



THE EXPERIMENT, or: BACK WHEN I WAS DYING

**Meditation on a Three-Day
Ordeal/Epiphany/Assignment**

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Forward

In April of 2008 I underwent a three-day death and rebirth journey that left me changed. The first day involved a medical diagnosis. The second day involved connecting with those close to me. And the third day? Well, that was the first day of the rest of my life.

The following account went through a number of permutations at various times during the intervening years (mainly because I couldn't decide just how much astrology to include), and finally (when the astrology I did include ripened) reached its natural closure during this first month of the second decade of the 21st century.

I look back and realize that this three-day journey served as my personal prelude for Act I of the Main Play, when the wrecking ball of Pluto in Capricorn (2008-2023) inexorably and relentlessly dematerializes global financial and governmental infrastructures and exposes the systematic corruption and malevolence infecting many the institutional hierarchies that govern our lives.

I am so grateful for those three days twelve years ago! Had I not been gifted with that journey, I would not now enjoy the kind of changed point of view that allows me to view, *with equanimity*, both near-term extinction hype and what does appear to be the inexorable and relentless poisoning of our precious air, water, and soil, not to mention the ever-deepening exposure of pedophilia, satanic ritual abuse and worse, blackmailed debasement of politics, religion, academia, medicine, sports, entertainment, the military, mainstream media, and others in high places whom we were taught to trust the most.

Key word, “appears.” Things are not as they seem. I have a sense that, just as the third day in my journey brought about a remarkable transformation, so too, will our collective “third day.” However, this will occur only if a certain percentage of us fully embrace the ramifying implications of both Above and Below, Within and Without.

Ann K

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Prelude
THE CROSSROADS

At 3:30 AM on the morning of April 13, 2008, I found myself alone in the E.R. waiting room of a local hospital with no magazines to read.

Of course I panicked.

Had I found myself in this situation a few years ago, panic would have morphed into “boredom,” my mind churning with impatience and frustration while I paced with head down and arms crossed. When that got old, I would have sat stiffly on a hard chair, jiggling my legs and glancing repeatedly at the clock. The longer the clock ticked, the greater my annoyance (at the inconvenience of the strange intermittent pain), my terror (of what the pain might portend), and my regret (at trading a good night’s sleep for an expensive and probably unnecessary venture into the world of western industrial medicine).

Instead, on April 13, 2008 a miracle occurred: I paused in the doorway, briefly surveyed the empty waiting room — and then walked directly over to a wall, got on my knees, curled into the yogic “child’s pose” (the fetal position, a pretty good substitute for thumb-sucking), and drifted into a near-pleasant, timeless oblivion while awaiting the call that might not come for hours.

I had always wondered how I would respond if I discovered I was dying.

I was about to find out.

Or, maybe I was already finding out.

Chapter One

THE SET-UP, scene 1

Like all of us, I am subject to mysterious messages from my belly — grunts, groans, stabs, gurgles, odd pains that rise and subside like the tides. Since they are temporary, I ignore them.

So when I found myself with a minor twinge in the lower right quadrant, I paid it no heed. It came and went and came again, so subtly that each time it let go I forgot.

But the twinge persisted. And, given the location, its intermittent knocks on the door of awareness made me uneasy. Finally, while climbing into bed that night, the question surfaced: *appendicitis?*

Around 2 AM I woke up, apparently summoned, the pain more frequent and a teensy bit stronger. I turned onto my back and, stiff with fear, listened to my belly, wondering what to do, if anything, and whether or not I could wait until morning to decide. What if it *was* my appendix? I was hunting for one good reason to banish that thought.

After about an hour I gave up, got up, wearily pulled on clothes and drove myself to the Emergency Room, thinking well, better now than in the daytime, since there won't be much of a wait.

I walked in, described my symptoms, and was ushered through the admitting and triage process. I would have to wait, the kindly nurse cautioned, since four ambulances had arrived just as I did. So much for my previous smug speculation. I had come in early Sunday morning, April 13, during the busiest weekend of the year in this college town of "Breaking Away" movie fame: the "Little 500" bike race weekend in Bloomington, Indiana.

She directed me into the cavernous, fluorescent-lit, nearly empty waiting room where I immediately noticed, in a moment of startled panic, that it held no reading matter. *I would not be able to distract myself.*

What happened next cannot be understood within the usual epistemological parameters.

Western scientific culture conditions us to frame our experiences within a linear cause/effect template, where they appear as predictable processes. Though we also insist on "free will," we make very little allowance for it. The beginning of any drama — called the "cause" — once triggered, tends to produce an "effect," which in turn "causes" the next "effect" and so on. Though (linear) "causality" is only one possible way for humans to impose order on seeming chaos, this long-running, ubiquitous and largely unnoticed

psychic structure has had powerful real world consequences: recall the “domino effect” in cold war politics; contemplate the “chain reaction” of the atomic bomb.

Yet we seldom ask how to decide the size and shape of any particular drama. Each time we carve a set of events from the flux of phenomena, what prompts us to begin and end at certain points rather than others? The start and stop of any story bookend a portion of the flux and delimit a supposedly simple, linear “cause and effect” chain that by an act of will, or fiat, implies, nay, announces, though subliminally: “this is meaningful.” But the original question remains: why start here and end there?? Why do we call any specific, delimited portion of experience “meaningful?” I, for one, have no idea. As the 20th century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein mused, with real perplexity, “It’s hard to start at the beginning and not go further back.”

The story I tell here documents what I’ve come to see as a transformative three-day death and rebirth drama in the spring of 2008 that began and continued as expected — until the chain reaction was abruptly interrupted and the story started over again, carrying an entirely other import. From a personal perspective, the entire episode (including its two beginnings) appears to have been an Initiation that I was destined to undergo. From a larger perspective it may bear further fruit.

The first beginning, or cause, was that intermittent bodily pain that I eventually realized I needed to attend to. From there, “one thing led to another” until I found myself in the E.R. waiting room of the Bloomington Hospital at 3:30 A.M.

But then something exceedingly strange occurred: the chain of causation ceased! In walking over to the wall and kneeling down I suddenly and unaccountably shifted from panic into what I can only call surrender.

Oh, one would not be able to detect this from the outside, because once in the E.R., the course of events *is* predictable, and I did indeed endure it. But on an internal level yes, my consciousness transcended the seemingly inexorable pattern that had been set in motion by subtle, persistent bodily pain. Somehow, my sudden panic as I entered the waiting room triggered a dimensional shift that sheared off from what would have been the next effect in the chain of causation propelling me in a certain direction and with a set of attitudes usual to “emergencies.”

In response to that moment of panic, another part of me bypassed the ego, switched gears, and set out cross-country, with neither map nor path. And yet that metaphor is not accurate, for the switch was not horizontal but vertical, ushering me out of our usual three-dimensional reality into another, larger one.

I dwell on the import of that one moment in time because it appears that my surprising, instantaneous, intuitive response to panic initiated a second point of origin, which then altered the way I experienced the entire ensuing course of events.

(But was this truly my “choice”? I don’t recall considering various options. Was this the workings of “free will,” or did something more mysterious push me into uncharted territory.)

The first, and obvious, origin, appearing as an intermittent pain in the physical, drew consciousness downward, into the interior of the body. The second origin seemed metaphysical, not located in either space or time. And the shift that occurred spread consciousness throughout an ineffable, timeless invisible expanse that surrounds and interpenetrates the body.

So that one moment of sheer panic was, apparently, an unexpected crossroads, jam-packed with significance. And yet only now, a month later, as I attempt to unpack the complex, multidimensional memory of those astonishing three days, do I realize the import of that singular point in time. For when I started to walk from the doorway across to the wall I paid no attention to what I was doing. I just did it: knelt down, head bowed and hands on the floor, as if in adoration. Within seconds, it was as if I was floating through the mists to Avalon, leaving the other world behind. And when I awakened, to the sound of my name in a soft, sympathetic tone, I was no longer the same person.

You can imagine the nurse’s alarm when she found me curled around my belly on the floor.

About an hour had gone by.

Chapter Two

THE SET-UP, scene 2

The nurse led me through the labyrinthine hallways of the hospital's "Emergency Room," its closed doors left and right. Aside from hospital personnel, I couldn't see or hear any other patients, but she said they were extremely busy that night.

She placed me in an examining room on a gurney and pulled a warmed blanket over me, telling me to make myself comfortable. I asked her to please turn off the light and close the door.

I had to rest, was determined to rest, sensing that I would need it, and not just to get through the next day. Something greater seemed to be at work. Even then, I seemed to be at least subconsciously aware of a subtle shift in my being and was unconsciously gathering the energy that was to hurtle me like a slow motion cannonball into the vast unknown. This early morning drama in my unconventional, peripatetic life was about to shock me into an altered state so pure, so powerful, and so utterly foreign that, looking back on it now, I'm having trouble remembering. It's as if, in embarking on that strange journey I was given first a truth serum, then an amnesiac.

But I want to remember it. I must remember it. I want to be able to record the mundane details of that three-day ordeal? epiphany? of presumably impending death (and rebirth) and I want to invoke the surreal atmosphere that surrounded it, for this experience both changed me and connected my life to others as never before.

Toasty under the warmed blanket and embraced by darkness, the pleasant oblivion of the examining room imperceptibly morphed into an awareness strangely serene and relaxed and yet highly alert to opportunity. Contrast this to earlier in my life, when I would have spent my time waiting for the doctor spaced out, feeling sorry for myself, and, groggy with missed sleep, both listening intently for the doctor's footfall and longing for the ordeal to be over.

Instead, I lay there on that gurney under the warmed blanket in the welcoming dark consciously recognizing the unusual circumstances as a valuable opportunity to practice awareness in the present moment.

At around 5:00 AM, the doctor entered. Probably somewhere in his 50s, though he seemed older, and exhausted; had a paunch and moved slowly, hair and clothes in disarray. (Later, he told me he had already stayed three hours past the end of his shift, due to the unusually busy night and short-handed staff.)

He palpated my belly, especially the lower right quadrant area. Nothing. No pain. In fact, now that his presence prompted me to once again focus on the pain, it hid. He asked about the pain's severity on a scale of one to ten. I felt embarrassed to tell him that it was so mild that I would not have considered coming in except for its location, the fact that it

had lasted maybe 24 hours, and seemed (until I got to the hospital) to have moved on that scale from a two to a three.

The doctor said he wanted to order a CT-scan, to rule out appendicitis.

More waiting in the dark. Again, I focused on awareness, on being at one with the muffled sounds from the hallway, the rise and fall of my own breath, the cascade of feelings and images and memories — all while catching glimpses of that larger mysterious space that holds them in suspension and stills the mind. At least another hour went by.

An aide entered, walked around to my head, and started to wheel me out of the room. We're going down the hall for the CT scan, he said. I was feeling more and more foolish, having not felt the pain since before the doctor came in, and — I could certainly walk on my own! The gurney slid into a big round tube. A machine quietly whirled while moving back and forth over my abdomen.

Back in the darkened room, once again I settled into the practice. By now I was almost relishing this extended opportunity to practice moving into and holding awareness of the present moment in such an unfamiliar, uncomfortable, anxiety-inducing situation. Another thirty minutes went by. Or was it an hour? I was getting good at this — this lulling myself into a hushed, nearly restful awareness with hardly a twinge of the old impatience.

The tired old doc came in again. Turned on the light and stood close to my left leg. I have made sure to document what he said as precisely as I can because his words proved remarkably disjunctive with what happened later.

He glanced at the notes in his left hand, then looked at me and said, "There is no problem with the appendix. It's not appendicitis."

Good, I thought. I can go home.

"But," he continued, "you have cysts on both ovaries and . . ." he paused, "a large mass in your uterus. Usually these are fibroids, very common, but this mass is very large and has a larger blood supply than we'd like to see."

What? This surprised me, since prior to menopause I had never experienced any symptom of this condition. And what condition? What did he mean, "a larger blood supply than we'd like to see"? Too startled by the unexpected information to think straight, I didn't voice that question out loud.

He finished by saying that I needed to see my gynecologist within one to three days. I didn't have a gynecologist; indeed, except for regular appointments with a dermatologist to check for skin cancer, I hadn't subjected myself to allopathic medicine of any kind for

over forty years. I'm not sure what his response to this was. Incredulity? Disgust? Whatever it was, he disguised it well, jotted down a referral and left the room.

As he closed the door, I noticed myself feeling stunned and overwhelmed. Desolate. My eyes winced under the overhead fluorescence as I wearily pulled on my sweatshirt and pants. Now that the drama/trauma had apparently climaxed, I seemed to have gone into shock. And with shock, came the dawning realization that I longed for the comfort of another human being, someone to gently curve his or her arm around me as we walked slowly out of the hospital after an ordeal that had dragged on for five full hours and resulted in a pronouncement that I was having a great deal of trouble taking in.

During the fifteen-minute drive home I kept checking my belly and finally had to conclude that the pain was indeed gone. Vanished! Hardly even a twinge since the doctor first entered the room. My focus on the seemingly uncanny timing suddenly yanked open my perspective, to include the pain as a knock on the door from my higher self: I concluded that it had needed to gain my conscious attention and did so by creating a bodily symptom possibly serious enough to drive me into the E.R. For though the diagnosis turned out to be other than expected, what a subtle, elegant way call my attention to a large uterine tumor!

One minute earlier, I had been wallowing in the desolation of existential aloneness. Now, voila! The sudden widening of perspective to include the higher self and its apparent purpose instantly settled and grounded me securely in the arms of the universe.

This feeling of ultimate safety and security remained, provided a rock-solid foundation during the days that followed. Good thing, too, because within minutes, this foundation was rocked by an earthquake. Were this a fictional tale, I might point to the earthquake as the final obstacle that the hero must face, the ultimate turn of the screw that forced yet another shift in consciousness, only this one much, much more profound.

Chapter Three
THE SET-UP, Scene 3

I arrived home, sat down to collect my wits. What next? The phone rang. It was the E.R. doc. He wanted me to know, he said, that another radiologist had looked at the scan and noticed a nine-millimeter mass in the pancreas.

The *pancreas*?!

So, he finished, you need to get to an internist also, right away, and gave me another referral.

So now not only did I have cysts on my ovaries and a large mass in my uterus, I had a *nine-millimeter mass in my pancreas*. I turned on my laptop, googled “pancreatic mass,” and read that 85% of all pancreatic masses are “adenocarcinoma,” terminal within two weeks to two months.

Chapter Four

THE DISCOVERY

In the hospital, panic had subtly provoked my awareness into another dimension, wherein I was observing both inside and outside in a detached manner and not hooking into the usual emotions. The experience tested my ability to “witness” my experience in a stressful situation — after nearly four decades of practice — and to a large extent, I succeeded. Yet, after five hours, while dressing to return home, any inner stability and ease suddenly fractured, flooding me with anguish. Then, while driving home, the mood switched a second time, and just as strongly — to excitement, even joy, as my perspective expanded.

Just after I hung up the phone with the E.R. doc at home I underwent a third internal transformation. Now it was not my mood that changed, but my entire ontological state.

It was as if that phone call had overloaded my psyche; I “couldn’t take it any more,” and needed to be soothed and protected. For that’s exactly what happened. My entire being seemed to immerse in a warm, viscous fluid that calmed the ricocheting emotions. Just as in the E.R. waiting room, once again I left this world and shot into another dimension, this one suffused with the numinosity, intensity and intimacy evoked by only the most extraordinary of transformations.

I could feel myself slowly sinking to the bottom of an inner ocean, the light streaks through the surface gradually fading. (Is this the first stage of “fainting”? If so, then I apparently caught myself before losing consciousness.) Though aware of surface conditions, it was as if they were operating in another universe, still accessible, but not nearly as real. I longed to descend to the bottom, to rest there and let the world go. But I couldn’t. I had to surface. Had to choreograph the logistics for the end of my life.

But wait, this might be a cosmic joke! The E.R. doc might have mixed up the records. The CT scan might have given false positives. The radiologist might have been preoccupied, or drunk, or exhausted. Who knows what might have happened. This whole thing might not be true! A waste of time and energy — not to mention mental and emotional suffering.

(And, given our litigious culture, if the diagnosis was erroneous, and caused unnecessary suffering, then it might be “actionable,” and I should “sue the bastards”! Several people, upon later hearing of my ordeal, suggested this. While I appreciate their concern, I recognize it as a conditioned reaction, the kind that I am attempting to become aware of in myself — and hopefully, to overcome.)

Though I understood that this initiation into my own dying process might blink out as suddenly as it winked on, I did not dwell on this possibility. I didn’t want to wait to find out; didn’t want to waste time in limbo if the diagnosis was correct and I *was* dying.

More to the point — and here's where things get really strange, where I veered into a decidedly metaphysical, transcendent orientation that from then on, never wavered — somehow this entire experience felt right, appropriate, exactly the journey I was meant to undergo now. Even if it turned into a cosmic joke, what mattered was that I grab hold of this unprecedented opportunity, chew it thoroughly, integrate its substance into my being, and surrender to its evolutionary thrust.

My single-minded intensity and focus stemmed partly from the apparent gravity of the situation, and partly from the timing — in case I had only two weeks, I needed to get going, make a plan.

This was Sunday morning. I couldn't make appointments until Monday. Hopefully I would get in to see both doctors that day. And if not Monday, then Tuesday. I jotted down notes reminding me to call them in the morning.

Meanwhile, the greater part of me was still engaged in an unswerving descent from the harshly lit realm of personality into the mysterious netherworld of soul. From that vantage point I was sensing Death as a long-awaited living presence. Dying felt like home. I was going home.

Really? Do I really mean that? In the midst of what seemed to be an entirely natural drift into what I can only describe now as a kind of euphoria, I suddenly woke up to the fact that this weirdly romantic swoon with death *was* my internal condition, incompatible with day to day life on earth — not to mention with saving my life!

But, strangely enough — and I tell this exactly as it happened, or (in the interests of accuracy) exactly as I remember it — instantly this thought appeared: *I don't want to "save my life."*

Interlude

FROM MY JOURNAL, 7/08/08

It's been nearly three months since I began to document April's intense three-day journey. Each time I sit down to write a fog descends. I'm sleepy, dopey, as if the amnesia is still trying to grab me, take me under, so that I won't remember, can't remember . . . At first I didn't notice this malaise; it took awhile to realize that I'm not my usual snappy fierce articulate self. I seem to pause over every sentence, fiddling, fidgeting, eyes closing, body tired, so tired . . . And I drift back to previous sentences, paragraphs, chapters, to juggle the words, the rhythm, the tone. Sometimes I seem to be nosing about for an opening, peering into the spaces between sentences for a way in, a way down, or up, or over, to find and describe other, invisible dimensions that seem to lurk about, tease me with their opacity. Brain feels mushy, confused, wants to drift off, let go . . .

I decided on this interlude, in hopes that writing about the writing will wake me up.

7/09/08

In the past two days, I've gotten word of the recent deaths of two friends, Bill in Idaho, and Amelia in New Mexico. From what I hear, it appears that both were prepared to go. A number of months before Amelia passed her friend Win said, thinking to cheer her up: "Well, you must be glad to get this [chemotherapy] over so you can get on with your life!" Only to hear Amelia reply, "And do what?"

And Bill, who nearly died in an accident years ago, when he broke just about every bone in his body, had lived so intensely and dramatically since then that his friends figured he had wanted to die, and kept trying to finish the job. His legendary outdoor feats included kayaking over cataracts and, when he finally edged over, they found his body floating in the River of No Return.

When I spoke about Bill to a mutual friend, Diane, she said that she too, often catches herself "wondering in a very positive, curious way, what it [death] will be like."

These two deaths, and Diane's comment, coming now, when I am most in doubt, feel like subtle whisperings to go on, tell it, shake off the amnesia, share with others . . .

Yet, in order to tell what happened I must activate my left brain. But the experience was so ineffably right brain! And in order to recreate the experience, I must revisit it, over and over again, plumb its depths, how it resounds, reverberates . . .

Every morning as I start to write, the forgetting descends. Like I'm drugged on a sleeping pill, and must jerk myself awake, over and over again, day after day.

I have to keep waking myself up, so that I CAN tell it. Knowing that I'm meant to, that I'm meant to tell it. That this is part of the bargain, the completion of the "experiment" alluded to in the title and that I will soon describe.

But first I seem to need to slog through the details of "when I was dying," both the medical details, and how I was feeling and interpreting those three days and some of the dimensions that the experience provoked. Dimensions nested within dimensions . . . More and more, no bottom line, no place I can say, here . . . this . . . is . . . where it ends, where the buck stops. No first cause. No cause and effect template. No linear chain. No contrasting polarities. Maybe that's the problem. How do I keep going when the "momentum" that usually propels a story keeps forking, braiding, seeping . . .

And yet I do trust gravity, this strong sense of going downhill. Ultimately the waters will run together.

(Could there be another source of this strange reluctance to keep going? Are there forces arrayed against the telling? I wouldn't be surprised. For if I can do justice to this tale, it might ramify in unexpected ways, might even disturb the cultural trance of daily life.)

Diane's take on my strange malaise: "Maybe sleepy amnesia is a) the super-ego's way of denying death; b) the first step on the path toward death; c) the poppy field in Wizard of Oz. . . or all of the above."

Chapter Five
SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY, part 1

I had just discovered that I didn't want to "save my life." And this surprised me. Not intrinsically: I was fine with it. But sociologically, I knew better. And frankly, given our cultural milieu, I was amazed that I wasn't at least tempted to "battle" my disease. Moreover — and this felt quite daunting — I knew that if I really didn't want to "fight for my life," if I really did find myself suddenly, but even so, *naturally* bending towards death, then this unusual existential state would entail serious social consequences.

I had three alternatives, all of them uncomfortable. I could ignore my family and friends, I could lie to them, or I could help them accept my decision.

I chose the third alternative; or, I should say, it chose me. This was not a rational process. Just like the "decision" not to save my life, telling others about my decision felt like a another current in the river that I had just stepped into.

Now, obviously, I'm still here. I didn't die. Those three April days distilled into a little jewel of heightened awareness that I attempt, in this account, to fathom. Had I gone through that experience alone, it would have held a very different flavor.

The third alternative, though it felt natural at the time, meant that once the experience ended I had to call back all those whom I had informed of my impending death! As one of my close friends — she had recently undergone a biopsy for a "little spot" of cancer in one breast and kept her condition very private, telling only a few close friends — said to me: "If only you hadn't jumped the gun and told people about it before you got a definitive diagnosis."

Yes, had I not told people one could say that I would have spared myself the trouble of having to explain that I wasn't dying after all — not to mention the embarrassment and chagrin of having caused them unnecessary suffering! Moreover, I would have spared them from confronting their own mortality while grieving mine, and — here's the kicker — *we would have bypassed the sudden, fierce love that surged through us as though funneled in from outer space.*

Why would I want to spare us this exceptional experience? Especially when I consider the alternatives.

To me, ignoring family and close friends when faced with an apparently terminal situation feels cruel. I would have robbed them of what they needed to know in order to begin to process their own loss. Plus, I would have stopped them from giving and stopped myself from learning how to receive. In short, I would have steered us all away from the transformative intimacy of shared vulnerability.

Lying to family and close friends feels even worse. Lying also would have created separation during a time when I most needed others' support — and of course, just the act of knowingly speaking falsely to another generates bad faith. Lying about serious matters, especially had I continued to lie, would have forced me to remember, sustain, and even embellish the lie over time. Prolonged dissembling would have created a false mask that felt terrible to me and promoted conscious or unconscious doubt and insecurity in those to whom I told the lie.

And yet, given our common cultural conditioning that renders us unusually fearful of death, I can understand why a person who might be dying would ignore others or lie to them — at least for awhile. For example, my dear friend George told me that his wife, dying of cancer, refused to admit him into her room when she knew she had, at most, only a few weeks to live. While at the time he felt hurt, and abandoned, he now realizes that she needed to prepare herself without interference. His need for her to try just one more experimental medical solution — a mask for his own unprocessed fear of losing her — both demanded too much of her precious energy and interrupted her internal process at a time when it was crucial for her to come into full alignment with the sacred drama of her dying process.

(A few days before she died, she re-opened her door to him. On the morning of her final day, she lost consciousness, stopped breathing, and appeared to have died. At some point George left the room; when he walked back in, she opened her eyes, reached for his hand and placed it on her heart at the exact moment that her heart stopped beating.)

Another example, this one with a different ending: I recently heard about a woman whose breast lump tested malignant. She told her sister about the diagnosis and of course the sister freaked out. The doctors wanted to remove the breast and do radiation and chemotherapy. She refused all allopathic treatments — and, in order to keep peace and reduce stress, lied to her sister, telling her that the lab had made a mistake: the lump was not malignant. For several years, the lump waxed and waned and finally dissolved. Seven years later, the woman still hasn't told her sister.

I don't tell this last story to try to claim that if we just don't treat a disease, it will disappear — though that does sometimes happen. As one of my healers remarked, if the mind and spirit are still aligned with embodied life then the body, as a part of nature, given enough support, does tend to heal itself over time. Nor do I tell this story to say that if we'd just conceal our disease from others, "everything will be all right." It might, and it might not. But what is undeniably true is that when faced with a difficult, indeed possibly terminal situation, the added stress of others' fear can feel overwhelming.

In my own family, one of my five sisters has survived various forms of cancer for over thirty years. Though the rest of us are aware of the outlines of her recurrent disease, and its history, she doesn't like to talk about it. "I don't want to be defined by my cancer," she has told me, in private. When the family gets together, Mary wants us to see her as fully engaged in life — and she is, having morphed from piano teacher (until she lost the use of her right arm due to nerve damage from radiation in her twenties) into high school

drama teacher. Then, several years ago she decided to go for her M.A. in spiritual counseling; now she begins yet another new engagement with life. How many people without the sword of Damocles perpetually hanging over their heads can say the same? How many of us keep growing, changing, evolving, no matter what our circumstances?

In the past two years, Mary has undergone an experimental outpatient treatment that required her to have someone assist her at her appointments. This time, rather than relying on her husband or closest friends, for the first time she invited two of our many female siblings to accompany her. They felt honored to realize that Mary trusted them to share in the deepest, most profound aspect of her life.

Mary has nearly died and resurrected numerous times in these last thirty years. I sense that her insistence that others treat her as normal, rather than as a sick person, has had a great deal to do with her continuing vitality and the deepening into her essential nature over time. How many people remain alive for so long with recurrent cancer? How many people are — fated to? lucky enough? unlucky enough? — to consciously introject the alchemical mystery of Death into their psyches over and over and over again?

Interlude

FROM MY JOURNAL, 10/27/2008

Amos Joel, my father-in-law, died just past midnight two days ago, five and a half years after the death of his son Jeff. Back then, when I called to tell Amos that Jeff had died, he had of course been devastated to learn that he had outlived his son. Outliving his wife Rhoda, who had died the year before, had been bad enough, but his own son! "I'm so glad Rhoda wasn't here to find this out," he told me. "It would have killed her!" Neither of us noticed the humor in this remark.

All he had left were his twin daughters — and me, his daughter-in-law. After Jeff died, I continued Jeff's long-term filial duty, both visiting his father once a year and phoning him once a week.

The overnight visits were difficult, increasingly so as time went on and his energy waned. I would drive down to New Jersey from Massachusetts (where I was visiting my children and grandchildren during Christmas vacation), at the mercy of winter conditions. Nor did I ever settle on the "best" way to get to the retirement village where he lived — and got lost more often than not.

Each time, on the four-hour drive to and from, I'd wonder how long he had left, and wish the ordeal would be over. He was obviously not happy, or even content. Rather, he was just existing, waiting to die without saying so, and yet wanting to live on forever.

It was his long drawn out dying process that solidified my own views on death and dying. It seemed to me that way too many of us hang on way too long, at huge interpersonal, social and financial cost for others — and for no obvious reason other than fear of death which we never talk about, never mention.

Of course a part of me felt guilty for feeling that way.

Yet I could certainly understand Amos's fear, given his atheism. For him death was it, the end. Caput. Even so, I still longed for his final journey to be over. His presence in the world felt like stuck energy, a black hole that threatened to swallow not only him but everybody that worked with him — his home aides, his daughters' energies, my own.

Was I callous, unloving? Apparently. And yet, when I did see him, our meetings themselves were always heartfelt. We would reminisce about our memories of his son, as that was the connective tissue between us.

For the last two visits, rather than stay overnight, I made a date for a meal together, bringing my little family with me — two sons, daughter-in-law and two young grandchildren. I thought that the energies of children might revive him at least for a short while. And during our first visit, they did. We all had a good time in the cavernous

dining room with ghostly old ones hovering like wraiths and two kids playing without a care in the world.

But by the time Christmas 2007 came along, our visit felt forced. Everybody was exhausted, as we had driven into a snowstorm and arrived around 9 p.m. Amos was clearly much more frail, and though he did go out to dinner with us — he wanted to go to a pancake house! — I could tell it took great effort, an effort he had not made for some time. I resolved then that this would be our last visit.

But I did continue my weekly phone calls with him; then bi-weekly; then, about a month ago, on hanging up the phone I decided that I would not call him again. That it was simply too difficult for him to try to talk with me. He was no longer here in the sense that you and I are here. He had entered a kind of confused limbo state.

For the last few years, despite his non-belief in the afterlife, his daughters told me that he would talk about Rhoda, saying that she was there with him, that she slept on her side of the bed. I never heard him talk like this. And did not feel that it was appropriate for me to bring the subject up. I was only the daughter-in-law who, as the years since her husband died grew longer, seemed more and more like an outsider to that little family.

During Jeff's phone calls to his Dad, nothing of substance had ever been communicated, no real connection made; each time when Jeff hung up the phone he would seem both morose and resigned.

Those phone calls weren't easy for me either. Amos had always been such a selfish, self-centered man. When someone asked Rhoda, for example, where she wanted her ashes to go, she quipped, with great feeling: "Scatter them at Bell Labs; because that's where he spent the best years of my life!" So we did.

Amos once asked Jeff to accompany him to a conference in Europe, since he was getting old and needed a companion. Yet, for the flight over, he sat himself in first class and his son in coach!

*And yet, during the year after Jeff died, I'd email Amos my journal entries, and he would invariably tell me that they made him cry, that they were so well written and Jeff was such an amazing man that I should publish them in a book. I did publish that book, *This Vast Being: A Voyage through Grief and Exaltation*, in 2007, with the intention of making sure that it was in his hands while he could still appreciate it.*

I just made it. Though he was in no shape to read it again at that point, he did very much love the fact that Jeff's life had been memorialized this way.

In his field, telecommunications, Amos was very well known. "Famous Amos" received many awards, including the National Medal of Technology from President Clinton in 1992. Inventor of over 70 patents, he was known in the industry as Mr. Switching, the man who had invented the technology that made the cell phone possible.

He was used to adulation, and as a convinced atheist, dying was not on his agenda. His way of life was to continually push further into new heights of glory. So his move to the retirement village after his wife died felt, I'm sure, like a humiliating defeat. Gone was his third-floor study where he could command the view below; instead he was housed "with a bunch of old people" in his own condo on the road to the sick ward. He'd tell me that he'd just sit all day and watch the ambulances leaving for the hospital or the morgue.

His next goal was to have been the book he wanted to write, a history of telecommunications. And up until two years ago, the best way to engage him on the phone would be for me to ask about this book, for which he was forever taking notes and trying to make an outline. I knew, and his daughters knew, that it was the thought of the book that was keeping him alive.

At some point he began telling me that he wanted to give a talk on telecommunications to the retirement community at one of their weekly programs. But I don't think that ever happened. I remember thinking at the time that, for him, wanting to give a talk there must have felt like a come-down from his glory days of speeches and awards before national and international audiences. Why didn't they put him on the program? Did he ever actually ask for a slot? And if so, did they just look upon him as a dotty old man and his subject of no interest?

His daughters were determined that he should reach his one remaining professional goal, aside from the book: an induction into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. They figured this was something that should have happened years ago, and over a two year span, pulled the necessary strings. In February and April of this year they traveled with him by limousine to first Washington, D.C., and then Akron, Ohio, for the ceremonies of induction to Amos's final honor.

Two days ago Andrea called to tell me of his death at around midnight the night before. He had been in the hospital again, she said. He had told someone there that he was tired, that he "just wanted it to be over." Stephanie, the twin who lives in New York had visited the day before. Andrea arrived from LA in time to make the arrangements to get him home that afternoon, where he wanted to be. She sat with him that night, talking to him in a soothing tone, saying everything was okay, that everything was taken care of, that he could go. I asked if he was conscious. She said she didn't know, but that at one point it looked like he was trying to open his eyes. At around 11 p.m. the nurse told her that he would last the night, and she might as well get some sleep. About an hour later she got a call that her father had died. "He waited until I was gone, and until the nurse was out of the room to die," she told me.

"When I came back and looked at him, it was so strange! He looked completely different. It was awful to see his body. Morbid. Stephanie wondered if she should view his body. I told her I didn't recommend it, that it was too morbid."

“Did she?” I asked.

“No.”

Chapter Six

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY, part 2

More than anything, what separates the living from the dying seems to be our engagement with life. As long as we are fully engaged — attached to people, animals, projects, stuff — thoughts of death are usually pushed aside.

And yet, in the midst of our daily busyness, it may behoove us to learn how to stop. Just stop! Stop what we are doing and pay close attention — to now. Right now. To this one moment.

For if, submerged inside this one long elastic moment, we dare to contemplate our own personal death, and do it in a more or less sustained manner, a profound choice emerges from the shadows and carries with it the capacity to dramatically alter our entire perspective. This choice is usually buried so deeply that we don't notice it, and yet it can surface in a single beat of the heart.

It may be that if we dwell long enough in the zone of the present moment, that this sustained focus in itself invites awareness of Death. And/or, it may be that acute awareness of Death locks one into Presence, where time slows down and life assumes a silent, dreamlike quality — something that happens, for example, during a car crash, or upon hearing of the death of a loved one.

Ultimately, conscious contemplation of Death invites its opposite. Death, when held in full awareness, provokes us to fully choose Life. Instead of walking with head down, myopically focused on this or that, we engage in an opportunity that is always there, but usually realized only in those rare moments when we narrowly avert sudden death — or when we are, in fact, on our deathbed. At these crucial times our vision widens to take in our entire life as a whole. We stand outside ourselves, viewing our trajectory over time, and how this trajectory is situated within the whole of creation. Questions surface. Why do we do what we do? Where are we heading? What do we drag along behind, unfinished? How do we want to feel about ourselves when we die?

Our society tends to view those who are fascinated by death and dying as “morbid.” In this way, we unconsciously collude to keep ourselves from discovering conscious awareness of death as the key to full aliveness. High-risk athletes know this. Climbers who inch up near-vertical cliffs without protection, for example, *must* enter the “zone” of the present moment and extend it for the length of the wall. While “in the zone,” they feel completely present and alive, their movements flowing mindfully from hold to hold in communion with the cosmos.

To consciously and deliberately invite Death into our awareness and allow it its rightful place, “sitting on our left shoulder,” as the Toltec shaman Don Juan Matus told author Carlos Casteneda, far from being a morbid preoccupation, transforms into a great and startling gift. The door opens and we leave the limited world of what Don Juan called the

tonal for the infinitely powerful invisible world of the *nagual*. From the standpoint of the nagual, the tonal tends to shroud our awareness from birth until death. Yet, just as we access the material tonal world through our five outer senses, nature endows us with the capacity to access the invisible world of the nagual through our inner sensing of the whole. “The tonal begins at birth and ends at death, but the nagual never ends. The nagual has no limit. The nagual is where Power hovers.” — Carlos Castaneda, *Tales of Power*.

The nagual has no limit. Any decision we find ourselves needing to make, any crossroads or dilemma, widens to encompass a field of infinite possibilities when we keep our own personal death in mind. No longer afraid, we break through whatever illusory barriers that we, or our culture, sets up to make us think that we can’t do it, can’t go there, can’t. We let go of no, and say yes to Life. We engage fully and meaningfully, with mind and heart and soul, until done.

Inside this larger, more spacious matrix, we recognize that a lack of engagement, especially when it translates to letting go of material preoccupations, is a major indication of being done, of beginning the descent/ascent towards death. An example here is my 90-year-old mother, a former shopaholic and in the early stages of what others call “dementia” and I call the dismantling of personality — held together by memory — to reveal the essential nature. Mom no longer wants to receive gifts. “What do I do with them? Why do I need more stuff?” she says, “I have no more need for stuff.”

In responding to my mother’s remark, I laughed and told her I could just see her looking down at us humans preoccupied with the weird business of handling material objects and passing them back and forth with others. Just how strange it was, that humans are so preoccupied with stuff!

She looked at me astonished. I had read her mind! My 92-year-old father, his hands busy with the stuff of breakfast preparation, paused, turned around to look at me, at her — and then turned back, silent.

Getting, keeping, sharing, giving, storing, hoarding — all various modes of material exchange (or not) that, as long as we are engaged in embodied life, tend to absorb us, keep our focus “down to earth,” and deflect us from awe and wonder — hushed states of awareness that we all remember from childhood. These memories seep — or pop — out when we least expect or want them to; we shake our head, blink our eyes, try to dismiss them, turn back, silent, vaguely upset, to what we were focused on before . . .

I used to sleep outside. Snug in my sleeping bag, I’d stare at the stars until I whooshed out into the universe. Like spinning, it made me dizzy; like doing cartwheels, or swinging, I flew, but farther — out, and kept going! The sudden ejection from my body that widened awareness and liquefied space felt so scary and exciting that I always hungered for more.

I didn't talk about swooshing to my siblings or friends. Certainly not to my parents. Either I intuitively picked up on the taboo nature of altered states, or I simply had no words for this peculiar rupture in ordinary reality that trumpeted a dimension more primal than either my dreams or daily life.

In childhood we learn how to shut down, or at least compartmentalize; from then on, we keep the two parts of life, worldly and otherworldly, in-body and out-of-body, separate.

Death, too, both scared and excited me as a child. Somehow, death united the two worlds; or it proved that they both exist; or it showed me the door between the two. Something like that. All I knew was that I was fascinated. I wanted, *needed* to see a dead human body. And my doctor father wouldn't let me. Over and over again, he dismissed my strange, repeated, silly request.

Now, as adults, if we do not immediately shut out the tumult of feelings that cascade through us when we encounter Death, we find ourselves back in our sleeping bags, filled with awe and wonder. As my sister Kathy pointed out, when she came to visit a few days after my husband Jeff's sudden departure from a heart attack and my mind was still trying desperately to make sense of it: "Death," she intoned, locking eyes with mine, ". . . is *Mystery*."

Yet how often are we actually able to be present to the mystery of Death when it, and the dying process, are medicalized? When we unknowingly collude in the mechanization of something that is, or could be, as natural and organic as the other end of embodied life's spectrum, Birth — another usually medicalized process.

My crone friend Shauna echoed my mother's material malaise as she neared death from cancer a few years ago. She had invited me to live with her for a week. Each day I would fix her enticing meals and try to get her to eat at least a little bit, but she felt nauseated and exhausted and said her mouth tasted like metal. She was still enduring chemo treatments, even though she told me that she was done, that nothing interested her any longer. On our final day together, while wheeling her down the hospital hall for what turned out to be her second-to-last treatment, I asked her why she chose to suffer in the last stages of her life. She replied, "Because if I stopped chemo, my friends would be too upset."

They didn't want to lose her. Yet these were women who called themselves crones, and so presumably aware of the continuity between life and death. Did they really think that if she died, she'd blink out? That they wouldn't be able to access her wisdom, her compassion, her quirks that make them smile? It may more likely be that the thought of Shauna dying dragged their own deaths to the surface.

Since in our materialistic, medicalized culture we tend to identify a person with his or her body — unless we hold fast to a convoluted religious dogma that propels our souls (but not our bodies) to heaven or hell (and then re-unites body and soul on the final Judgment Day) — we tend to think that when the body dies, the person dies, too.

Regarding those who see themselves as religious, I have a hunch that some who believe strongly in St. Peter's pearly gates and white robes and golden harps cling to their literal picture of "heaven" as a kind of Disney paradise to mask their terror of dying. As my brother-in-law, a long-time hospice nurse, mused, "It's amazing how many Catholics are afraid to die."

How to account for this fear?

Is it because they are afraid to get stuck in a static, boring paradise? I sure would be, given the usual view of heaven, *a place where nothing ever happens* — Talking Heads.

Fundamentalists might say that when people are afraid to die it's because their beliefs are not strong *enough*.

Yet, given that fear of death is endemic in our society —and perhaps in most cultures, see Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*; given that fear infects the very air we breathe and that the fear of death underlies all other fears, I sense that this most primal fear cannot be overcome with any left-brained belief, no matter how strongly held.

From my own experience, I would say that what is missing is trust. Right-brained trust. Trust in the universe. Trust in the benevolence of being. Trust that anytime we fall, we land in the arms of love.

So, then the question arises: do we trust the universe? And if not, how do we learn if we can?

I had to ask myself that question, back in my early 30s, when I popped through our cultural bubble to find myself a stranger in a strange land, with little self-awareness and no real plan. Had to ask it once, and then again a few years later. Both times, it seemed as if my life was over. Both times, a creeping depression had settled in, taken me down and held me under.

Somehow, I intuitively knew that trust couldn't be drilled in like the nuns drilled the catechism into me as a child. Back then I my internal state was that of chronic dread: like Chicken Little, I was sure the Bomb would devour the sky.

Later, as a young adult weighed down by a vague generalized anxiety, at some point I began to wonder: is my chronic fear a rational response to reality or is it paranoid? I figured I might as well find out, since my only alternative was to die, slowly through depression, or more quickly, a suicide.

I knew intuitively that the only way for me to find out if I could trust the universe would be to take some kind of enormous risk that scared the hell out of me. In order to jump-start my life, I would have to deliberately immerse myself in a situation where I didn't know if I could survive. I would have to leap blindfolded, into the void.

On the first occasion, I forced myself to punch through groggy exhaustion and rise from my basement bed — where I had been drowning in the foggy winter drizzle of Marin County, California. Steeled against depression's inertia and moving like a robot, I dressed in warm clothes, hiked down the hill, and, in a moment of heart-stopping bravado, stuck my thumb out. Though scared shitless, I had determined to hitch north on Interstate 101 for the weekend with a dollar in my pocket and no sleeping bag.

Needless to say, the adventure jolted me into aliveness. By shifting into survival mode I tuned into the universe.

The second experiment also involved little access to money. And this time survival mode stretched into years. I had to learn if the trust I had uncovered that earlier weekend was just a fluke, a lucky accident, or if I could actually trust the universe for an extended period. I wanted to see if I could make a habit of trust and live inside that.

Again, I not only survived, but thrived. By staying in the moment and opening to the opportunities embedded in the here and now; by noticing and consciously working with all exchanges with the environment; by feeling my way along the trail of synchronicities like I would later follow the thread of white water down rapids of the Colorado, I

surrendered to the flow of my life. Both times, I opened to the current of my own inner trajectory, on high alert, fully alive, and exhilarated.

I still work with fear. I view fear is an early warning device, a signal that something new is coming for which I must prepare. Preparation is internal: I move into awareness through the breath, focusing precisely there — *here, now* — allowing the rhythmic inhale/exhale to blend and expand into spaciousness, attune to the whole, surrender to reality.

What I have learned to call “unprocessed fear” — fear that is not consciously held in awareness but simply reacted to unconsciously — was, and of course *is* . . . not unusual. Indeed, now transmogrified into “the war on terror,” unprocessed fear has corroded our culture to the point where it infects the air we breathe. We can sense fear as a thick, dirty, ubiquitous fog that clouds perception, exhausts our adrenals and dulls our responsiveness to the point where only the most aware among us realize that they too — despite their will! — have absorbed the culture’s chronic state of high or subtle anxiety that runs on underneath all plans and projects and destroys trust in the self, in others, in the flow of life. And of those who *are* aware of their participation in the general anxiety, and who refuse to medicate themselves against it — a *very* select group — how many of these rare ones then rise to the challenge by consciously asking themselves, “Can the universe be trusted?” And how many of *these* then devise an experiment to help them find out?

For me, the only way to learn if I could trust the universe was to jump blindfolded off what might have been a bottomless cliff. Was to actually invite into conscious awareness the classic nightmare that most of us undergo at least once in our lives — the one where we fall endlessly through space until sheer panic shocks us awake.

My discovery that the universe can be trusted transformed my experience of life. Rather than seeing/feeling myself as separate, I sense my connectedness. In learning to trust the universe I recognize my own nature and the nature of the universe as, at some deep and mysterious level, harmonized. They sing the same song and are made of one substance. I and the universe are one.

By jumping off the cliff, I shocked myself awake. I awakened to the present moment, and glimpsed into its stunning, unexpected gift: the all-encompassing Love at the heart of being.

From then on, I *knew*: if I had the courage to follow my nature, then Nature would support me.

Chapter Eight

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY: part 4

My particular discovery process might sound extreme, and yet it is not that unusual. In the business world, for example, though seldom talked about or even consciously recognized, trust-in-the-universe resides at the very foundation of the entrepreneurial spirit that veils those who work for themselves from those who depend on a paycheck.

Trust is not logical, not an aspect of the rational self that we have been taught to construct and guard since birth. Our exit from the warmth and security of the womb burst us into an alien world where, unless securely held by a nurturing presence long enough for us to find our feet without fear of falling, we lost trust in the grounded beingness of existence.

In order to live in a world where things appear to be separate, we had to learn how to separate from the mother in a way that invited independence while maintaining connection. Yet most of us remember our mothers as either too detached or too familiar. The push/pull of the changing mother/child bond sets up a lifelong paradox: how to simultaneously embrace both a healthy sense of self and healthy relationships with others?

Depending on our reaction to our perception of how we were mothered, we tend to identify with one side or the other. Either we fixate into a remote detachment that is commitment phobic and terrified of intimacy; or, feeling needy, dependent, and terrified of abandonment, we obsess on the other, want to control him or her. Whichever side we gravitate towards, we attract others to us who represent the opposite pole in order to maintain the familiarity of the original push/pull.

However, unless we get stuck, we do naturally continue to evolve. At some point in our lives many of us take the next step, discovering that we have unconsciously switched places and ended up on the receiving end of what we had once given out! We begin to see the other as behaving like we once behaved and vice versa; and moreover, with chagrin and even shame and embarrassment, we begin to understand just how difficult and even impossible it was for the other to deal with us! By changing places, we get perspective on our original identification and thus recognize our own part in the situation; we begin to have compassion for what it feels like to be in the other person's shoes; and, most crucially, we begin to recognize each other as partners in a powerful, invisible dynamic that, once recognized, transforms into a boring, repetitive drama.

In other words, once we switch polarities, the projection loosens its grip and paves the way for an awareness of the push/pull pattern in ourselves that has its origin in how we were originally nurtured — or not. Eventually, if we are diligent, we learn to take back a projection each time it occurs and to expand the range of our awareness by consciously holding the paradox of polarity in order to continuously refine the ever-shifting balance between independence and connectedness.

Ultimately, we find that as we continue to refine our capacity to work with both poles of any seeming contradiction, we deepen our appreciation of them both and realize their unity. They not only affect one another, they are aspects of one another on a continuum that includes the space that defines the distance between them. In other words, to become aware of both poles at once is to embrace the space between them as a unified field.

And yet, there's a difficulty. We don't know how to widen awareness without losing the pivot point that keeps us grounded. We're taught to focus on one thing at a time, and move in linear fashion from one thing to another. So, to rear back and let our eyes go fuzzy, to lose the usual narrowed focus, feels weird. When we simultaneously and deliberately direct awareness in opposite directions — to both the very small and the very large; to both points and the spaces in which they are held — we start to feel spacey, dizzy, even nauseated. It takes practice and persistence to easily shift our focus from zoom to panoramic and back again.

Back then, before I struck out on my own, I had a dream, of Nietzsche's eye, like a camera lens, widening, narrowing, focusing in and out. I realized, upon awakening, that this dream metaphor was key to my mental and spiritual evolution.

As we learn how to embrace the space between any two seemingly opposite points and see them as a unified field, we make a startling discovery: *space is not empty*. Despite the push/pull dramas that result from our seemingly separate existences, at a deeper, invisible level our individual being is continuous with, and but an aspect of, the primordial ground of Being that rounds the world into one. Far from being empty, space is full, a plenum, liquified; there is no space left over from or within Being, nothing that separates anything or anyone from all that is.

Thus — and here, finally, I come to the point of this seemingly abstract, even spacey discussion — *there is no way for us to fall, no reason not to trust*.

And yet, unless we are fortunate enough to experience a safe maternal presence when young for long enough, we forget this fundamental grounding within the whole of being. And who does not forget? There is always some kind of glitch in the mothering process. Our mothers too, had to negotiate the tension between self-will and self-surrender. As did their mothers before them. This tension, as long as we occupy bodies which appear as separate, never goes away entirely. The continuing tug between self-sufficiency and self-surrender is one of the hallmarks of being human.

Like individuals, various cultures stress one side of the equation at the expense of the other. It's a cliché to say that eastern cultures value harmonization and western society values striving. We westerners are taught from birth to stand on our own, do our own thing, compete, fight to win. Death, in the worldview that we have inherited, feels like losing. Doctors and patients' families often feel they have failed when, despite their best efforts, the loved one dies.

And yet, and yet . . . amazingly enough, despite our entrenched cultural emphasis on ego, individualism and self-sufficiency, there comes a point in our short or long or even longer lives, when, unaccountably, most of us are blessed to enter what does appear as an entirely other atmosphere; a moment when, through no fault or virtue or decision of our own, we wake up into what we would, if we could but fall back far enough, remember: we awaken into what feels like the hushed, sustained presence of grace.

Just when we least expect it, toward the end of life if not before, grace tiptoes in and saves us. Unexplained, undeserved, and bearing divine benediction, grace bestows its miracle: many, if not most people, especially if they are fortunate enough to undergo a prolonged, but not too painful dying process, do move into oneness with being and die peacefully, in the arms of Love.

And grace often blesses family and friends as well. How many times have we heard someone say that they felt a shock of revelation when they viewed the body of their loved one and realized that it was empty. That the person who had inhabited the body was no longer there. That the body, far from being the person, was merely the container. And that this recognition gave them closure, peace.

For those who are fortunate, the death process itself feels like a benediction, with all participants surrendered as one in the hushed presence of grace. The atmosphere in the room changes, lightens, charges with mystery, numinosity, even majesty, as beings from both sides of the veil intermingle, hold vigil, joyfully witness and participate in the loved one's climactic passage from this dimension into the next.

Chapter Nine

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY, part 5

Unfortunately, fully forty years after Elizabeth Kubler-Ross began her monumental work to sit with the dying and de-medicalize our departure from this life, natural, peaceful, even joyful death is still the exception. It's not just physical pain that the dying person must endure; they must contend with the gulf that opens between them and their family and friends who still fear death. Paradoxically, the fear and lack of awareness of family and friends can be the final straw that cuts the cord and allows them to slip out of their body.

Fortunately, in contrast to the uneasy disjunct between the one who is dying and their frightened familiars, it is no longer so unusual to hear of deaths where the one closest to the dying person leans down and whispers, "It's okay, you can go" — and within minutes, or hours, they do. But even so, a hospice director told me recently that many hang on to life longer than they would prefer — because their friends and family don't want them to die, thinking that this is the way that they show their love!

Though well meaning, they do not realize that what they call "love" is actually attachment, a consequence of desire in the material world where everything seems separate from everything else and we feel alone, lonely, and longing for home. The greater our feeling of separation, the greater our desire for union, the more we suffer when the object of desire appears unavailable or is snatched away.

The state of attachment is most pronounced in the brief euphoria of romance when we "fall in love" with an Other. No wonder we seek romance, over and over again, and then, when fusion dissolves, bemoan its demise! This kind of "love" is addictive. It feels paradisaical when present, a brief immersion into the oneness of being that we all vaguely remember — and then, when yanked away we feel devastated.

Our process of grieving a primary loss of any kind is as little respected as the dying process itself. "Hurry up and get over it!" We hear ourselves or others say. Come back to life, don't get stuck in grief. Take a pill, work harder, do something, anything, to avoid the descent into an abyss that feels so awful that, when we inadvertently find ourselves near its rim, we're afraid it will suck us in. That once we start howling, we will never stop. That to fully experience our grief would kill us.

Fear of our own deep grief circles around to fear of death.

So we do what others do, pretend to get over our grief. Pretend even to ourselves. We lie, dissemble, busy ourselves with endless piles of details, junk ourselves up with alcohol,

legal and illegal drugs, bury ourselves in stuff — anything to distract from the serious business at hand.

For grief will not wait. Not really. We can think we've squashed it effectively, but the unconscious effort to do so takes all our energy, and leaves us depressed, at a loss, exhausted, unable to freely feel. The play and exuberance of joy, our birthright as beings, seems to refer to an entirely other universe.

The very thought of grief makes us cringe and back away. It does not fit into our cultural insistence that we smile and have a nice day, or at least hold on and make the best of things. And when we do not take the time to process and integrate great loss, then we end up shut down, dead to love's whisper. And we fear growing old, afraid that our bodies will lose attractiveness and no one will "love" us!

Thus, a society that denies death and grief also hates aging. And since we're always aging, when should we start to hate ourselves? Over the past century, society's view of the "prime of life" has pushed back from the 40s to the 30s to the 20s, to the teens. We all want to be teenagers! Even little children, who have been sexualized, through abuse or fashion or both.

So, in effect, our individual and collective fear of death has gradually drained value out of the natural cycling of life's stages to all but the narrowest of adolescent windows, since, by the time we're 30, even 20, we're already afraid we're washed up, "too old."

Chapter Ten

PERSONAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY, part 1

Despite the convolutions of a culture that goes to such extremes to avoid and deny, and failing that, to minimize and medicalize death; despite the conditioning that torques our natural responses to both death and each other into stereotyped caricatures of caring, at some point in our evolutionary journey each of us is destined to realize that in reality we *do* experience what we *can* call “true love.” That we have always lived in love, and that we always will. Love is the ground of all our longings and imaginings. Love is the call of our being that opens us to the universe.

Love is. Love is what is.

Love holds us in its nourishing embrace.

I speak from experience. My descent into grief after my husband Jeffrey’s sudden death in 2003 had the paradoxical effect of opening me into the reality of all-encompassing Love. Just prior to his death we had moved 1500 miles away from family and friends. His fatal heart attack left me alone and bereft in a new town. Rather than moving back to be with family or friends, I recognized my aloneness as a rare and privileged opportunity to surrender, for a full year and without interruption, to the rich humus of my grief.

It was in so doing, that I unexpectedly encountered its opposite: exaltation. In my solitude, I grew acutely sensitive to subtle, inner dimensions. My interior life, fully acknowledged, plunged me into the heart of being. As a result of that one exquisite, bittersweet year I now know, with every fiber of my being, that what we call “love” on Earth is but a tiny taste of Love’s infinite abundance. And again paradoxically, I realized through grieving Jeff’s death that my love for him was and is but substitute and mask for the unconditional Love that powers the universe and steers the stars. Love is the invisible substratum of Being, so full and rich that we can only barely apprehend just how precious we are, how tenderly we are held. Love *is* Reality. Love is the Oneness that includes all of creation and from which we can never be spared.

With this expansion of perspective not only is there no separation from others, there is no death either, if what we mean by “death” is annihilation.

Yet is difficult to talk about “love” without sounding maudlin or sentimental. I have no way to convey how profoundly, and how surely, with no hesitation — and certainly no regret! — my journey through the turbulent currents of grief, when fully felt and honored, moved me below its wild, inconsolable howl into what I can only call the numinous. Love warmed me, like the Sun; Love plunged me into its oceanic depths within which, like surface waves, forms appear and disappear.

I suspect that my unusual openness to fully processing grief after my husband died prepared me, just over five years later, to easily and naturally accept that I was dying. As

I had encountered his death from behind, now, for a few short days I was moving towards my own death; and from both sides of death — looking forward, looking back — I stumbled into this vast, spacious, utterly mysterious and fluid medium that floods through us all and from which only our thinking seems to estrange us.

I realize that this mystical intimation that pervades my being like blood and bone and refuses to depart is a far cry from a discussion of the kinds of behaviors that tend to operate in a culture where fear of death rules. Yet I cannot help but talk like this. For I have landed in the ground of being, and I know: *love and fear do not occupy the same space*. Nature abhors a vacuum. When the illusion of fear disappears, Love's presence pulsates, buzzes, a kind of liquid surround sound.

This Love that powers the life force has been here all along, and yet we, in our silliness and myopia and despair, have either ignored or sentimentalized Love into romance, or more “heavenly,” into winged, haloed angels and the gentle oblivion of a good parent God or Goddess.

I feel for all of us who are caught up in this culture's terror of aging, death and dying. I feel especially for those who are dying and must interact with others who are not — yet. For as the dying person moves towards departure, he or she does tend to undergo a profound transformation. The forced intimacy with mortality throws new light on former preoccupations, including attachments to those we love the most. The dying process is our final, climactic initiation, dissolving the ego into dimensions too subtle and powerful for the rest of us to follow or understand. The crack between worlds widens, invites, ultimately swallows the one whose time has come.

Given that the two states of being — fully engaged living and disengaged dying — are incommensurable, and given the fear of death that saturates this culture, it's no wonder that the strategies for dealing with the disjunction that opens up between the one who is dying and his or her loved ones can seem convoluted and strange. George's wife holed up until she was prepared to die. That woman I heard about second-hand never did tell her sister of her cancer scare. My sister Mary refuses to be thought of as ill, and engages with life more than most of us who are healthy. And Shauna kept up her ravaging chemo treatments so that she wouldn't upset her friends.

I have mentioned these examples to show, given the contradictions and complications of living in a culture that denies and defies the so-called “death” to which we are all heading, just how various are the responses to others of those who appear to be in the final stages of this embodied life.

And I mention them in an attempt to describe clearly how, though they differ from one another, these responses are still enculturated, in contrast to my own. My response also differed from the standard cultural response, and that is to see one's disease as the enemy and one's fight for life as a war.

Underneath the medicalization of disease and death and dying, is the even deeper tragedy of militarization.

For most people in our culture, unless they are very old and/or unusually philosophical, when facing a just-diagnosed terminal illness sooner or later move from initial shock into attack mode. They marshal will, intelligence, resources, family and friends to “fight” the “threat” and “save” their life. Their battle, whether or not it heals their disease, usually stimulates people to rally around them, and thus creates or enhances community.

So for me to decide not to fight — and especially not to fight “this early in the game,” while I was still apparently healthy, and not *that* old; why would I want to “give up”? was I suicidal? — was to court my own community’s rejection — or at least their terror and anguish. I knew this, and went ahead anyway.

Then, being a truth-telling Sagittarian, I decided to inform family and close friends of my situation and my decision — and work with each one individually to help him or her accept it.

When confronted with terminal disease, I leaped high over Kubler-Ross’s first four stages of dying — Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression — and landed with both feet on the ground of the fifth stage, Acceptance. The discovery that I was dying, encountering no obstacles, shoved straight through into the interior where oneness resides.

Dying? No problem. Just another door — the most mysterious door of all — long closed, now opening.

I wanted not only to accept it, but I wanted my community to accept it along with me.

Yet I *was* surprised at my own response, even though it was precisely what I had intended! For years I had been intensely curious to discover just how I *would* respond if I discovered I was dying. I wanted to be able to embrace death as a part of life, but didn't know if I could. For me, what my lifelong quest to continue learning and growing tends towards, what fills life's trajectory with its ultimate meaning, *is* its climax, the final act, a "good death:" death without fear, and, if possible, in full awareness of the dying process. I have long prayed that I be allowed to move through the veil with consciousness intact.

This is a tall order, I realize; and for most of us, outside the range of what we think is possible. But I've heard stories of high masters of one kind or another deciding on their time to die, and then just doing it.

Scott Nearing, for example, a well known back-to-the-land person in the '70s, had an agreement with his wife Helen that neither would interfere when the other decided it was time to die. Nearing died eight days after his 100th birthday, having told Helen ten days before that it was his time; that he was going to lie down and she was not to bring him either food or water for the duration. [Check this.]

I read about a Buddhist monk, who when he knew his time had arrived, left this life while in sitting meditation, body still upright. [Check this.] And of Eskimo elders, who, when they decide their time has come, walk out on the ice and never return. [Check this]

But how, in a culture that fears death, does one find out if one is prepared to die except by dying?

I didn't automatically assume that I would die a good death just because I had been training for it. I knew very well that my ego mind might cling to life; and especially, I knew that the body has a will of its own, and that its strong survival instinct might fight on long after my mind had let go. One 84-year-old friend, for example, as she lay dying, thrashed about restless, and at one point grousing to the granddaughter attending her, "Dying is HELL!"

On the other hand, my sister-in-law Kathy, who had been using alternative treatments to fight breast cancer for three years without calling it that, finally gave in, saw an M.D., and agreed to chemotherapy. After one session, the doctor told her that it was too late, the cancer had spread, the chemo wasn't working and there was nothing more they could do.

When her friends brought her home, she told them matter-of-factly that now that she knew that she was dying, she would make it quick. First, Kathy sat on a stool in the kitchen while her handmaids washed and combed her hair. Then she climbed into bed, lay on her back and closed her eyes. Twenty-four hours later, her breathing turned ragged

and loud. During a moment when I, on shift as her caregiver, had stepped out of the room, she released.

I admired Kathy, seeing her as someone who truly knew how to die, and wondered how I would respond in the same situation. Would I freak out? And if so, would I be able to come back into balance before I actually crossed over?

In short, I had long been curious to discover if the serenity that I had been cultivating for so long would remain when faced with terminal illness. A part of me secretly feared that my hard-won composure would suddenly or gradually crumble in the end.

So it is no wonder that even on the first day of my three-day sojourn, I was intensely grateful to discover that even *in extremis*, equanimity had not only not deserted me, but in fact, had solidified.

My attitude of near-immediate acceptance was perhaps the clearest indication of just how far I had traveled from the dominant culture.

For I had long been strange.

Chapter Twelve

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF OUR CULTURE, part 1

The Bubble

Note: In this chapter, I imagine culture as a one-way mirror-skinned bubble, and I draw clear lines between those who live inside it and those who no longer do. I'm aware that the way I frame the discussion may seem so simplistic as to be almost cartoonish. First of all, cultures vary in the range of behavior that they allow. Plus, no one lives entirely inside a culture and no one entirely outside. There are always gradations, and areas where one feels a bit quirky, or carries secrets that if known by others, would signal (unallowed) strangeness. No one is an island, just as no one is cut from the same cookie stamp.

Moreover, no matter how much an outsider someone might feel from the culture that he still (appears, to insiders) to live inside of, he does, at some level, still live inside it — despite that he actually did at some point pop through its skin and now sees back through, to notice how the culture is structured, what makes it tick, how others are still caught like spiders in its web. No one is entirely immune to the perpetual flow of subliminal influence. The culture flows through us always; insiders and outsiders both are relentlessly being conditioned by what's around them. Those who wish to live outside the bubble must continuously shake off subliminal and other conditioning lest it infiltrate and infect them again into thinking they're inferior, ignorant or crazy, need the guidance of authorities, and should, nay must obey cultural laws, forms, orders, taboos.

I say this as an outsider for nearly 40 years who still finds herself continuously shaking off subliminal influences. As fast as they bombard my subconscious, I try to notice and move them along. And I am aware of various behavioral memes that anchor me into the culture. For example, I automatically choose the longest line at the grocery store in order devour People magazine. (I like to watch celebrities age.) And, I notice myself addicted to email, a form of communication that, more and more, replaces personal meetings and phone calls.

Email addiction is but one symptom of what my outsider self considers truly alarming: how my personality is synchronized into western culture's endless technological amplification of complexity and connectivity, all of which tends to fracture focus, reduce attention span, and leave us exhausted and depressed. Ultimately, constant adrenal stimulation crashes our biological system, and we "fall ill," in body, mind and soul.

For the past 40 years I have also endeavored to practice awareness of the present moment in the midst of being automatically plugged in to culture's chaotic atomization of the seamless web of life. It may be that my outsider status and this practice are connected. They may even be one and the same. In any case, please realize that I, too, view the following rough sketch of how a culture's inside/outside dichotomy works with a very large grain of salt.

Yet please do bear with me, for there is a case to be made, and insight gained, when we imagine the culture as a one-way mirror-skinned bubble.

Open and Closed Systems

When I was a doctoral student in the philosophy of science at Boston University, one of my friends, a doctoral student in mathematics at Harvard, told me that he didn't believe that science could ever discover Truth. Not because he was cynical; nor did he hold the then sophisticated view that at best, science could only expose falsity. His view was simpler, more radical, and offered in the spirit of glum resignation.

Any test of a scientific theory, he said, works with a finite slice of the cosmos. How do we know that the same laws apply universally? Since we don't know where the edge of the universe is, or, even if the universe has an edge, then we can't, no matter how much we learn about it, claim to understand the laws that govern it as a whole. At the time I felt flummoxed by Michael's idea, and didn't want to consider it seriously. My intellectual need for certainty — a mask for my emotional need for security — was too profound.

Now I can admit that it does appear — at least from our earthly perspective, but who knows? — “true” that only closed systems can be scientifically described and their future predicted. That only if we determine the boundaries of a system, and only if those boundaries are impermeable, closed to outside influences, can we learn what it's made of, what it's for, how it works for sure.

We like to think that what we call Nature, for example, has predictable laws. (We certainly hope they're predictable, otherwise how do we predict and control the future?) For example, that water flows downhill and hot air rises; that day follows night and spring follows winter; that seeds incubate, sprout, flower; that a sperm penetrates the egg to create new life. But even Nature's laws, we are learning, seem to be relative and not absolute. Not only does Nature offer us seemingly endless complexities and even multi-dimensionality that must be ignored when we attempt to understand her via the artificial boundaries we loop around our “controlled experiments,” she also appears, as a dynamical system, to be *open*. In other words, the laws of nature can change, not just in continuous minute ways, but suddenly, drastically, and with no little or no warning — and no way to even look back to discover what happened or why.

Even our biosphere as a whole — Earth and her atmosphere — seems to be an open system, its edges permeable to influences from surrounding space. Yet, despite the accumulating evidence, those who see themselves as in touch with Nature (fewer and fewer in the glare of constant artificial light) want to think that we *can* trust Nature and natural laws; that at least here we can find our feet in some kind of common ground.

But — and here's the rub — what kind of “trust” are we talking about? A trust that's synonymous with predictability? Or another kind of trust — subtler and more ineffable, a reliance on or surrender to the mysterious sense of feeling at home, cared for, beloved, at

one with the whole of creation. Though we might think that we trust nature because we see her laws as predictable, those who spend time in nature and who are *open* to the experience, may find themselves sinking into this latter type of trust as a sense of communion with the heart of being.

Within this culture's bubble, however, "trust" does mean predictability. We trust that our paychecks will arrive on time twice each month; we trust that "God," however we view him or her, is "on our side," and then wrestle with "why bad things happen to good people." We trust that people will drive on the right side of the street and stop at stop signs; we trust that if we fall sick our insurance will cover the expense; we trust that our social and commercial and religious and governmental structures and laws and the roles we play and rules we go by try to guarantee only certain sorts of behavior so that we can, hopefully, at least some of the time, predict and control what happens to us.

We've all noticed how this kind of trust is being severely challenged during these post-millennial years. Trust as predictability is eroding at the same rate as other cultural trends accelerate. Loss of trust as predictability destabilizes; makes us uneasy, stirs up terrible feelings, alters our attitudes, makes us clutch and strive to protect what we have while grasping for more.

So what would it mean "to find our feet in some kind of common ground" that did not involve trust as predictability? I suggest that there is a more radical and less enculturated, even less biological kind of trust involved when we truly feel our way into the actual recognition that we're all in this together: that we all feel the same thudding in the stomach when something we expected to go a certain way because it always did suddenly changes, lurches into an entirely different direction, transforms into its opposite or worse, drops off the map.

This kind of trust is spiritual, metaphysical: we sense ourselves as a mere drop in an ocean of being that intermingles all of creation, and in which we humans slosh together in waves, each of us a quivering receptor for the feelings and attitudes and belief systems and pain and love and joy of everyone else.

Unless we experience our own center as that through which all this is flowing, then the commingling of everything with everything else not only confuses but terrifies. And of course, it doesn't meet with our rational expectations of ourselves as being able to figure out what is going on, as a limited series of linear causal chains.

So we try to build walls against our own quivering sensitivity. Indeed, we don't need to build them, but just to maintain them, and continue to fortify them, for those walls were built long, long ago, when we were very young, so young that most of us don't realize they enclose us in a prison of the culture's making. The stronger the walls that (apparently) separate ourselves from our surroundings, the less in touch are we with our inner center. For what surrounds us and what is inside us reflect the same reality. So, the more we try to ward off our interconnectedness, the worse we feel: empty, isolated, unsafe, unloved.

So trust, in this context, is taking down the walls. Allowing the original absorption into the whole of being to fill us again with such endless potential, abundance and creativity that we realize it can only come from a world larger than the one we think we inhabit. For we don't understand this larger world; it feels mysterious. Trust then, in this larger sense, is surrender to mystery.

Yet this kind of trust might be mistaken for conditioning in that it also flows through us always, but for one crucial difference, and this depends on us opening to an *awareness of the present moment*. Where awareness exists, the walls do not. As we expand our awareness, the walls thin and dissolve, rather like the Sun dispels fog. Ultimately, awareness practice re-introduces us to the whole of being in which we live and move and wherein we feel connected, safe, and beloved. Within this context that is larger than the culture's bubble, we notice how we are being conditioned, rather than simply succumb to it. (And when we do unconsciously succumb to it, the more we practice awareness, the less time it takes to pull ourselves out.)

Spiritual, metaphysical trust involves an expansion into love, rather than contraction into fear. Awareness widens to include the entire external situation in which we appear to be held as well the thoughts, feelings, and patterns of our inner world — all as one seamless whole. This higher level trust requires us to identify not with the self and its needs alone but with what at some point appears as an unbounded, infinite, all inclusive field or space with no edges and therefore no possibility of rational comprehension. Rather than living inside a one-sided mirror-walled bubble while thinking ourselves free, we *are* free — to roam through endless, unbounded expansiveness.

This single internal switch, from trust as predictability to trust as awareness of the ocean of being in which we are all held, shifts consciousness into a larger dimension wherein the insider/outsider distinction dissolves into unity and transforms the edge of the bubble from a closed system into a transparent, living, breathing membrane.

Not only are biological systems open, with permeable boundaries that, when infiltrated, can change the state of the whole, so too are social systems. For it may be that when such collective awareness is achieved by even a certain small percentage of people, it alters the entire society, and enlarges the horizons of possibility for everyone.

It's hard to imagine that this kind of social transformation could happen anytime soon. And yet it must happen sooner rather than later if we are to survive on this planet with dwindling external resources. We outsiders who have already recognized necessity through our own (at least periodic) surrender to the ocean of being know that such a transformation is possible, for it has changed us. And this makes us view those still inside with a terrible poignancy.

For when we see ourselves as living in a world of finite resources — and this is true of any bubble, any bounded field — then when we lose trust as predictability, we grow afraid. Territorial and survival instincts surface. We try to cocoon ourselves in our own

little bubbles, for fear of others' territorial and survival needs. We clamp onto systems of belief that claim to insure certainty and capacity to predict and control. We separate ourselves and those we "trust" (to be predictable) via class/gender/religious/color distinctions, locked doors, gated communities, border fences, membership rules, and the myriad ingenious ways humans have created to insulate themselves from the unknown Other.

For those inside the cultural bubble, even marriage, family, company loyalty and nation states, long bastions of protection from outside influences, have proven not only permeable, but explosive.

Amidst the relentless entropic tendency of everything to eventually disintegrate and reconfigure as it connects with and interpenetrates everything else — amidst the ultimately inevitable but meanwhile held-in-denial surrender to the ocean of being — social systems are biased towards self-preservation just as forms of all kinds and at whatever level of magnitude seem to be — or are they? Another unknown. How long do butterflies live? Do they care?

Culture: Inside and Outside

Most people live inside whatever culture they grew up in. A society (and its dominant language) functions emotionally and mentally as a shared container and framework: it supports and nourishes those who stand upon its ground, and it unites them with a set of rules and taboos that enable them to communicate and share seemingly fundamental values.

Any culture operates as both an unnoticed security system and a usually unnoticed set of constraints. It's as if we all have on a set of glasses with a certain prescription. We've had them on since before we remember, so we don't realize that they mediate our experience of reality. Our cultural glasses don't feel uncomfortable or heavy. They are ever present, like the air we breathe and the ground under our feet, a shared context to help us make sense of our lives.

Though we don't realize it, our glasses frame up the world in a certain sort of way and allow for only certain possibilities that tend to reappear over and over again. In general, we think of future possibilities as predicated upon past expectation, so it appears that only what happened before can or should happen again. Exceptions are called "anomalies," and usually despised, explained away, or ignored. This attitude pervades even the supposedly open-minded culture of science.

Of course, it is never actually true that what happens next must have happened before. Indeed, at any level of detail, nothing ever remains the same — and when we stop to think about it, we know this. Yet in order to give form to seeming chaos, humans cannot help but seek patterns. And whenever we think we detect a pattern, we are liable to latch on to it, use it to bet on the future and try to control what happens. However, if we are

honest with ourselves, we realize that even patterns change over time. That everything changes, evolves, grows, decays. New experiences continuously break through the weight of (no matter how broad or detailed our range of) expectation.

One way to assess a culture's resilience is to ask how well and easily its basic assumptions allow for change, especially structural change. How far will the framework bend before breaking? How much disorder can be introduced into any (apparently, hopefully) closed system before it disintegrates?

The same goes for individuals. Evolution selects for adaptability. The more we fear change, the more rigid we become, the less our capacity to let go of expectation and flow with life — and death.

No matter how rigid the culture's framework and conformist its members, every culture spawns individuals who are or become more adaptable than their fellow citizens. Despite our lifelong need as embodied beings for emotional and physical security, these rare ones sometimes find themselves changing at such a rate that at some point they come up against the inside skin of their culture's bubble and pop right through to the other side.

This switch in status can happen slowly, or in a flash, and either way, it feels traumatic. Suddenly, or gradually, the newly fledged outsider finds himself cut off from normal communication with those still inside the bubble since, by definition, those inside can no longer see or understand him. Since they do not recognize a wider range of possibilities than those the cultural glasses identify, insiders do not see beyond the bubble — or even, that they reside inside a bubble. From the inside, the bubble's skin appears as a mirror, reflecting back to its beholders who they think they are and how they see themselves. Anything outside the bubble is literally unthinkable, unimaginable. And whoever thinks or imagines another way, is considered ignorant or crazy.

So a profound asymmetry exists between those caught inside and those free to roam outside. For though some of those outside *can* be considered “crazy” — if by “sanity” we mean social agreement, then the really crazy ones are lost in their own internal worlds — other outsiders are full of crazy wisdom, since they *can* see through the skin of culture's bubble to the bounded world within it. And for them, the behavior of those inside now looks, by and large, predictable, even silly, or *truly* crazy!

(There are many versions of “crazy.” For me: truly crazy is one who bites off one's own tail, fouls his own nest; thus suicidal, against the natural order, or at least what appears to be the natural behavioral order that enhances survival in Earth's particular biome.)

(The bubble's skin is like the one-way mirror of a room used to view, unnoticed, criminal interrogations or therapeutic encounters.)

To sum up and extend the asymmetries: Those inside the bubble can't understand those outside, though some outsiders can, if they wish, understand insiders. Those outside, to those inside, when acknowledged at all, seem strange. Outsiders see insiders as

predictable (and thus boring, silly), and since outsiders are relatively rare, they tend to feel alone, isolated, misunderstood, invisible, abandoned — the price paid for the enhanced freedom of thought and movement granted by an enlarged perspective (from their point of view) and reduced status (from the insiders' point of view).

Those outside don't have the same relationship to each other as those inside do. Insiders share a set of assumptions about reality and do not recognize their assumptions as limited to the bubble within which they live. Those outside the bubble live in a larger universe; some of them recognize, but do not share, the assumptions of those inside. They may or may not share assumptions with other outsiders. But outsiders usually do recognize each other without too much trouble, since, at the very least, they tend to be less dependent on others' approval.

But that's only the first clue. After all, they might be just crazy, meaning sociopathic!

For me, as an outsider, one sure way that I know of to decide whether or not seeming "strangers" actually do live (mostly) inside or outside western culture is to notice how they work with polarities. If they identify with one side of any duality and hate or reject the other, then I assume they live inside the bubble, still caught in the drama of competition, and projection, seeking to best the other rather than embrace both the other and the rejected shadow quality of the self.

Those I consider genuine outsiders work hard, despite breathing the thick, poisoned air of continuous polarizing conditioning — no, let's go further, let's call it *brainwashing* — to recognize, accept and embrace the reality of both sides of any polarity, to understand the relative value of each pole within its own limited context, and the still relative value of the polarity as a whole within an even larger context. This continuous *opening*, to understand and embrace any whole as nested within another, larger whole, and to which all its parts belong like the workings of a machine, is the key to outsider independence. For the mental machine constructed from off/on digital polarities prescribes the computer program of the culture's glasses, the framework or structure that holds the bubble in place. Outsiders, but not insiders, can not only see this but are bent on deprogramming themselves.

Sometimes outsiders try to "explain" their freed-up world-view to those on the inside. After all, they're also human, and seek company! They try to describe how "projection" works, how, when confronted with something that feels like a contradiction, the unconscious pushes out into the world one side of that contradiction — usually a quality of one's inner life that feels uncomfortable or even monstrous, completely unacceptable to the conscious view of the self. From there it is one easy step from projection to labeling. The person or situation that is made to carry the projection then gets demonized as bad or wrong or evil.

When outsiders explain this to insiders, some are actually ready to hear it, and the recognition makes them stop short, let go of their drama, at least for a moment. For example, the other day I was talking with a feminist who hates domination and violence

and is extremely fired up by the culture's rejection and denial of the aging process. We were talking on the phone, and every time she stopped to catch her breath I would try, and fail, to get a word in. Her angry rant was not only hurting my ears but slamming my solar plexus. I was trying to stop her from continuing her loud, repetitive critique of what we both know.

The firehouse spewed on and on, with me trying and failing to intervene, always politely. Finally, I yelled at her, "STOP! Just STOP!" That got her attention. Then, into the space of her sudden silence, in a carefully modulated tone I told her that her tone of voice felt both dominating and violent — exactly what she's trying to stomp out and what she herself doesn't want to be doing. In response, her voice faltered, softened, sounded crestfallen: "Well, what you say hurts. And it's not the first time I've heard it . . ." She paused, and then, almost whispered, "I'm not allowed to see my own grandchild because I'm 'too intense'" — then, as if she had to pull back from any further opening — she concluded with a sarcastic swipe: "whatever *that* means."

It's scary to open. Scary to allow one's boundaries to efface, become permeable. Scary to proceed in a direction that if persisted, leads to cultural death and rebirth as a unique and individuated person on the other side of the cultural wall.

I really felt for her at that moment. She is me. I used to be what I now call a "violent peace activist" — until I learned to see and work with the war inside myself. Hopefully, that moment of clarity in our conversation will help Pat learn to take back her own projections so that she too, can finally break through the skin of the bubble and experience real freedom.

But though some insiders are ready to recognize the inside of the bubble as, when you rub off the muck that covers it, a clear, all-seeing mirror, most are not. Those who are not want to push back the words into the speaker's mouth and blame him or her as bad or evil for having judged them. Without realizing it, they instantly demonstrate the truth of the outsider's portrayal of projection.

However, unless those on the inside are ready to take the next step, initiating the perilous journey of popping through the skin of the bubble into what is sensed from the inside as the vast unknown — they simply can't hear — or care, or bear — what the outsider is trying to convey. They are still satisfied with the apparent — though relative — security offered by life in the bubble. Having not yet bumped up against the bubble's skin, they haven't realized that there is a world beyond; for they haven't yet gotten to the point where they sense the inside of the bubble as a relatively closed system, more or less predictable, and ultimately both boring and suffocating.

Even outsiders, however, usually don't move too far away from the bubble, since after all, it's home, where they came from. Some want to break down the boundaries between them and those inside, and, once they realize that hating the bubble just thickens its skin — and, as a matter of fact, since hate always involves projection, injects them right back into the bubble! — they begin to see that their appropriate path is to gracefully and

artfully live at culture's edge. Not inside it, and not far away, either. In this manner they can show by example, how courage enlivens us, helps us learn to flow with the mysterious dynamics of a universe way larger than the bubble. In their position as change agents on the edge of culture, outsiders make themselves accessible to those who begin to wake up and realize that in order to breathe freely, they too, must get out.

In these ways, outsiders can serve as mentors and exemplars, showing others a way of life beyond the seemingly predictably secure confines of the bubble, a larger life infinitely richer and more interesting than the bounded one inside. They know that once insiders get a good taste of it, they can't help but hunger for more.

It's with real anguish that those living on the outside edge see/feel the sufferings of those inside. They have to stop themselves from trying to drag them out into the light, so that they too, might wake up from the collective nightmare. But they know they cannot; that each person must make his or her own journey, and that, in fact, there is no way that anyone can push or shove or even entice another to go through the skin. Only when they find they can no longer breathe in the stifling air will they start to instinctively nose their way to the edge.

This transforms into the moment of greatest peril. The person is nosing the inside edge, may even be poking tiny holes into it, getting little whiffs of fresh air. But what's out there? Whatever it is, it seems so strange compared to what's in here, and until he or she can get past thinking that a known bad is better than an unknown good, a person can get stuck right there, on the inside edge, no longer believing in what's inside, and yet still too scared to break through.

Here I remember my mentor in graduate school. He knew that the world he was living in (that of positivist philosophy, itself the so-called "common-sense" of (pre-woke) academic philosophy in the late '60s and early '70s) was a dead end, and he also knew that he did not have the courage to leave it behind. He was in his mid-life crisis when I became his student, and he used my evolutionary drive as the tip of his sword, to poke fun at and generally cause an uproar in an academic philosophy department whose world-view he felt both caught in and alienated from.

Some people might spend lifetimes stuck to the inside edge of the bubble before they get to the point of total suffocation and break through, *despite* their fear. They get to the point where life on the inside is no longer viable. It's either change or die.

Their fear is natural. For the journey through the skin of the bubble is a one-way trip. We cannot leave and return without having been so affected that we can never again feel even moderately satisfied with life inside. Once we experience the extreme power of the unleashed life force itself flowing through us it feels impossible to consciously choose to continue to participate in a system that chokes off life.

So it's wise prepare ourselves before breaking through.

But how to prepare? For if life is predictable on the inside, the basic hallmark of life outside the bubble is its unpredictability. And, of course, with lack of predictability comes lack of control. We just don't know what's going to happen. *We have no choice but to trust the universe.*

But what does it mean, "trust the universe?" For of course, life outside the bubble is also in a bubble, a context of meaning that, while larger than the culture's, we can assume is still bounded, somehow, in some way. Just because we've gotten out of one set of chains doesn't mean that there isn't another, subtler set of constraints. We may call ourselves "free," but what we mean is that we are free of the constraints that we recognize.

For now, let's call this larger bubble that encloses the smaller cultural bubble "the solar system bubble."

The main difference between the "solar system" bubble and any cultural bubble is that we don't know where its skin is. It is so far outside our realm of awareness and comprehension that none of us will ever live to get some kind of "take" on it as a whole, some way to get its measure and to understand it as a framework. Not in a single human lifetime will the diameter of the "solar system" bubble reveal itself. We are always swimming, as it were, in a seemingly infinite sea.

So how do we find our feet? What lies "under" our standing that we can take for granted? That we can say, "this, I know, for sure"? How, without a clear and definite context, do we know what point of view to take, how to move, how to judge one thing better than another, or even how to discern differences? No matter how much we learn, it will never be enough; we can never say that we've mastered anything, because we can never consider all the variables. There's always more, and we know it.

But why is this so? How can we take the measure of the cultural bubble, but not of the larger bubble that encloses it? While cultural insiders might seem boring and predictable to outsiders, but what does that mean, really? What do the outsiders have that the insiders don't? Why do some people become outsiders and some stay inside? How come some make it through the wall and some get stuck to the inside edge? How to get a better understanding of what it means to be an outsider, rather than an insider? What makes outsiders tick?

I don't know the answers to these questions, and I doubt you do either. But I do know of a language that might help us understand the questions better, and to help broaden and deepen the discussion.

Chapter Thirteen

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF OUR CULTURE, part 2

Saturn and Pluto

The last chapter was a set-up. I wanted to introduce the reader to a larger way of making sense of the disjunction between the experience I had while apparently dying, and what I outlined earlier as a range of possible experiences that most people in our culture undergo when dying. And that was to talk about culture itself as a bubble which separates the world-views of those inside it from those who have moved beyond it.

As one of those who has lived at culture's edge for four decades, I have a lot of experience with feeling like an "outsider." Moreover, I observe the framework that locks insiders into thinking they are free; from my point of view however, they appear as rats in a maze, free to follow one path or another through it, but not to eliminate the maze itself.

Back when I first popped out of the cultural bubble, I also began to study the symbolic language of astrology. At first, I cringed when insiders asked me, out of politeness or curiosity, "What do you do?" and I'd respond, "I'm an astrologer." Instantly, I could feel a wall slam down between us, a force propelling the other person backwards, beyond reach. The reaction felt so strong and instinctive that I had to conclude they feared contamination, wanted to avoid being associated with someone who took "such nonsense" seriously.

If they spoke at all, they would then exclaim, or sputter: "I don't *believe* in astrology."

To this, I would counter, "Do you *believe* in English?" Then, to their puzzled look, I would add, "Astrology is not a belief system; it's a language, a symbolic language. You either speak it or you don't."

That usually shut them up. A few even grew curious, now that I had reframed astrology in a way that it didn't have to be either believed or not believed.

Certain subjects, including astrology, despite decades of infiltration of so-called "paranormal" New Age ideas, still serve as litmus tests for whether one is an outsider or an insider. What most of these ideas or ways of looking at the world have in common is that they admit as possible "energies" that are not, or not yet, "scientifically" testable. Those, for example, who claim to be visited by the spirit of a loved one shortly before they die, are not taken seriously. Nor are those who claim to have been visited in dreams by the spirit of a loved one who has recently died. As a result, those who do have such encounters with invisible realms rarely mention them. They fear being called crazy, banished to the outside.

Science continues to be the container, the framework, and the prescription, for the set of glasses of western culture.

In Chapter 12, I offered a bird's eye view of our culture as a "bubble." In this chapter I will further characterize the cultural bubble by relativizing and contextualizing it via an astrological lens focused on two "planets," or "energies," Saturn and Pluto.

From our embodied perspective, our home planet, Earth, is the apparent center of the universe. Now, let us imagine each of the planets that appear to cycle around Earth as scribing, over time, the circumference of its own bubble. Planetary bubbles stretch out from Earth as the center concentrically, from the Moon (30 days) out to Saturn (30 years), and beyond that to (at least) three "outer planets" with cycles that are both longer than one human lifetime and not visible to the naked eye.

Let us imagine the 2D cycle, opening into its 3D sphere, i.e., "the bubble," of any planet as its context, or meaning. The size of each planetary sphere or bubble is determined by its distance from Earth, which in turn determines the length of time it takes for that planet to circle Earth once. The return of a planet to its birth position in the zodiac for the first time signals the closure of that cycle, the fullness of that sphere. As the first cycle closes, so does the second cycle begin, but this time we experience it differently, since the way it works as a whole has finally become familiar. What happened before, starts to happen again. The cycle of a planet becomes predictable, a matter under our control.

In the case of Saturn, one of the ways of describing its meaning is to say that it schools us into our scientific culture's notion of linear causality. Like billiard balls, where one hits another, the first ball "causes" the "effect" on the second ball, its motion and direction. Saturn's bubble or cycle, offers us a crucial lesson: if you don't want to undergo that effect again, then don't recreate the cause which brings it about! We call this "learning from our mistakes," or "learning from experience."

In our individual lives, each of us goes through the first cycle of many planets from birth on to the age of 29.5 to 30 years of age, when Saturn finally returns to its starting point in the zodiac at birth. We all remember how that felt, and how we looked forward to it, intuitively knowing that 30 was a huge milestone, marking the end of youth and the beginning of maturity

During that first cycle of Saturn, we learned "the way the world works." We tried on the roles, rules, laws and goals that govern behavior in the culture we were born into. We either conformed or rebelled, in both scenarios measuring ourselves by this outside standard. We learned how actions have consequences; how, for example, whatever we began at 21 seemed to close down as we approached 30. What had seemed like a wide open field at 21 begins to feel confining, suffocating, and ultimately predictable, boring. We come up against the fence that surrounds the field, the inside surface of that planet's bubble, and rather than continue to pace its inside edge, we are determined to get out.

The years right before and after 30 represent a crisis of confidence. Are we going to continue in the same well-travelled route, or are we going to strike out in a new direction, having absorbed the lessons of the past as the foundation for a new future? The natural

direction is evolutionary, to spiral outward — unless, of course, we allow fear to paralyze.

Thus, astrology identifies certain change points in a human life time when we are internally motivated to expand or change direction entirely. The Saturn cycle is the most obvious; I've met no one over 30 who, when I talked about "what happens at around 30" didn't nod his or her head in recognition. Furthermore, we all sense that from 30 on, there is a crucial difference between those who choose to let fear rule and those who choose to press through fear to the other side. It's rather like the insider/outsider distinction that I drew earlier. In fact, I would call Saturn the chief determinant of the framework/container/bubble of a culture.

At sixty, Saturn makes its second return to its natal place, and again, during the final years of our 50s we notice ourselves beginning to feel hemmed in, limited, much too confined. Again, what had looked like a wide open field in the years following 30 now seems predictable, even boring. We've learned to create our own identity in the world, and we're bored with it. Even if we did make a big change starting at 30, at the approach of 60 the second cycle of Saturn creates that same feeling of needing to let go of the past in order to invite new challenges. For some, of course, this means "retirement" from the work world.

The point is, Saturn rules training, rules, roles, predictability, security via regular paychecks, insurance, discipline, responsibility, and so on. It's what helps us focus and keeps our eye on the goal. Saturn can turn us into dour, bitter, rigid, bored, controlling people, or it can, when tempered, and focused, help us to manifest our dreams. Without Saturn's experience and lessons learned, we wouldn't be able to focus imagination into reality. And yet, if we don't see beyond Saturn, we eventually feel trapped in an airless prison.

So, whereas in the first cycle we learn the roles, rules, and laws of how our society is organized, and either conform or rebel, in the second cycle, we strike out on our own, establish our own identity, seek to make something of ourselves by utilizing the laws, roles, rules we learned in the first cycle to accomplish our own individual goals.

Thus the second cycle of Saturn when consciously undergone, is experienced very differently than the first.

Likewise, the third Saturn cycle will have its own set of goals, attitudes, values, traditions, utilizing the second cycle as its foundation. At 60, our "identity" has been established, nurtured by the skills and talents we developed in order to come into our own since we were 30. The third cycle of Saturn, consciously experienced, yields what we call "wisdom," that of the crone, or elder: no longer needing to "build an identity," a certain detachment arises, as well as compassion for those still suffering the throes of egocentric striving. The consciously aging crone or elder becomes a treasure chest for a conscious community, happy to be called upon by young ones for nurturing advice and counsel.

To sum up: Saturn, with an approximately 30-year cycle, symbolizes order, structure, frameworks, predictability, rules, roles, programs, a set way of doing things with only certain inherent possibilities taken as “real.” When used unconsciously, Saturn rules the person who moves like a robot, is rigid, controlled and controlling. To this person, reality is ruled by linear chains of cause and effect, and everything can be rationally understood and controlled. When used consciously, Saturn signifies the person who has clear and consistent purpose and focus, one who disciplines him or herself to follow his or her own path and learns from mistakes.

Let us view Saturn then, as the cultural bubble.

The cycle of Pluto, on the other hand, is 248 years long, way too long for us to comprehend in one lifetime. We don’t know what makes Pluto tick; all we know is that we are subject to its mysterious laws, and that there is literally nothing we can do to avoid them.

Thus Pluto *rules*. Pluto engages the primal life force itself, that which powers our being and the greater being in which we are all immersed. Pluto, ruler of the underworld, governs creation and destruction, birth, growth, aging, death, and transformation. Its action is relentless, purgative, uncontrollable, out of bounds. When Pluto is active, the smallest action can produce an effect way out of proportion to its apparent “cause,” whether for good or ill. When used unconsciously, Pluto signifies the power of domination and ruthless (pretended) control; when used consciously, we sense in Pluto the magnetic power of nature that bursts seeds open, greens the spring, and turns leaves brown in fall. Pluto’s life force, growing and aging our bodies, creating and destroying according to mysterious natural laws, nourishes and destroys all and everything.

Let us call Pluto the solar system bubble.

Utilizing astrology, a symbolic language I have studied for 40 years, the difference between insiders and outsiders can be described as those who are primarily working within Saturn’s cultural laws versus those who have surrendered to the much larger, unknown, mysterious, powerful, natural order of Pluto.

Now of course, astrology itself occupies an outsider position, deemed strange to those who reside within the western cultural bubble. Anyone who studies this language deeply sooner or later realizes that astrology seems to be governed by laws that, while we can feel our way through some of them, feel essentially mysterious to our rational mind. Astrology assumes the ancient hermetic principle, “As above, so Below:” What happens to link Heaven and Earth vertically intersects horizontally, here Below: “As Without, so within.”

Astrological “planets” are symbols for energies that gain meaning through the space/time fields carved out by their orbits. The larger the cycle of a planet, the further out it resides in the solar system and the deeper within we feel it. If we live to be 30 years old, we will

experience one complete cycle of Saturn. But for us to experience one complete cycle of Pluto would take 248 years. So Saturn, but not Pluto, is an energy that we can understand, and therefore learn how to control.

Let me repeat: those inside any cultural circle are governed by Saturn. Those outside the circle live in the much more expansive and profound world of Pluto.

Every person has both Saturn and Pluto operating somewhere in their birth chart, so must somehow contend with them both.

Both planets are karmic “heavies,” in that they operate by laws and rules that limit us to certain ways of acting and behaving and thinking, with severe consequences for any transgression.

Once again:

Saturn’s laws are those which have been established over time by social convention. They originated through human agreement. Different cultures signify different agreements its inhabitants have made as to what is real and what not, what will be allowed and what not.

Pluto’s laws, on the other hand, are those of nature, of living systems. They are mysterious laws that we cannot fully understand, since we don’t live long enough to experience one full, 248-year, cycle of Pluto.

Chapter Fourteen

PERSONAL CONTEXT OF MY DISCOVERY, part 3

Backstory

In order to elucidate what I can now see as the background to how I actually did respond to this three-day process, I need to go back, way back, starting with a thumbnail astrological sketch of my basic nature.

Born at sunrise, I am a fiery “double” Sagittarian, destined to seek to know, to understand, to philosophically comprehend, or at least consider, contemplate, ever widening perspectives.

Built to head full-steam ahead into the unknown, I leap blindfold off cliffs, forever the Fool. Sometimes I land in a net, more often on rocks, and have to pick myself up again, dust off, nurse wounds, absorb lessons, and correct my course before leaping again. No defeat feels final, nothing alters the innate optimism of a Sagittarian who scans the horizon and leans into the future, attending to what’s next rather than what is or was.

Which, of course, is why, above all else, I value the practice of awareness. Instantly, in one long conscious intake of breath, I can turn, or re-turn, my attention to this moment now, right now. In the space of a single breath I transform my fears of or demands for a certain kind of future into the expanding spaciousness of the present moment. Both what is to come and what is behind vanish. I wake up — inside what *is*. The Now that is not a point on a line but opens, wider and wider, deeper and deeper — to include points, lines, spaces, time, causality, geometry, any other mental construct. Here. One. No separation. No in and out, up and down, you/me, good/bad. This living presence. This dark, fathomless abyss. This loving oceanic fullness that greets the sun-kissed surface and waves. This silent, still, serene all-one Being that creates and holds space for the life force coursing through lungs, heart, orgasm; through comings and goings of migrations, seasons, tides, the silent, endless, rhythms of Earth’s circling, planets orbiting, galaxies wheeling, universes blinking in and out . . .

Indeed, I would say that the practice of awareness of the present moment has saved my life. Saved the life inside me. Without its moderating influence, its capacity to modulate and even transform desire, I would have burned out long ago.

I refer here to the kind of awareness that meditators cultivate, that of mindfulness. This is an awareness that, thankfully, began to come increasingly into the public eye at the turn of the millennium, due to the popularity of especially Eckhart Tolle’s best-selling books. In cultivating mindful awareness, we may be coming full circle, back to communion with our ancestors that hunters with a mystical bent remind us of: a state of intense alertness that unites predator and prey; full aliveness, attuned to the surround and the interior, without distinction or distraction or goal, surrendered to the flow of the now.

Though many more of us now cultivate meditative states, and sing the praises of those who live “off the land,” and even “off grid” —in dense jungles, primeval forests, empty deserts, mountain caves; and though we may admire (and fear) aboriginals who seem to enjoy an easy attunement with Nature, few of us in the “civilized” world have had any experience with the *psychic* requirements for physical survival in the wild.

Just when we sacrificed our natural communion with nature in the process of becoming civilized is a matter of debate, but we can point to its acceleration in the 18th century with the industrial revolution, and how it gradually, unwittingly, and insidiously funneled our mysteriously attuned, organically evolving selves into a supposedly ordered, integrated, predictable clock-like universe. Like the computer Hal in the film *2001*, the technological slave has now usurped the master, and dictates our life-style. Unless we pay very close and sustained attention, our symbiosis with the digital, off/on temporal and spatial matrix of electronics entrains our brains. Digital constructs play down the right brain in favor of the left brain, ignore diffuse boundaries, limitlessness, the mysteries of birth, growth, decay, death; in short, they foster the illusion that we can control reality.

On the other hand, we could compare the right brain to the internet itself, a complex, interconnected, invisible and infinitely mysterious electronic web that reaches across time and space to connect any left-brain construct with any other, and often leaves us utterly confused and even deranged. Right brain lives without horizons, boundaries. Left brain craves them, and works to contain and direct whatever is being sensed and turned into words. Thus we are accustomed to the scientific method of being able to “prove” (or at least “disprove”) a theory, perspective, or interpretation by using empirical, factual evidence and logic. But what happens when so-called “facts” turn out not to be? Or are contradicted by other “facts”? Or might be, in the future? What happens to our ability to think clearly and to discern differences, when the invisible realm of the internet seems both infinite and infinitely malleable?

The above cursory neo-Luddite critique of the psychic dangers of contemporary western culture is nothing new. (The Unabomber said it better.) Many of us, especially in older generations, can remember a time when life did not move so fast, when we could indulge in wandering, and wondering, and took time to dream. For decades, I’ve realized that in order to continue to feel alive in the present moment I must practice awareness as a crucial antidote to both my own fiery nature and our frantic cultural acceleration. Without awareness, I succumb to the psychic ramifications of my interaction with technology, an ever-increasing mental agitation that ignores the body and the natural world and then, feeling strangely empty and lost, unconsciously craves bodily sensation of all kinds, grasps and clings to more and more stuff — in an endless, doomed quest for a return to wholeness.

I understand all this, and yet I must continually remember to live it. Over and over I return my attention to the wholeness into which I was born. Over and over again, I lose awareness, fall out of balance, out of harmony. No blame. It’s easy to get sucked up. I can’t pretend to exist “above” the culture, unaffected. I breathe its air, drink its water, hear and speak its linguistic rhythms, participate as a consumer, act and think and sleep

within its artificial constructs. With every breath, the invisible currents of this culture move through me.

There is no escape.

But what I can do is to continuously recognize the culture's pernicious aspects, shake them off, let them go.

Take one example, the panic I felt upon entering the E.R. waiting room. That was a heightening of the subtle fear I tend to feel every moment, with every breath, unless I wake up to it. Which I must do, hundreds of times a day. Every time I catch myself becoming infected with the fear that I am failing to speed up enough, hurry up enough, catch up (but with what? And why?), I have trained myself to do the opposite: switch gears into reverse, descend back down into the body — and *breathe*.

Reversal goes against the grain. Like all of us, I grew up striving to “rise above” the body and ignore it. So this practice is not easy. In fact, learning how to keep on switching — from mind's overwrought, nervous frequency to the body's steady, biological rhythms — is the hardest work I've ever done. It's like turning back the clock. Or better, like turning off the clock. This is especially true now, since I no longer bleed and time no longer slows down monthly to a luxurious crawl. I experience life's rhythms more like a man does, which is to say, not nearly so intensely and rhythmically. It's easy to forget my body. Easy to treat my body as an object separate from me, since it's no longer subject to lunar/tidal currents.

Menstruating women carry the memory of the ancestors through our female body's resonance with the natural world, the Moon and its cycles — whether or not we want to. And increasingly, we don't. Women are taught to want to live like men, in control, separated from the body, pure mind, rising daily from restless, interrupted sleep to rush busily around in a blind attempt to keep up, get to the top, cross off to-do lists and stave off the fear that rises in the throat like bile. What we call “heartburn.” Rather than filling and spilling over with the waters of love, our hearts feel like they're burning up, to blow away like cinders in dark, polluted winds.

Since I no longer bleed, in order to remind myself of my connection to the natural world I make a conscious decision to honor my own personal astrological Moon — the planet that symbolizes the body, the subconscious, memories, security and survival orientation. For while my Sun, Ascendant, and Mars occupy the fiery go-get-'em sign of Sagittarius, when I was born the Moon occupied the slowest sign of all, Taurus. So when I make that switch, from barreling ahead and up, to slowed down and low, from Sagittarius to Taurus, Sun to Moon, I tend to feel like a race car that screeches to a halt, then grinds gears as it starts to back up.

Moon in Taurus helps ground and stabilize my fiery Sagittarian flights. Yet Sagittarius, feeling trapped, tends to fight the Moon's influence.

I describe my own mental (Sagittarius) and bodily (Taurus) split to demonstrate how extreme the two parts of ourselves — mind and body — can feel. I imagine that if you look closely at your own life, you might notice that, unless you practice some sort of discipline that grounds you into an awareness of the present moment, then you too, feel split from your body.

Without awareness of the present moment, most people tend to fall into one of two broad categories unconsciously operating in early 21st century American culture. Those in both categories view the body as one's personal possession, but only those in the first category value this possession.

These people usually pay a great deal of attention to the body, for one reason or another striving to “get” or “keep” it “in shape,” to tone down its instinctive needs. The athlete, for example, hones the body into a well-oiled machine, an object, instrument for the mind's expression and competition. And, in our culture, since the body is the basis of “self-image,” and (therefore) self-worth, many people value the body for its power to attract or keep a partner, a job, social status; they wish to gain ultimate control over their bodies and therefore their lives (see: anorexia/bulimia); and/or they hope to “reverse the aging process” — and even, hopefully, absurdly — avoid death.

But here's the paradox: while most people think of the body as their possession, which implies that their real “self” is not their body, when it comes right down to it, these same people are terrified of death, fearing annihilation: without the body they would cease to exist. They live inside this contradiction, feeling both separate from their bodies and yet completely identified with and focused on their bodies!

The second category of people who are not attending to the present moment includes those who do *not* value the body as their possession. In contrast to those who value and use their body as an asset to get what they want, the consciousness of these others seems to be basically oblivious, either buried within the body or floating high above it. For them, the body schleps or drifts along, entirely unnoticed as the source of the mind's cravings. I've noticed that over time these people tend to grow either more and more obese, dense and sluggish, devolving into entropy; or they get skinnier and skinnier — hollowing into a fragile, brittle, rickety rigidity that might shatter in the slightest breeze.

Whereas those in the first category work to avoid death or at least slow down its approach, those in the second category live like zombies, as if already dead. The difference between the two, though seemingly extreme, is not. They exist as two poles on a continuum where the body is viewed as a possession, cut off from the mind, and treated as if it were a machine, without life in its own right.

Just like our industrial society's relationship with Earth, we colonize, dominate, weaponize, or feel defeated by our bodies, rather than treasure them, learn from them, listen to them. Ultimately, I sense that as those of us who intend to complete the transformative and seemingly impossible act of moving into more or less continuous awareness of the present moment, that we will, over time, naturally rejoin our minds with

our bodies; that each of us will feel our own body in its sacred function as a sensitive and utterly unique antenna for Earth's body, carving out its orbit around the Sun, the Sun sailing through the Milky Way galaxy, our galaxy whirling in attunement with other galaxies — all of them swirling through a black hole that opens into a white hole, into supergalactic wonders galore, on and on through the infinity of dimensions that surround and interpenetrate each and every singular moment of our itchy bitsy, busy busy lives.

Much has been written and said about this topic of the mind/body split, how it separates us from not only our bodies, but from each other and the natural world. The *cogito, ergo sum*, famously articulated by Rene Descartes in the 17th century as a philosophical credo, gradually infiltrated western culture so thoroughly that by the 20th century the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget claimed that the ultimate goal of the stages of mental development is to effect a complete separation of mind from body. Piaget's final, normative stage of adulthood occurs when a child is only twelve years old, the age at which, says Piaget, the child has learned how to use language to manipulate objects *in absentia*, according to the rules of formal logic. Has learned, in other words, to separate the formal structures created by his mind from both the ineffable mystery of the body and the rest of the physical world.

Note: Twelve years is the Jupiter cycle in astrology. I will discuss a powerful personal synchronicity involving the Jupiter cycle in Chapter 19.

But of course, even poetic facility with words cannot replace sensuous contact with tactile reality. And, there is no one-to-one exact correlation between words and what they are supposed to represent. In fact, the more we rely on words, the less real we feel.

The maverick British psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, among others, pointed out in the 1960s that the perfection of logic yields the “schizoid” personality, where one is so split off from his body that he identifies only with his mind. Forty years later, being schizoid is the norm. Virtual reality is the new frontier; our contact with the natural world retreats ever further into the far distance, represented on screens that simulate physical reality or leave it behind altogether.

By now you might guess that the kind of awareness I cultivate includes the body, indeed, is centered in the body, because, first of all, I feel better there, connected, in tune with the whole of nature and the universe. And secondly, I realize that the body — as the externalization of my personal portion of the collective unconscious and of the great breathing mass of Earth herself — knows a hell of a lot more than I do.

When the hair on the back of my neck rises, that's the entire body functioning as an antenna alerting me to danger behind.

When a wild animal moves to high ground just before a tsunami hits, that's the entire body in tune with Earth's body.

Each time the Moon and Sun regularly eclipse one another *exactly* from Earth's point of view, despite their enormous difference in size and vast separation in space, that's higher intelligence evoking awe and wonder in the human heart, no matter how primitive or sophisticated.

We have much to un-learn.

And way more to re-member.

Chapter 15

I INTEGRATE THE DISCOVERY

I'm still re-membering, still putting myself back together again.

My turnaround began when I was 26 years old, newly separated, caring for two young sons, and a full-time doctoral student in philosophy. I was desperate, but for what? All I knew was that I was out of sorts, that my life was not working. That I felt dead.

Just at that point, I discovered a book by Ouspensky, who was a disciple of Gurdjieff, the mystical Sufi philosopher. The author discussed Gurdjieff's practice of "self-remembering": stopping what one is doing long enough to simply say, "I am here." Ouspensky claimed that by following this instruction over and over again, learning to wake up to the present moment, I would gradually develop a "magnetic center," and no longer be pulled to and fro by outside forces, no longer mechanical, reacting to whatever happens with no free will of my own.

Intuitively, I *knew* that this simple practice, if followed faithfully and for a long time, would help me gain control over my life. And I have followed it, ever since, with more and more success. Even so, after 40 years of practice, only rarely am I able to hold an awareness of presence for more than a few moments. When successful, I wake up, over and over again, hundreds of times a day.

In the light of this background, perhaps you can now grok why that crossroads moment as I stood in the doorway of the E.R. felt so powerful. *Something shoved me into the beating, loving heart of the Presence, and did not let me go, for three whole days. A death and resurrection cycle. I have not been the same since.*

For 40 years now, I have known that in order to break out of the trance state of obsessive runaway thinking that is induced by panic, all I need do is slow down, breathe more fully and deeply, respond to the textured subtleties of the present moment, surrender to the miracle of the here and now.

Easy to say, very hard to do — especially for a full-on fiery Sagittarian. Yet, despite, or perhaps because of my tendency to leap off cliffs blindfolded, this Sagittarian nature also yields inner riches from a young age. Because of my tendency to take risks, I've engaged in *and digested* an extraordinary range of experiences. On those occasions when my wounds felt particularly painful, in order to correct course I'd stop in my tracks and pay close, sustained attention to what actually happened, how I landed with such a splat, head first, face in mud. I'm not a masochist. I do prefer pleasure to pain.

How to evolve and grow? — a crucial Sagittarian question. How to continuously expand awareness — rather than just repeat myself over and over, locked into Saturnine mental and behavioral patterns that not only bore me silly, but hurt like hell.

This is how Sagittarius — how any of us, no matter what our Sun signs — gain perspective, by fully processing experiences and absorbing lessons of more or less painful “mistakes,” so as not to make them again. Of course I fail. I cannot help but fail. I am human, destined to repeat some patterns but, and here’s what I want to emphasize: at this point in my long long life I notice my patterns much much sooner; and though I may still have to journey through one whole cycle again, it’s with a sense of humor and a lighter touch, ever gentle, gracious, grateful.

Of course, part of the initial attraction of any cliff is the perspective it offers. I’ll scramble up to any high place just to “get my bearings” — not so much to orient myself on Earth as to once again see and feel the solidity of Earth dwarfed by the boundless sky.

Whatever my troubles, they melt away. No matter how controlling my ego, it dissolves. Life opens. I get a larger view of my own particular history, sensing how the sequenced minutiae of my life are somehow arranged into a divine play, choreographed according to the template of an immense, mysterious order.

Rather than falling off cliffs, I now step off them, and sense myself suspended in a buoyancy that floats slowly down, with plenty of time for sights along the way. And when I land, the impact feels cushioned, almost unnoticeable as a discrete event. All of life feels more diaphanous, transparent, shot through with translucence.

So, in April 2008, when I determined that I was dying, I felt that I had already lived a long, full life — indeed, in this one life, many lives, each richer and more differentiated than the last — and could detect no crucial emotional “unfinished business.” Granted, I was in the initial stages of leading a large group project, and moreover, had just entered into a promising relationship with a man. One might think that either of these situations would have felt like unfinished business. But I was old enough to know that I was not indispensable to any project, and could think of a number of others who could take over leadership. And as for the new relationship, I knew, from my own experience, that cycles of primary relationships vary, and need not end with death.

At the “ripe, old” age of 65, I realized that, no matter when I die, by living a full life I am always in the midst of seemingly crucial tasks and situations and honor the Native American credo, “today is (always) a good day to die.”

Interlude:

From My Journal: July 16, 2008

After April, my second encounter with the world of western medicine came on July 9. Why didn't I finish telling the story of those three days in April, back when it was happening? Because the meaning I assigned to it wouldn't be there until the story had come to some kind of fuller conclusion, and only as I felt it to be meaningful could I find a way to tell it.

But why is this? For many years I kept a near-daily journal, and especially when things got difficult I would scribe my feelings there, furiously, intently probing my subconscious, wanting to touch into whatever original wound was precipitating the latest soul level suffering, and its externalized drama or crisis.

These 2008 anthropological expeditions into one of the bastions of technological culture, modern medicine, certainly qualified as drama, crisis. But I no longer seem to need to journal daily to probe the meaning of now by attending to the past. Rather, even in crisis, I seem to be capable of staying more or less awake, aware, in the present moment, open to the experience and whatever it has to offer. Of course, this particular type of encounter with modern medicine does make me feel like I'm gambling with my life, especially last week's appointment, the first time that actual "treatment" was mentioned.

Remember the fibroid in the uterus and the cysts on the ovaries? I know that possible "adenocarcinoma" occupies the starring role here, but these weird growths were also found by the original CT scan, and confirmed by a sonogram a few days later. The gynecologist had told me back in April that he wanted another sonogram in three months, to determine that the growths in the reproductive organs were all "stable," but which I imagine he meant not growing.

And yes, it turned out they were stable. But to this list of weird growths in my ovaries and uterus was now added a third kind: the second sonogram had revealed a polyp, in my uterus.

The doctor took me back into his office, sat me down, and told me that he wanted to do a D & C to take out that polyp, and while he was at it he might as well take out the ovaries as well. He could, he said, do that operation as a laparoscopy. And that's when I heard the immortal words:

"We just take them out through a little slit in the skin and pop them into little baggies!" I sat there in wondrous befuddlement, fascinated by the way his mind worked. Or was it his sense of humor? Or the value he put on efficiency? Whatever it was, it was important to him, because he said it twice more, "We just take them out and put them into little baggies!" I swear he was kind of excited, and I presume — or am I reading him all wrong? — he was hoping to cheer me up with this information.

Meanwhile, I was sitting there in disbelief, stunned that because of cysts on the ovaries, he would want to remove the ovaries. He said that cysts on the ovaries usually come and go, dissolving when a woman has her period. That for someone my age, cysts on the ovaries were not normal, and might indicate something else was going on. Likewise the uterine polyp. He'd like to biopsy that thing.

I did agree to take the C-125 and C-130 lab work, to test the blood for ovarian and uterine cancer. But I didn't respond to his request to make a hospital appointment to have the double procedure that he wanted. Instead, I decided to again visit a local osteopath whose deep hands-on healing I had experienced during the April event and ask for his opinion.

"Well," the osteopath said, "how many women past menopause get sonograms?" In other words, how do they know that it's not normal?

Meanwhile, and here's the reason I tell this story now, rather than waiting until I'm finished with the original one, my attitude towards death in this second round was the same, though I was not enjoying the bliss consciousness that accompanied me in April. Nor did I feel a great need to share the experience with others. This confirms my sense that the timing of the first round did seem to be essential to the way that I experienced it: the thought that I might have only two weeks to live had popped me into another zone.

This time, I experienced what I imagine is the usual anxiety while waiting to find out if a test for cancer will turn out "positive." And yet, anxiety didn't follow me around like a shadow. In fact, due to another crisis in my day-to-day life, for the first few days of waiting the blood test took a definite back seat. Then, as that other crisis resolved, it came forward. So, I noticed, with chagrin, it almost doesn't matter what the matter is, if I think about one thing that bothers me, I will feel anxiety; then when that issue is resolved, something else comes up for me to feel anxious about. It's as if I make things up so that I can feel anxious. And when one leaves another takes its place.

Today I found out that the blood tests were normal. I did expect this, despite the anxiety. So, now, I ask myself, newly aware of my proclivity to worry: that's over. What's the next worry?

Meanwhile, today, within an hour of finding out my test results, I hear about another death, a few days ago, of my ex-father-in-law. Two scenes from this drama will remain with me forever:

As Dick Sr., dying of leukemia at age 90, was nearing the end, Dick Jr. (my ex) and his brother Dave were caring for him at his home. Each morning they would disrobe and get in the shower with their dad, to tenderly wash his body. Imagining these three grown men, a father and his two sons, in such a vulnerable, intimate relationship with each other, made me burst into tears.

Two days before his death, Dick Sr. told his sons that it was time for him to go. They arranged for hospice. The hospice nurse arrived, accompanied by a chaplain. Ever polite, he told the chaplain: "I've lived a long and wonderful life. And now I'm moving towards an equally wonderful death."

In other words, Dick Sr. needed no help, nor did he need to get any "sins" off his chest. He was done. Through. And very very full.

Chapter Sixteen

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

I take this same attitude for granted, and yet I've noticed that many people, when nearing death, seem to "hold on" to life longer than they themselves might prefer. I attribute this attachment to our culture's terrible fear and denial of death and dying. We are conditioned to "fight to the end," "never give up," and, as a reward, praised as "courageous." And, we are conditioned to "need permission"— from spouses, siblings, parents, significant others — in order to exit this life.

When the dying person is parenting young children, I can understand the need to hold on as long as possible, and the need for permission in order to go. In certain other situations, where attachments have been long and strong, and one partner "can't imagine living without the other," couples together for 50 years, for example, I recognize that a gradual letting go may be easier on both than a sudden exit. Though the shock may be just as great, there is also an opportunity to begin the grieving process prior to death. And, in fact, if the dying process lasts long enough, the one left behind may even feel relief when the partner finally breathes his or her last. (And then, unfortunately, given our anti-death culture, they will likely encounter "guilt," fearing their relief must mean they "wanted the other to die.")

But for anyone else, I scratch my head in puzzlement at our odd cultural practice of needing permission to die. Frankly, it never even entered my mind to consider others' needs as I tasted the first ineffable, enticing flavors of what seemed to be my own dying process. I was concerned for my loved ones yes, of course, and wanted to make sure that I contacted all of them personally. I would alert them to my coming death, and my decision not to "fight" it. I would bid them farewell. I would not ask for permission to go, and I would warn them not to try to persuade me to stay.

If my attitude seems unusual, it may be because I have been blessed with three different types of experiences that taught me not to fear change, no matter how drastic.

1. I encountered death, face to face, on two earlier occasions; both of these experiences also shot me into transcendent realms of which I had not been previously aware.

The first primal encounter with Death came as a 26-year-old, from generalized abdominal peritonitis. Ten years later, I almost drowned in a freezing river. Both occasions felt like depth charges into spiritual realms that reverberated from soul into personality, and completely altered my manner of relating to the world. And on both occasions, the "attachments" that, prior to these experiences, had kept me stuck in certain postures and behaviors, evaporated.

2. I have had a number of out-of-body experiences that demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that "I" am not my body.

My first out-of-body experience, as a 27-year-old, was shocking and involuntary. It began as an extremely loud staticky buzzing in the middle of my head just as I was falling asleep, which then quickly shot through my entire body. Next, it was as if a trap door opened in the middle of my brain (the pineal?), and I suddenly catapulted out through the top of my head, through the closed window, above the buildings and trees, into the blackest of nights before turning around and shooting back the same way I had come, then hovering near the ceiling for a moment prior to re-entering my body. As waking reality feels more real than nighttime dreams, so this out-of-body experience felt more real than waking reality. That first “OOB” experience scared me so much that I remained sleepless and paralyzed, for hours.

3. My relationship with my husband Jeff did not end when he died. The love between us continued to evolve after his sudden death from a heart attack, to the point where he actually became much more capable of intimacy than when embodied. (See my book, *This Vast Being: A Voyage through Grief and Exaltation*.)

Having encountered, in these three ways, dimensions beyond the physical, I *know* that I am not my body, and that what awaits us is not annihilation but expansion, transformation.

These three types of experiences all lie outside what the culture considers “normal.” I imagine that most people have encountered similar experiences, but keep them secret, fearing they will be judged as “crazy” if they let others know. In fact, because these experiences are so foreign to our expectations, they are difficult to translate into words; and anything not named is easily “forgotten.”

You can call me crazy, or you can see me as a “free spirit.” My curiosity and drive for unusual experiences, plus my urge to hammer them into words and commit them to memory, have helped me shed the cultural conditioning that keeps us so entangled with others and their expectations which most people find it nearly impossible to identify, own and work with their own individual thoughts and feelings. Since I enjoy a loose connection with the usual mental and emotional baggage, I have long felt both “free as a bird” and, of course — here’s the kicker, the downside — this “edgy” way of life has positioned me outside culture’s edge.

While I can relate easily with others — and even lull myself into thinking we share the same world-view — certain occasions shock me into remembering that we don’t. For example, I am predictably surprised at others’ surprise that I find it easy to say “good-bye.” It’s easy for me, not because I’m cavalier about relationships, but because I don’t see goodbye as forever. Given my experiences with and openness to, not only my own near-death, but to the so-called “death” of my husband, I *know* with every fiber of my being that relationships do not necessarily end when one person lets go of the body.

So, for me, in April 2008, as a 65-year-old facing apparently impending death for the third time, I figured that if uterine and pancreatic tumors were the avenue that my soul chose to release spirit from body, then fine.

And here's where it gets even weirder. Because not only was I willing to die but in fact, I thought, somewhat guiltily, I had lucked out. I wouldn't have to be present during the end-times; wouldn't be condemned to witness the slow- or fast-moving free fall of our ignorant, greedy, bloated civilization.

Chapter 17

THE COLLECTIVE CONTEXT

Later that first morning of my three-day death and resurrection process, while glancing at that day's *New York Times* headlines, I grunted, with real relish, "Don't have to witness *that* destruction, or *that*, or *that*!" My terminal condition made me feel lucky, as if, against all odds I had just won the lottery.

For many years now, I had pretty much stopped talking about our climactic collective situation. What was the point? Others were either equally aware or blinded by denial. That we are destroying our precious biosphere through the convergence of peak oil, global warming, overpopulation, war, terrorism, bio- and nanotechnology, propaganda, corporate capitalism, industrial poisoning of earth, water, air — you name it! — a swirling, blaring, media-amplified, in-your-face cacophony of destructive forces humanity can no longer afford to ignore and, increasingly experts say, may wake up too late to prevent the extinction of all life on Earth..

Indeed, each time I encounter new parents or those about to become parents I silently salute their courage for daring to usher in a new being as we appear to head into the apocalypse. That they prepare for the future, as if there will be one! This, to me, is a marvel.

I imagine I'm not the only one who, when told about a terminal condition, breathes a sigh of relief at not having to witness The End. For me, the relief might have been stronger than for most, since I had been shocked awake so long ago — as a two-year-old by the radio announcement of the bombing of Hiroshima. From that day on, I was Chicken Little, I *knew*: the world would end in my lifetime.

I have spent my entire life attempting to come to terms with this horrifying prophetic sense while working with every fiber of my being to prevent it. In my 30s, while working for the abolition of nuclear weapons, my behavior was frantic and over-the-top, driven by a mind hardened into leftist fundamentalism. Finally, after smashing against one too many walls, a sudden recognition shuddered through me, that I was *violent* peace activist. Far from offering solutions, I was part of the problem. The only war I could end was the one inside me.

I have spent the past three decades exploring and deepening this understanding.

So, from the very beginning, Death has been on my mind. My death, collective death. What for others was taboo, too terrible to contemplate, has been for me, the mother lode of meaning, hidden deep inside us all, radiating uncanny energy. Given the difference between my own and others' concerns, it's no wonder that, in order to preserve my sanity, I learned to dwell on the margins of materialistic culture from an unusually young age.

So yes, there was a part of me that did prefer to check out. I had to admit that. Even so, I have always been blessed with an optimistic, enthusiastic, spirited nature. Was not this fiery nature, or at least my bodily instinct for survival, stronger than my lifelong, near-despairing view of the future? Did I really *want* to die?

Well, no. I realized that it wasn't that I wanted to die, but that I didn't need to cling to life. In fact, death — and what lies beyond or behind, or within it — seemed an equally interesting alternative.

Really? Did I really not only not care that I was dying, but actually accept it, even welcome it, prefer it, look forward to it? Did I really mean this? Was I in denial?

But each time I asked those questions — sternly reminding myself that given my newly diagnosed condition, my job was to figure out how to stay alive — my left brain would let go and the euphoric atmosphere steal in, fill with spaciousness and peace.

Even so, left brain decided that my attitude of apparently easy acceptance was so radical that I needed to sleep on it. Maybe this was just another symptom of shock, a way of separating from the natural fear of dying. After all, only an hour earlier I had discovered I was on my way out. Not much time to process!

Meanwhile, despite left brain's warning to wait to see if I really felt that way, another part of me — what part? The mystery deepens — also felt an unusually strong directive to begin that very day to tell those close to me what appeared to be happening, and my apparent response to it.

Chapter Eighteen

THE CONVERSATIONS, part 1

As I picked up the phone to make the first call, I was reminded of the day my husband Jeff died, five years earlier. Once again, what I had to say would stun the other, and perhaps change his or her life. Once again, the atmosphere felt intense, unprecedented and very very real.

A shock wave had again shattered my world. And, as before, that same shock wave would run through others. On the day Jeff died, though I was already detecting the first glimmers of the profound settling into solitude that I would inhabit for the entire first year of my conscious grieving process, I contacted people because I had to. I was not the only one who loved him. Others would need to know of his departure as well.

To each I would say, with hardly any preliminaries: “Jeff . . . is dead,” and feel the stunned silence at the other end. Though of course I was in shock that day, profoundly disturbed by the sudden rupture in the natural order — he had died of a heart attack — another part of me, even from the first call, actually relished these conversations. His death had yanked us into the Real. No one’s personality structure can withstand the strain of the sudden penetration into our essential being that Death provokes.

Likewise, here. I was announcing, with hardly any preliminaries that I was, apparently, dying! Again, the stunned silence. And again, I was relishing these conversations. But with a difference.

That time I was getting the conversations out of the way, as a new widow’s duty. Talking with others felt like an intrusion into my process. I was standing in the sacred doorway of my own grief, and needed to head down in. I knew this journey would present an unprecedented opportunity to explore life in a deeper way than I had ever been offered. So though I both dreaded and enjoyed making the calls, I wanted them over with.

This time, the conversations themselves felt central to my dying process. It was as if, in announcing my own possible, probable, or cosmic joke of dying, I was introducing my essential self for the first time to the one on the other end, and inviting an introduction from the other in kind.

To each one I announced what had happened and the diagnosis, and was met with the expected stunned silence. Then I told of my decision not to cling to life — and knocked them into oblivion.

What did their second stunned silence portend? We have all received the “bad news” that someone we know and love has died or is dying. As the years roll by, and we receive this news over and over, we cannot help but wonder how we will respond when and if we get the call about our parents, our children, siblings, spouses, close friends. So my first announcement, that I was dying, is one that you might say is scheduled into everyone’s

life as both inevitable and increasingly frequent. If we live long enough, we will hear the bell toll for so many family and friends that, at some point, we may be the only one left.

But the second announcement, of not choosing to cling? This one seems to be of a different kind, one for which we have not made room in this culture. To say we don't want to cling to life is not only unexpected, it seems impossible, absurd — or we try to make it into something else. The person must be “giving up,” or “is suicidal.”

I knew this would happen, of course; knew that my decision would be unimaginable, so that the second stunned silence at the other end would feel especially long and uncomfortable. Moreover, I wasn't surprised that the next words would seem extra-cautious and carefully chosen — I could sense the other attempting to control his or her emotional reaction while treating me as if I had called a hot line asking for help!

What happens when Saturn's cultural bubble neither includes an opening for what I said or for what the other might say back?

Another turn of the screw. Now, it's not just me heading down into Pluto's realm of the Real, we all are.

To each one I would explain that I was not making the decision because I was “giving up.” And to those who would ask, just to make sure what I really meant, I would repeat: “I don't want to cling. I can live or I can die, either way is fine. If my soul chooses this way to leave, it's okay. My concerns are that I let my dear ones know, that I minimize bodily pain, and that I get my affairs in order.”

What I didn't count on was how often these calls would provoke openly expressed suffering in the other person. And of how much I would be drawn into their suffering, experience it with them, the agony *they* were undergoing. With each call, my heart had to wrench open wider, wider, and wider.

I personally wasn't suffering. I did not fear the letting go of this life. But they were suffering. And in witnessing their suffering, I was also participating.

I look back now and notice the difference in me on the phone as I told about my own expected death compared to when I had announced Jeff's death five years earlier. Back then, my personality was too defended to allow myself to absorb other people's suffering. I couldn't do it. It was too much. Somehow, in the five intervening years, I had opened to others in a new way. And that opening, now that I was, apparently, dying, was revealing itself in these conversations.

So this dying process was gifting me with another surprise: that my heart had grown fuller, wider, more resilient. I was discovering that I was still largely free from attachment, in fact freer than ever! And yet the big surprise: no longer alienated, I could now vibrate with, absorb and integrate, the suffering of others.

By far the hardest phone call was to my sons, whom I had left in the custody of their father when they were seven and five-years-old. My younger son, Colin, who lives alone and has never married or had children, felt especially stunned and stricken. In the intervening years since his father and I separated, Colin and I have moved into an unusually close relationship. We have done a lot of healing work, and we both know it is not over. At the time I left our little family, I certainly didn't ask their permission, but just left, leaving them to cope with whatever feelings arose; and though for the first few years afterwards they visited me during the summers, at one point I was so alienated from their father that he refused to let me see them for six long years.

Though Colin is an unusually mental person, living in his head and with his many original, inventive ideas that he endeavors to put into material form, over the past few years he has broken through to his feelings, and during that first conversation with him when I announced that I was dying, he was racked with heartfelt emotion.

A few days later, when he and I spoke and he had already heard from his brother that I was not dying, he told me what had gone on after that phone call announcing my coming death: "Mom, after we hung up I went through so many emotions. And about the 18th emotion that came up was (and he adopted a mock cynical tone here), "Well, that figures."

In other words, she left me once, and she'll leave me again. Just like that.

At this, we both laughed so hard that we dissolved into tears.

I have long noticed that though the left brain once governed my life, at some point in my twenties the dominance switched. The right brain took over, and uses the left brain to accomplish its mysterious aims. So now, as usual, left brain had to fall in line, begin to rationally figure out how to translate this apparent but strong soul directive into practical decisions regarding the kind of care I would receive during the ending of my life.

I would *not* try to "cure" this condition (and besides, pancreatic cancer is notoriously difficult to "cure"). Not because I was suicidal, finding life so awful that I wanted to die; nor was I "giving up" — but because, fundamentally, *I had no desire to cling*.

"I do not wish to cling," I said, over and over again to family and friends as, one by one, I made the necessary calls to stunned silence on the other end. "Either way is okay, either way is good! I can 'live' or 'die,' stay in this body or not."

And, I would caution each one, "This whole thing may be a cosmic joke!"

My overriding left-brain concern was that I manage the situation to be conscious and aware, if possible, during the entire dying process. This concern was nothing new. For decades I have been aware that my ultimate aim in life is to *consciously* experience the

crossing of the final threshold. To die consciously, in full awareness, has long served as my beacon, my lodestar.

So, palliative care only. Do nothing meant to “prolong” life or to “restore” life. Rather, allow the natural unfoldment of my living through into my dying, just as I have aimed throughout my conscious life to follow life’s natural unfoldment without circumventing the process. And I have done this, over and over again, *no matter what*. No matter what had to die in order for the next evolutionary step to emerge. This commitment to the unfolding of my own nature has required enormous personal sacrifices which, frankly, were not that difficult to make. (In my 20s I left my two young sons in the custody of their father; in my 30s I left a husband whom I dearly loved — and introduced him to the woman who became his life partner.) Simply, for this fiery double Sagittarian, the evolutionary thrust is always stronger than the instinct to hold on.

Of course the commitment to non-attachment, while it may be entirely compatible with the soul’s nature and intent, is decidedly alien to the body’s survival instinct. Nor is this attitude compatible with the ego’s identity construct that, incredibly, aims for immortality and permanent separation from natural cycles. So of course, every time I have realized that I needed to make a shift that would result in letting go of what I had formerly been attached to, I have encountered fear, the fear of the body and the ego of annihilation. And each time, I have faced that fear, and embraced it, have learned to let go and surrender to the unknown.

(People say to me, “Oh Ann, you are so brave!” Each time, the remark puzzles me. Brave? Not really. I’m just doing what, for me, comes naturally. Foolhardy might be a better adjective — when I look back and notice how often, despite my fear I’ve held my nose and jumped off cliffs without looking for the bottom. Amazingly enough, each time I’ve been supported, as if suspended in mid-air, then floated in a cocoon all the way down.)

So I’ve had long practice in coming to the point where I was just one month ago, contemplating my own imminent demise. And as I placed the situation I was facing within the context of a decades-long mindful effort to allow the unfoldment of being, no matter what, this terminal situation felt like the climax, the final examination, with me victorious! I was filled with exaltation, excited, thrilled to be where I was in that very moment, and so very very grateful.

For of course, like many people with a contemplative bent, I had often wondered how I would react if told that I faced imminent death. I had wondered whether I would be afraid, and if so how afraid, and how would I handle that final fear, the one that undergirded all the others. Would I be able to push through fear of death, too?

So the thrilling fact was that, to my complete surprise, I was not afraid. *Not afraid!* Really? Truly? Again, my left brain wondered, was I in denial? Kidding myself? Had euphoria destroyed my capacity for rational thought?

But such questions didn't last long. The euphoria was much stronger and more pervasive than anything my egoic mind could come up with to try to scare me. It was as if that mind was a gnat, and all I had to do was swat it away. A mere annoyance that could pull me off track, yes, but momentarily. By far the greater pull was towards the serene fullness of space, peace.

And, of course, the discovery that I was not afraid rendered me intensely grateful — *I had been allowed to have an experience that brought me face to face with death, actually given the opportunity to discover how I would respond!* That the response that I had discovered within myself was exactly the one I had been preparing for, praying for, most of my life, was supremely gratifying. I would walk towards death, willingly, not afraid, in full acceptance of this next phase of Life's ever-evolving process.

The loneliness that had engulfed me under that final fluorescence still present, I reached for the phone and made my first call.

And that's when the next shift occurred. But before I go into that let me mention that the loneliness I was experiencing felt striking because highly unusual. For most of my adult life I had been decidedly self-sufficient and in love with my singularity. Indeed, six years ago, after my equally singular husband died, I spent the following year in near-solitude, reveling in the fact that we had just moved to this new town of Bloomington when he died, so I hardly knew anyone and could grieve in my own way without being surrounded by the projections of friends and family, their expectations of how I would (or should) be feeling, of what "grief" was supposed to look like, and for how long.

I felt grateful to Jeff for his forethought in dropping me off in this wonderful town on his way out, and for gifting me with the financial means to feel secure and supported, without any need to "work" or otherwise dilute or cut short a grieving process that I recognized as a precious opportunity to explore a profound archetypal human experience that in this culture is rarely addressed with conscious intent, or allowed to germinate at its own rate of speed.

But what was also true about this period in my life, was that I was never alone. Never! Jeff was always present, his strong and steady being extending into the air around me. As if I was breathing in his essence. As if I was recognizing for the first time the actual living quality of his essence and indeed, that it was, is, that of love, pure and simple, just Love, just this, this power that moves the universe and holds the stars in place.

I look back and recognize that it was precisely my aloneness on a mundane level that allowed me to open to the pure, powerful, mysterious subtleties of levels beyond the physical world. That had I needed to pay attention to the mundane, then my experience of the field of Love in which I was held — a field that Jeff introduced me to by dropping his body and remaining present — would not have been available to my oh so "self-sufficient" personality.

So I was surprised, this past April, 2008, even as I picked up the phone, wondering what drove me now to contact family and friends. Surprised at my loneliness, my evident need for people when facing death from this side, since when I had faced death from the other side, I made sure no one on this earth stood between me and my solitary exploration of grief, that holiest of life's sacred mysteries.

If, prior to undergoing this three-day experience, I had been asked how I would feel when faced with a near-term terminal condition, I imagine I would have said that I would seek aloneness, and then call upon Jeff for comfort, to help ease me over. Thus, my great surprise. When I was gifted with the opportunity to discover how I would feel when facing my own death, I found I needed company! Or it seemed that way. Actually, there is a further surprising enlargement of this perspective that I will present to you next, one which I never would have guessed and, frankly, as they say, it blew my socks off.

In any case I was stunned to realize that in the five years between my year of conscious grieving Jeff's death in solitude and this first day of facing my own death, my awareness had apparently shifted remarkably. Then, I couldn't tolerate other living beings; now I craved company.

I ask myself: was that year-long incorporation of the experience of the field of Love preparation for the three-day experience in 2008?

That Sunday, and the next day, Monday, were devoted to this care and companionship of friends and family. To giving each one the news, not only of my apparently terminal condition, but of my decision not to try to "fight" it. That all I would accept was palliative care.

It's not that I was being brave. Rather, I was face to face with the apparent end of my own life and I was surprised to find that I was fine, that living or dying felt the same. Of course, at first I thought I might be kidding myself, in denial, and said that, telling loved ones that of course I would have to sleep on it, to see if I really felt that way. I let each one know that I was both surprised and delighted that I had actually been given the unusual opportunity to look death in the face, and to discover that, at least for now, my apparent response was actually what I had prayed for years that it *would* be, equanimity. Because of course, like most people, I had often wondered about this, knowing that I wouldn't really know how I would respond unless and until I was actually face to face with my own death.

The contemplation of my own death had dropped me into a space that is impossible to describe here in words. Everything felt portentous, heavy with meaning. Every precious moment counted, felt blessed. Life positively dripped with exquisite wonder and awe.

I discovered that this was my decision while in conversation with these others. And while each one fell into the same shock I had experienced, with each conversation I felt more and more centered, more and more . . .

Here, the original manuscript concludes. I never finished the chapter! So instead, 12 years later, in order to convey the conversations, I must rely on memory, and what remains are only a few startling details, bits and pieces.

Chapter 19

THE CONVERSATIONS, part 2

Everything I have conveyed up to this point took place within the first few weeks of that singular three day experience in April 2008 wherein my life reset itself on a new foundation. As you can see, and as shown in the Table of Contents, I began with narrative (THE SETUP, scenes 1-3, and THE DISCOVERY) and then abruptly segued into INTERLUDES from my journal plus deep psychological, sociological, philosophical, and cultural inquiry that went on and on — and on!

Intuitively, I felt I needed to offer these widening perspectives in order to situate those three days within the type of micro and macro context that would hopefully help the reader understand the unusual personal (and social, philosophical, cultural) significance of the experience.

But then, deep contextual burrowing completed, I set the manuscript aside, unfinished. Why? It's not like me. I always finish whatever I start — and quickly!

I have often asked myself this question.

Ever since then I have picked up the manuscript every two years or so and started to reread, only to find myself disoriented, bogged down, once again. Each time I would shake my head in puzzlement. I couldn't finish the story. Couldn't switch back from contextualizing to pick up and run with the second and third days of the experience. Why not?

Aha, now, in early 2020, with perhaps the sixth reading of this pesky manuscript, I *do* realize why. And bear with me because, wouldn't you know, the key finding is astrological.

In April 2008, the planet Jupiter was in Capricorn, the same where Jupiter sits now, in January 2020. The Jupiter cycle is 12 years long. Moreover, this current transit of expansive, philosophical, Sagittarius-ruler Jupiter just happens to occupy the same sign as a very rare conjunction in the heavens, that between Saturn and Pluto, the very planets I feature in this account to further contextualize what I mean by the inside and the outside of the cultural Bubble!

And what's even more astonishing, indeed uncanny: during that three-day death/rebirth experience in April 2008, Jupiter was located at 21° Capricorn, *only one degree from exact conjunction with the Saturn/Pluto conjunction at 22° during this month, January 2020!* I.e., a past astrological position points to a future astrological configuration, 12 years later; this scene unfolding Above, finds its echo down here Below, in my own personal life. Uncanny, because this is the precise time when I have been feeling pushed

from within to finally complete this manuscript of 12 years ago. The inner pressure to do so has been enormous. And given the astrology, I now “understand” why. Not that I really understand. But I take magical, mysterious synchronicities between solar system configurations and events and processes in my own personal life very seriously. Indeed, I bow before them in awe and wonder.

What especially fascinates me here, is that what’s helping me complete the manuscript is Jupiter, ruler of my Sun, Ascendant and Mars. Why? Not just because of Jupiter’s proximity to the current Saturn/Pluto conjunction, *which it anticipated twelve years ago, back in April 2008*, but because Jupiter, at my birth, sat directly across from the current Saturn/Pluto conjunction, *in Cancer, sign of family love*, and Jupiter’s position, back in April 2008, was located directly opposite that original natal position. Bingo!

No wonder I felt strong internal motivation to call my large family and speak to each one individually.

In January 2020, the shifting panoramic perspectives — personal, social, philosophical, cultural — that I described in 2008 no longer make me dizzy. Somehow, 12 years later, as Jupiter again moves through Capricorn and is about to catch up with *the conjunction between Saturn and Pluto that it anticipated for me back in April 2008*, I finally inhabit a psychic space large enough to knit together the various widening perspectives without getting lost. Thank you, Jupiter!

Astrology aside, why couldn’t I just have finished it up back in 2008, by continuing the story of day one through days two and three? As I said, I usually I do tell personal stories from beginning to end. They flow out, like a river. But this one did not. Instead, it began to flow, and then got flooded with contextual considerations necessary to advance the plot.

Too bad, because at that point, the memories were still fresh, very fresh, On the other hand, though no longer fresh and detailed, they are in still very strong in skeletal form, twelve years later.

Back then, I could have gone into heartfelt detail relating various conversations I had with loved ones, mostly on the phone with family and old friends, while waiting to die from pancreatic cancer.

Instead, I can only rely on my memory of fleeting moments from two of these long-distance conversations. For these two do return to me now, twelve years later. Interestingly enough, both these family members have since died — and I live on!

I remember especially one telling moment from my conversation with Dad, a medical doctor. “What about pain,” he had asked, plaintively. “Would you like something for pain?” I had already told him I didn’t want medical care. That I wanted to die on my own terms, and consciously. His question came from a deep, compassionate, almost

wrenching place within himself. I very much appreciated the question, and especially his tone, and of course it made me think. *Did* I want medicine to alleviate or numb pain?

Like everyone else, he too was very much on board with me once I related my experience of being in the emergency room, and how I had opened to the process of dying. His concern for pain demonstrated both his caring and his expert understanding of typical physical symptoms of pancreatic cancer.

The other conversation I especially remember was with my sister Mary who had suffered on and off from various forms of cancer herself for nearly 40 years before she finally died a few years after I did not. When I called her, she instantly warmed to the conversation, became effortlessly effusive, and launched into gratitude, singing my praises. “You were my real mother when I was growing up!” Huh? This surprised me. “Yes, you paid much more attention to me than Mom ever did.” (Bear in mind that Mom had eight children, and so was inherently distracted from any single one of them.) “One time we were playing scrabble, and I came up with an unusual word. You told me I was smart!” she exclaimed, still clearly relishing that moment when I had affirmed a part of her that she very much needed.

Oh wow, just as I am thinking back to the 2008 experience here in early 2020, sitting in the same chair from twelve years ago, these two memories flood to the surface.

I ended up calling both parents, my six sisters, and both brothers on that first afternoon. Something made me do it. I felt utterly compelled. During each extended conversation my sibling and I would dive into an intimate world specific to the relationship the two of us had held since childhood. We were communing, our hearts and psyches synchronized with the intensely powerful experience that I was recounting — and undergoing!

With each sibling, initial shock would give way to spaciousness, almost relaxation. Gratitude for our extraordinary, heartfelt connection. A sense of mystery, depth, the sacred. With each discussion, I could feel the atmosphere of love palpably expanding, deepening. None of us were holding back. All of us were right here, right now, present in this precious moment, attuned to one another and to my dying process.

On the second day I continued the phone conversations, first calling each my two sons, then one of my former husbands (the other three were already dead!), plus former lovers and dear old friends from childhood and the various phases of adulthood.

During these soulful meetings, at some point during this second day I found myself visualizing a certain bridge in New York’s Central Park (see cover photo), one that husband Jeff and I had walked under during an autumn vacation in the city in 2002, a year or so before his fatal heart attack. I imagined this bridge buttressed horizontally with a narrowing energetic channel directed towards it, just as ranchers funnel animals into what gradually turns into a chute. In my imagination, the chute ended where the tunnel under the bridge began. And I knew: Upon entering that tunnel, there would be no return.

During the first two days of that three-day period, I saw myself as, having entered that narrowing energetic channel, being gradually nudged towards the tunnel.

Meanwhile, intuitively, and very very strongly, I *knew* that my task was to spend this precious time speaking with loved ones, helping them process and transform initial shock into the inviting spacious sweetness beyond. Until I entered the active dying process, I was to spend my time this way, conversing with loved ones, so that we could all move together into the same loving atmosphere.

Chapter Twenty

THE FINALE

Towards the end of the second day, after I had finally gotten off the phone, I was in the middle of doing my regular, daily, hour-long, late afternoon yoga/chi kung/tai chi practice, when I gradually became aware of being surrounded by spirit beings — guides, angels, whatever you want to call them. I could sense them crowding around, excited, as if raising their hands to clink wine glasses with each other, congratulating themselves. Why?

Instantly, clearly and with not a scintilla of doubt, I knew: *they had wondered what would happen if one person, knowing she was dying, and accepting it, was also willing to not just talk about it with friends and family, but in her conversations with them actually inoculate her entire social sphere into a unified expanding field of universal LOVE.*

Would that work? Furthermore, could that transformation be produced quickly?

In other words, this was an *experiment*. These beings in the spirit world needed someone who was not afraid of dying to offer herself as a subject. I fit the bill.

Now imagine this three day pilot project scaling up. Imagine an entire society beginning to enter the dying process, due to some incoming or ongoing, or near, and inevitable catastrophe that everyone either consciously knew about or unconsciously sensed. A possible extinction level event. *Could a massive transformational field of love be generated inside that larger context?*

So then I ask myself, is this why I was given the wherewithal to finish this manuscript now, twelve years later, when all of us are feeling totally on edge, knowing that something major is coming, and we don't know what it is; all we know is that when we look around, most of us are furious, irritable, ideologically polarized, and increasingly violent, in both words and deeds, seeking to blame the other for what feels like a fiery conflagration in our own hearts.

And further: might it be that those of us who *are* consciously aware of what we are facing, could generate a massive field of love that itself would be so powerful as to alter the expected future? In other words, because of our conscious communion, and because of our commitment to help those of us not yet conscious, what had promised to be an extinction level event might be miraculously either averted, or transformed? — Or not! And either way, it wouldn't matter. We were and are LOVE. The barrier that exists between life and death dissolves.

Again, might the conscious among us, those who discover that they do *not* fear death, in waking up together, and helping others to wake up too, simultaneously recognize how much we need and value each other's company — and indeed, each other's full personal expression and fully mutual cooperation — so that from now on, from this singularity

point on, we easily continue to accept and nourish this sweet liquid field of universal love?

Chapter Twenty-One
THE DENOUEMENT

On the morning of the third day, Monday, I had an appointment with a doctor. He prescribed an MRI exam, and, wouldn't you know, discovered that the growth in question was not in the pancreas, but in the liver! — where, he said, it's probably no big deal.

And so there I was, after this apparent, and very very intense and transformational dying process, the experience itself fully felt and fully accepted, released again to live. Resurrection!

Which meant, of course, that I would have to call everybody back, and let them know that I was *not* dying, after all. That took the rest of the day. You can imagine the relief, and the laughter.

AFTERMATH

In order to ease the worry of the medical profession, I agreed to submit to a sonogram every three months, to check on the ovarian cysts, and especially to monitor the size of that “fibroid tumor” in the uterus that had “a larger blood supply than we would like.”

Myself? I wasn’t worried. As I told them, I’ve probably had all these growths in me for 30 or 40 years, and will most likely die with them, not of them.

Nearly three years later, the doctor who had been administering this test finally admitted that I was right. I would probably die with them and not of them. “Come back for one final check, a year from now,” she told me. But when I called a year later to make my final appointment, I was told that the doctor herself had died! Some kind of fast-growing cancer, I was told. She had been in fine health, was a runner, and only in her 40s.

During that same period of time, I had also been seeing a naturopath on a regular basis. But then, when I went to make another appointment with him, was told he had also died! He had been chain sawing wood, and a large branch fell on him from above. This happened near his home in the woods. Friends found his body.

So here I am now, twelve years later, 77 years old, the spent lives of three family (both parents plus sister Mary) and two medical helpers strewn behind me — and I’m still alive, still kicking! What’s next?

What new and transformative process will I engage in that might further assist me, and my beloveds, to absorb, integrate, and transform this climactic era in human history?







