he would arrive home and see it open. And be furious. So he took the car away. But I acted as if it didn't matter, just to spite him. So I was pretending to be what I really was! Because it *didn't* really matter to me. He had assumed I wanted it without asking me.

As a teenager, I already truly didn't value money or the things it buys and, I could also use my insouciant attitude toward money to passively rebel against my father. (Which came first?)

To complicate the matter of money further, for many years I had known that it was unfair that our family (Daddy was a doctor, as was David) had more money than most people in our small town.

I vividly remember walking home from school one day in first grade with my friend Freddy, also the child of a doctor. Across the street, walking in the same direction, but alone, was another first grader, “troublemaker” Lorenzo Ortega, a Mexican child of migrant laborers, or, as we called them, “wetbacks.” Suddenly, I had a eureka moment: from some place deep within came the knowledge that I was a child of privilege. That this privilege was a lucky accident. That it did not make me “worth more” than Lorenzo. I felt elated and secure to realize how lucky I was; at the same time I felt terrible, since I recognized the unfairness of the class difference between Lorenzo and me. This knowledge flashed through, wordless. It was not something I could articulate, much less share with anyone, especially another child of privilege.

So now in my 30s, and estranged from David, for three weeks I wrestle with memories which provoke me to notice my own contradictory attitudes towards money and materialism. This wrestling is passionate, and it is purposeful: though I have no way of knowing it, I am unconsciously reaching for something, some larger way of understanding values. Some way of perceiving, of reframing the entire discussion, so that all the elements of my life and of what is happening between David and myself will reconfigure into a new gestalt.

And finally, the fog clears. I get it. Finally, it is there, The Eureka Moment.

“Money,” I announce to myself, ***“is energy. But it is not the primary energy, not “bottom line.”***

“No. The primary energy is human energy. This means that for some people, depending on their nature and training and how that nature and training is valued by the culture, their human energy is easily translated into money energy — and therefore, into other forms of physical manifestation. For others, their human energy is not recognized in this culture because it translates more naturally and easily into invisible dimensions, and so cannot be quantified in the same way.”

What this means for David and me: each of us is giving our human energy equally to the relationship. Since David’s energy translates easily into money energy and mine does not, our culture views his energy as more valuable than mine and does not recognize the equal exchange between us. Nor do we ourselves recognize the equal exchange, since we have both been conditioned by this culture. It takes enormous intellectual and emotional effort to see through the veil of one’s own culture.

Looking back on it now, I can say that David and I were fortunate in that the remark he made was the knife which, for me, cut through the veil to reality, leaving me extremely confused and in a sustained process of alchemical dissolution and transmutation.

David’s remark collapsed the cultural screen, penetrated to the heart of my nature, and left me feeling furious, confused, unworthy and guilty. Why? Because in thinking

about money, I had not recognized the distinction between nature and culture. Between me and what others wanted me to be.

Each of us has a certain nature, which more or less “fits” into the culture we happen to be in. Each of us is conditioned into the culture as children and young adults, with more or less success, depending on our nature. For me, as a person called to work mainly with invisible energies, the cultural fit was always problematic, and yet, since I am a human being who longs for connection with other humans, I was forever, and with little success, seeking to “fit in.”

When we are successfully conditioned into a culture’s “reality,” we don’t realize that there is a difference between culture and nature. Those of us who have trouble “fitting in” are fortunate in that we have the opportunity to recognize the difference between who we are and what culture wants us to be. With this recognition, at first we can usually see only two options open to us: either we continue our essentially frustrating attempts to “fit in” to culture’s “reality” or, resigned to our loneliness, we rebel against it. But these are *not* the only two options. In fact, both options assume cultural reality as the basic given, to which we must either conform or not.

What happened to me during that three week period was this: ***I realized a new given.*** The new given was my own human nature, the energy that moved through me, and its translations into other energetic and material forms. ***I was the primary given. David was the primary given. As is everyone on earth her or his own primary given. Each of us is the center of her or his own reality, interacting with all the others. Each of us, as the center of the entire universe, is the real bottom line.***

When we see only two options in relating our nature to culture, the polarity of conformity or rebellion, we are making culture (and its artifacts, including money) the primary given, rather than our own individual selves. In either case, no matter how much we succeed in conforming or rebelling, we never quite make it. There is always somebody or something more perfectly in conformity or rebellion than we are. So we strive until exhaustion, at which point we feel disappointed, or bitter, or icky, yucky. In

short, guilty. Guilt is our culture's glue. It binds us together and keeps us in our place, looking for something outside to give us our value.

This business of looking to the outside, of living from the outside in rather than the inside out, is so pervasive that it might give some clue as to why it took me three weeks to "figure out" why I was so angry. And why I had such a strong drive to figure it out. My life with another was at stake. Though I didn't realize it at the time, the understandings that would result from those three weeks in the underworld would change my life.

I spent three weeks groping blindly in the dark, a very turbulent dark, unable to do anything but feel and remember, and re-experience the excruciating contradictions which the culture's "bottom line" value of money had drummed into me. *The key to my being able to reconfigure the way I looked at money was this three-week period which preceded it.*

Usually, whenever we look at anything that upsets us, we try to "figure it out" as quickly as possible. Sometimes this approach to a "problem" works fine; at other times, it yields at best a superficial solution, a mere bandaid. The wound goes unhealed. It is just covered up.

During the one year when I was a college teacher (in a California experimental college: I was then fired for being "too experimental") back in 1972-73, I would say to my students: "I much prefer a fertile confusion to a sterile clarity." During those three weeks in 1977, I experienced the dramatic results of this preference. When a "problem" is deep — in this case, not merely personal, but cultural and historical — then we need to have the courage to open to the depths of ourselves and the pain and continued upset that this provokes in order to have any hope of eventually finding real clarity.

For radical new understandings do not originate in the mind, but come up through the body. And that takes time. Matter moves slower than mind. Saturn in Taurus is, more than anything else, S-L-O-W. To creatively utilize Saturn in Taurus during this six-month period requires patience, endurance, and the courage to allow ourselves to re-member the buried pain of experiences that hold contradiction at their core. Only as

we allow ourselves to descend will we be able to finally ascend with a more real set of values as the foundation for our lives.

My body during those long weeks was the source of both my memories and my capacity to hold all those memories, no matter how they conflicted, simultaneously in the same emotional space. And, since nature always seeks order out of chaos, the chaos of that turbulent time led, in the end, to this new (old) kind of order which had at its heart three assumptions:

1. Everything humans do can be expressed in energetic terms.
2. The primary bottom line value is not money energy but human energy.
3. Human energy can be translated into many different kinds of energy, of which money is only one.

Armed with this new gestalt, I called David up, and we arranged to meet. As I outlined for him the process I had gone through I could feel him absorbing what I was saying, and getting more and more excited. In the end, David was as thrilled with the way I had reframed “money as energy” as I had been with his original bifurcation of money into “luxury money and survival money.”

As a result of this perceptual shift, we both recognized that each of us was bringing equal energy to our relationship. That my energy, though less visible in its effects, was of equal value to his.

Within weeks, enveloped in our shared new field of understanding, and yet not wanting to live together, we decided to buy me a house to live in. And did so. Of course, when our friends heard about this, they snapped into the usual cultural perception of “the doctor and his mistress,” and were embarrassed and uncomfortable. But the new perceptual field that David and I had created was so powerful and so sure that they soon were pulled into it with us, and rejoiced, not because I was “lucky to have a rich and generous boyfriend,” but because they too were beginning to glimpse the expanding field of possibilities which we can enjoy once we realize that for every human being,

their own personal human energy is the real “bottom line,” equal to that of everyone else.

I went on to establish a community magazine in that house, *OpenSpace*, putting the editorial offices in my living room and the production office downstairs. For two years our little community of the heart within the larger community of that small town shared a field of intent and delight as we put to work this new/old idea that all of us are of equal value. That as, together, we work to open up space, we discover and enjoy endless new worlds.

Column

CAN ONE HEAL THE ORIGINAL TRAUMATIC IMPRINT?

Or is that the wrong question.

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I lie in bed, curled around my belly, awareness sucked into the dense black hole that has taken me over and invaded my chest, swallowed my heart and solar plexus. It is a dark night outside, even darker inside me. I gasp for air and my mind flies out. "Up, up and away! mind seeks to escape this endless nightmare. This obliteration, this flesh pulverized and compressed to its original traumatic imprint.

"Original traumatic imprint?" you ask. "You mean pain? What pain do you have?" To this I wonder, "Does it matter?" Does it really matter, my particular pain? I spent so many decades deconstructing why I hurt that it bores me. "I don't want to get stuck there. I am not stuck there! I want it over and done!" and yet — not. Years and years ago that original trauma burned into me and into my psyche like a brand.

The original trauma fractured my being. It froze me in place and left a lifelong scar. Catholics say that we arrive wounded and marked with an "original sin" that only baptism eradicates. I say that you cannot get rid of it, that it follows you like a shadow. I tell you my story, of an innocence hurt and crushed. Each of us, if we look within long and deeply enough, re-enters that original trauma. The pain started in childhood. Or at birth. Or in the womb. Or in another life. Or even before that. How do you go back to the beginning and not further back?

Curled on the bed around my own personal black hole, sucked down into my original traumatic imprint, suddenly "I," that is, my mind, escapes my body. Whoosh! Just like that! Mind flies free for a nanosecond. Then, snap! Shut! — mind traps itself in its own machinations.

Inside mind's instantly self-constructed cage, mind reels with questions. "Why pain? Don't want pain. Get rid of pain. So what happened? Got to figure it out." Mind goes back over, slows down the sequence, looks at it frame by frame. "Where did we split off? Which part his, what mine? Will astrology explain the situation, transits to our charts, aspects between them?" Buzz, buzz, busy bee mind flashes astrological charts on the wall of imagination, obsessively cross-references, pours over details.

Mind utterly absorbs this task, fixing, trying to solve this problem. Mind's trick — ignore the body and what it feels. That usually works. Think! Get busy with something else, some project in the outside world. Or, if body insists, if the pain overwhelms, then, as a last resort, fill mind with ideas, lots of ideas, ideas that rush in from all directions.

My mind is edgy, nervy, relentlessly churning and turning. On this endless, sleepless night my mind compels me to deconstruct the origins of an abrupt and terrifying break with my new partner who arrived recently from California. For 30 years I have addressed interpersonal issues with laser-sharp mental analysis. I take pride in my capacity to telescope in on an emotional problem and dissolve it so that I — so that we — can go on.

But it's not working. Not this time. And perhaps it never did. Perhaps what worked in my relationships worked *despite* my mental prowess, not because of it.

Victor thinks that I need not mention him. He considers his presence incidental, that this has little to do with him personally. He is right, yet I disagree. My pain does not surface except within the context of this relationship. It simmers just below — always just below. I only pretend that my pain goes away, or that I have finally solved or dissolved it. In this relationship, my armor thins. I become vulnerable. Pain leaks out; pain floods my awareness and overwhelms me. Any break in the relationship triggers old stuff; the thin skins that cover my old injuries rip open, expose other, deeper injuries.

A new, intimate relationship stirs up old emotions. Who knows where the new pain starts and old pain ends? Sometimes old pain simply obscures and confuses. Our relationship wants to go one way, gets sidetracked, twists into patterns made long ago to avoid or to re-enact old pain. Confusion descends, veers into mistrust. Expectation sours, in a heartbeat, from hope to despair. Communication deteriorates into static, and static threatens to escalate, to obliterate, to overcome and drown out. So while this article is about me and my process, its context feels inextricably interpersonal.

"What? How could this be?" Mind instantly realizes its impotence in the face of Victor's implacable resistance. Recognition cracks mind's facade. Suddenly, in the deep and dark of this night, very soon after mind's sudden flight from body to fixate on

what went wrong, by the grace of the Goddess another part of me wakes up and, in an eureka moment, notices — small mind has gone berserk.

So my process now includes two separate awarenesses. First, the usual small, chattering — and sometimes berserk — ego mind. Second, an awareness more spacious and non-judgmental — the Fair Witness. Fair Witness functions as an impartial ally that views both my behavior and my internal process as if from above, clearly and with equanimity. Indeed, Fair Witness calms me; without Fair Witness, Small Mind would have ruined my life decades ago, spiraling down into chronic pain, to depression, to hopelessness and into despair.

Seconds after Small Mind's escape from my body, thanks to the objective observation of Fair Witness, Small Mind drops back into body, where it clings like a burr to black hole's ceaseless swirling, swirling down into nothingness —at-the-core, the death-in-life that the small "I" wants to do anything, anything, to avoid, to get away from, to deny. But it cannot. Committed now — Small Mind plunges deep, relinquishes control, despite my fear and antipathy. Why the shift? Because suddenly Small Mind finds itself welcomed into the arms of yet another awareness, another "I."

Here then, a third awareness, again separate from each of the other two awarenesses (Small Mind, Fair Witness) that I call Big Mind. In the presence of Big Mind, Small Mind gives way, no contest, no struggle. Big Mind encompasses my entire being; Big Mind includes Fair Witness and Small Mind, as well as my pain and my body. Big Mind serves as compass and guide to my life's direction. Each time I experience crippling pain, Big Mind reminds me to "move awareness into the pain, into the very center of the pain," and remain there no matter how much it hurts, or how long it takes, "until the pain moves." Big Mind knows — the only way out is through.

To move through, I must center my small-minded awareness deep inside that chaotic-feeling black hole of abandonment and desolation and, while there, become one with my breath and its cyclical filling and releasing. Like lapping waves that pulverize rocks into sand, sooner or later my breath gradually permeates the dense, leaden black hole — and usually much later. I struggle to stay with the process no matter how long it takes — this subtle, ever so gentle rhythm of the breath surrounds and then calms; it rocks in and out, in and out, encouraging Small Mind not to fly out of body and lets body gradually relax pain's relentless grip.

The swell and subsiding of my breath, if long and slow and balanced, not jerky or tense, lightens the swirling black hole inside me. When I hold my breath, or when my breath runs shallow and short, then the situation worsens and sometimes panic sets in. But when I have the courage, and the faith, and the trust, to settle into my breath, to begin to breathe naturally, then my breath gradually lengthens and my internal storm gradually clears.

So I breathe. I breathe into the pain. No matter how long it takes. I keep breathing. No matter how many times small ego mind flies off into chatter, I attempt to patiently breathe my mind back down into hell. To be here, right here, right now, no matter how claustrophobic, or how awful. Breathe. Breathe again. And again.

It may seem that pain occupies too much of my existence. Why not ignore, avoid, or numb myself, pretend it isn't there? Should I? Should we? Can you sense a huge, horrible, heavy hole in the very center of your being? We reach in and think we find nothing there. We encounter something empty, like a vacuum, no there there. (No wonder so many of us fear dying. For if the body decays, and nothing survives it, then death seems indeed the end.)

I view the concept at the core of existence, the nothing that is something — the awful emptiness, the thing that seems to us not there — as ubiquitous, with a long cultural history. The philosopher Immanuel Kant first identified it in the 19th century, and called it the ding-an-sich, or “thing-in-itself.” Kant claimed that the ding-an-sich is Reality itself, but that we lack awareness of it, because we cannot know Reality directly. (Then how did he know that he cannot know? — you might ask.) Instead, Kant said we view Reality through an inborn perceptual framework that conceals Reality's true nature.

In Kant's view, we never know reality itself, confined as we are to mere appearances. We still find this idea, for example, in the academic field of linguistics. MIT's Noam Chomsky says that each of us has an innate inborn grammatical structure inside our heads that determines how we learn particular languages. Chomsky's “transformational grammar” implies categories of perception common to us all that dictate the way we see and interact with the world. We cannot know the world outside us, the world “out there” or whether it has the structure that we think it has, says Chomsky. That is, both Kant and Chomsky wrote of a common, hard-wired and unchangeable perception of an unreachable, unknowable Reality.

I prefer, instead, to invert Kant's ding-an-sich, the Reality that we cannot know, and turn it inward. I prefer to explore how our cultural framework constructs and constricts our view of our own inner sanctum and encourages us not to seek ourselves there, if at all. Kant states that we can never know Reality because our inborn framework blinds and forever separates us from it. In my view, in order to understand ourselves, as individuals and as a society, we need to move beyond surface appearances and to plumb the something deep inside that cries out for our attention. In other words, I see Kant's ding-an-sich as inside us — and until and unless we explore our true nature, we feel it as a hideous, empty black hole at our very core that we try like hell to avoid.

Kant discovered the internal structure of the western mind. He described the underpinnings of our cultural strategy to cope with the daily fears and tremors of modern life while ignoring or denying our inner life. But such systematic denial of Self

gradually closes us down. The child's natural wonder glazes over as the perceptual apparatus of the culture takes over and locks in. Sooner or later, the focus only on appearances means that we lose our souls, get stripped of hope, until only the persona remains. When we live from the outside in, the personality may appear to thrive, but the inside withers. This is a huge loss.

I join Thoreau, Emerson, Rousseau and others who claim that we can tune into and stay in touch with Reality, with ourselves, with our True Nature; that this fundamental sense of self has crusted over, a result of cultural conditioning. As I meditate on symbols and synchronicities that imbue events in my life with meaning, I notice that the veils that cover my original nature gradually thin through time. My sense of this slow, natural attunement comes from close attention to my own experience over the past three decades and as a PhD philosopher turned astrologer who connects what happens in the heavens with what happens to me, and to others. I seek the inner space and resonance of a roomful of Buddhist monks, chanting.

“But what,” you ask, “does all this have to do with me, my life — or your pain, for that matter?” I answer that we tend to limit our attention to daily affairs. It strikes me how, like busy little bees, we scurry about with heads down, caught in whatever miniscule situation. We seem to have lost the daily, lived sense that we are all in this life together. We seem to have lost our wonder — at the extraordinary fact of Life on Earth, at the Life our home planet enjoys in relation to its solar system neighbors, at Life from the point of view of this Milky Way galaxy and beyond. Billions of bright stars wink at us every night, as if to let us in on a giant cosmic joke, and we, in our advanced, entranced state of chronic distraction, refuse to look up!

That is, we turn away from the stars. The word “disaster” comes from the Greek words “dis” (away) and “aster” (star), to turn away from the stars. Of course, I am not the first to say that we ignore the larger order to our peril. When we blind ourselves to all but small, myopic concerns, then the width and depth of our concerns exactly fits within the small ego mind and we lose track of our destiny. The starry night sky above reflects hidden treasure down below. I am a star. You are a star. Each of us a star in our own right, unique and irreplaceable, designed to shine.

Our denial of the larger reality at the core of our own body and feelings — and of course, if we deny our feelings, pain will break through first — has been so much a part of our western cultural conditioning that it actually seems right, good and “natural.” But it doesn't work forever. Sooner or later pain overtakes us, more often than not signaling chronic disease. From that time on, we have no choice: pain becomes our partner in a slow agonizing dance towards either death or, more rarely, transformed life.

And of course, our lives, no matter how long, eventually end. Must the contemplation of our own death be painful? Western culture thinks so — thus the often

Herculean efforts to prolong life for even the very, very old and avoidance of thoughts of self and death. In our culture, “disease,” *dis-ease* — that condition of being ill-at-ease and not knowing how our physical and/or mental symptoms mirror and stem from our spiritual distress — has gone on so long that it moves from the spirit and mind and infects the body. We regard illness as something to fix, a problem to solve. We see illness as our enemy, something that attacks us from the outside (viral or bacterial) or inside (like defective DNA or a chemical imbalance), in any case, something separate from our real selves. Small Mind grapples with disease, fights it, does battle with it, and wins — or loses. It doesn't matter.

We could work with our chronic individual and cultural ill-at-ease in another way, a way not so violent, a way that begins with an acknowledgement of the body's condition as a reflection of the condition of our larger being, a way that attunes mind and spirit to feelings within the body, and therefore, with surrender to the pain that lies deep within and must surface before it can release.

“Ah, release!” You say. “If I can actually rid myself of pain this way, then maybe I can face my pain and even embrace it.” Let me say that I too, wish for an end to suffering. However, in decades of experience with my own hidden, inner pain, I always encounter more; always more pain seeks to surface. At this point, I sense that my pain belongs not just to me, but to us; it is ours, forever ours. For as I surrender to my most vulnerable feelings, the walls that divide me from others thin and dissolve. Indeed, if everyone's personal pain is an aspect of a single phenomenon, then what makes us curl up in despair, we share with others, Our Oneness as a species we know first in our agony.

Kant's unknown Reality, his ding-an-sich, lives deep inside me and deep inside you. You are here, too, with me and all the rest of us, once again one and not separated out. From afar it feels fearful because we do not sense the small “I”. Up closer, once we overcome our fear, it feels better — small “I” has been happily enveloped, absorbed, into the ocean of being.