

**Book Six**

# **The Promised Land?**

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*n the beginning, the earth was covered with darkness and void... and God said let there be light and there was light.*

*And the Lord said to Joshua, son of Nun, Prepare to cross the Jordan. As I was with Moses, so will I be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed*

*In the beginning, was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*

*As these words are read in sequence, the darkness that surrounds the theatre is softly illuminated by the light of three lamps. Each lamp reveals the long bearded, gray, shadowy face of an old man holding it. The three lamps and the three old men standing in front of the stage at the start of each aisle, are nearly indistinguishable.*

*After reading his words, the men begin slowly walking down the aisle through the audience, repeating the words. Initially, the words are read sequentially, the second man not beginning his lines until the first has finished. But as they continue to walk, they start to sing the words simultaneously, and they become intermeshed. Sometimes it appears they are singing them like a musical round, and there is an interchange of melody and harmony. At other times, the words are jumbled, cacophonous, strident, and disharmonious.*

*When they reach the back of the theatre, the men turn off their lights. The stage, dark while they were walking, now become illuminated by a single light high in the rafters.*

*The light shines on purple curtains, which are pulled tightly together.*

*On the left curtain is stitched the outline of two yellow triangles, forming a Star Of David, and inside the star is a red J.*

*The three men turn, and begin walking back toward the stage.*

*The one on the far left intones:*

*"God saw that the light was good. And God created male and female, He created them in His image."*

*The one on the far right says "The Star of Bethlehem, the light that guides. We approach the manger."*

*The voice in the middle, asks, "How can God say to Joshua, in good conscience, 'As I was with Moses I will be with you. I will not forsake you.' He killed Moses before Moses could enter the Promised Land."*

*The voice on the right, changing his tone, responds, "I agree. He killed Jesus too."*

*And from the left aisle, "And challenged Abraham to kill his only son; and killed Job's children on a dare from the devil."*

*As the man on the left reaches the front of the stage, the curtains are pulled back. He then turns toward the audience, and points to a now completely lit stage.*

*"You, audience, are the jury. Look at this stage, and you decide what is occurring. Are we three wise men approaching a manger where our salvation is being born? Are we approaching a courtroom where God is on trial for untold deaths?" In fact, the stage is neither manger or courtroom, but a hospital room, where an old woman is lying in a bed surrounded by her family, a middle-aged woman and man, a young man, and an older man, the woman's husband.*

*The middle-aged woman is praying in a pleading voice, "God, there's no One left but You. Help me, I pray to You, please help us."*

*The man with the now shuttered lamp in the middle aisle speaks again to the audience, "Depending on the question you feel the trial raises, you must*

*decide, based either on a preponderance of the evidence; or beyond a reasonable doubt. Let your heart, mind, and conscience be your guide, as Act Two now begins."*

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Today is Palm Sunday, leading up to Good Friday and the Last Supper. I've buried myself the last several days in words. I call it Devarim: The Last Assignment. I've decided to finally complete the play for my creative writing class. Then I can graduate. To what, I'm no longer sure. But I feel compelled to write. It's as if these words must be said, and then my task is done.

I take a break, and when I walk outside I realize it's already evening. Days and nights have blended, as I've kept my blinds down and focused only on the play.

I'm hungry. I walk into the Old City, stop at a small food seller, and buy schwerma--roasted lamb-- which he places in a pita. As I eat it, I continue walking down Armenian Street, where I see a well lit church ahead. The moon is half-way between crescent and full, so there is some natural light, but the cloud cover creates a certain haze. As I get closer I see that it is Christ Church. At first I didn't recognize it because of the haze and because I'm approaching it from a different direction this time.

Although it's late at night, there are many lights on. I enter the gate, and I'm accosted in Arabic. "As-salāmu 'alaykum. Allah Akbar."

"Wa-Alaikum-Salaam," I reply. With thanks to Karim's kind teaching.

He tells me his name "Even though I am Arab and Muslim, Melchizedek is the name I use in this job, serving as the watchman of the Church." I imagine there is a story there, but I remember how confusing it was trying to understand Karim's name. And I don't want to take too long away from my writing, or get too side-tracked. So I ask him, simply,

"Why are the lights on so late tonight?"

"Today is Palm Sunday. Many people are praying."

He asks if I am thirsty or hungry. He offers me some bread and grape juice. His way of showing friendship.

I ask why he drinks grape juice and not wine, to which he replies, "For them, it's the blood of Christ. For me it's forbidden--khamir--that which covers and clouds the mind and keeps us from focusing on Allah."

Wine. Same substance. For some, a sign of, or even God; for others, an impediment to God.

Even though I'd just eaten and wasn't hungry, I accept the bread and juice "Shukraan." My way of showing friendship.

A Jew and a Muslim share bread and wine-colored grape juice on Palm Sunday as Christians pray on the day commemorating and celebrating Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

We toast.

"Let there be peace, Shalom," I say.

"Inshallah," he replies.

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*A match is struck, and two candles are lit, illuminating a long table covered with an ornate, embroidered, but all-white table cloth, on which are candles, a loaf of bread, two wine glasses, and a bottle of wine. Above the table, stitched into the left curtain is a now wrinkled Star of David, with its twisted unreadable red J inside, smooshed together by the undulating folds of the now pulled back curtains, forming fragmented red and yellow lines.*

*A young man picks up the bread, mumbles an inaudible blessing, then lifts a glass of wine, holds it toward the audience, and says, while reading from a book,*

*Baruch Atah Adonoy Elohaynu melech*

*Ha-olam, boray pree hagafen*

*He takes a sip of wine, and then, speaking to the audience, says "In vino veritas." Welcome. We who are about to die, salute you. We are pleased our wise men have led you to this august arena. If you look at your programs, you will note that this is a play in three acts, though it could as easily be an act in three plays. Ah, words, how clever they are, how wily, how shifty, how obfuscating, how penetrating. And for that reason, we have decided to call our act, our play, Words. Devarim. In words, truth. In principio erat verbum.*

*"As you have already been briefed, your task tonight is to serve as judge jury. I am here to make sure you are as comfortable as possible, and to provide you with basic background. My name is "J," not Jay as you might imagine but just the single letter J."*

*He stops talking, and looks up at and points at the e "Star of Bethlehem" which is now shining directly on him. "It's a good beginning for a name, wouldn't you agree? It allows me flexibility and fluidity, and keeps many choices open. But more of that later.*

*"I will now give you an overview of tonight's performance as prologue. We began, as you may have noticed, with Act II. Why? Hopefully that becomes clear as we progress. Our first character is a young man, we'll call him Johannes, a tall tree--proud and arrogant--who wants to be a lawyer, to use the words of the law. Not for finding truth, necessarily, but for displaying his wit and intellect. He hides behind the words, allowing his mind to rule his life, keeping everything and everyone at a distance. If he were to have written this play--and I am not unaware of the dangers--he would acted like a god, moving the actors around like pawns on a chessboard by the mere whim of his pen. He would have been a controlling narrator, only caring to further his schemata. Fortunately, I no longer have a schemata. That is what you are here-- to help me develop one. Let us work together to see how this evolves. Living theatre at its finest and most real.*

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*"Act II begins in a hospital room with the paternal side of my family, mournfully gathered. My dying grandmother, played by herself, is lying in the bed, surrounded by my grandfather, my father, and my aunt, his sister. As you can see, there are few characters. The author kindly saw fit to keep the number limited so you could keep them straight. How thoughtful. How about a round of applause for the author?"*

*(He looks out at the audience, expectantly, then continues).*

*"Yes, I know it seems premature, to clap before the play has really ended,--or really even started-- but imagine it's like clapping for a maestro, who comes onstage before the music has been played. It's a sign of respect. Come now, let's all join in." He pauses for the audience to clap. And he himself begins to clap.*

*J bows. "Thank you. Thank you, dear audience. If you hadn't clapped, there would have been an uneasy pause. You see, it says right here in the script." He holds up the book from which he read the prayer over the wine: 'Pauses here for audience to clap. They likely will, for crowds generally are willing to follow direct instructions.' (Looking at the audience).*

*He continues reading from the book: "If there is an uneasy pause and they don't clap, go to plan B. Plan B should not be a direct order, or a more forceful request for applause, as the audience might engage in an annoyed Pavlovian 'freedom reflex'--don't tell me what to do.*

*"Rather, Plan B will be to have a young child come out holding a sign saying, 'Applause, please.' That young child should win some sympathy. You might even say, as if this is all pre-planned: 'Please note that the clapping is not really for me, but for the little boy I once was who still likes to be appreciated and applauded.'*

*"But I must ask more from you. I don't want to appear unappreciative. And again, I thank you for your kindness. But, please, in the future, be more careful. I realize it's hard not to follow a seemingly kind invitation*

like, 'How about a round of applause....?' Even from a lowly playwright. But for this trial you mustn't be too willing to follow what is asked of you. Rather, you must decide to choose, and determine whether you are willing to stake your life on your position. With so much at stake, do not be swayed by anything but your deepest beliefs and understanding of the truth, the still small voice within you that is authentically yours and yours alone.

"Now, with those preliminaries out of the way, please sit back in your pleasant red-cushioned chairs. Since you have to face difficult issues, it is best to do so from a comfortable place. There will be none of the tension that sometimes occurs, you know, 'out there,' beyond these walls, that tension between societal 'upstairs' and 'downstairs.' Yes, of course, someone had to build the chairs, construct the theatre, take your tickets, and will need to sweep up your tossed-aside wrappers and clean up your cigarette butts. But the idea of a play in which moneyed, privileged audiences sit comfortably in theatre seats and atone for their upper class guilt about the inequities of a system that allows them to sit there in the first place is not at all my goal. No, I want you comfortable, with nothing but what is before you and around you to intrude on this private space, thereby ensuring that all your attention is focused on the task at hand. For this task, money and privilege won't help you at all. We are going to be addressing the deepest level of what we believe about 'Upstairs' capital U; and we here below, what we might call 'Downstairs.'

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"Without further ado let us begin. As noted, I am both the author and a member of the cast." (He pauses for several seconds and looks at the audience with an ambiguous expression. The pause and focus on the audience continues for another twenty seconds). "To clap or not to clap, that is the question. How does the silence feel to you if you don't clap? Is it awkward? Do you think I am looking expectantly for more applause and hurt if I don't get it? Are you just



*courteously and perfunctorily giving light applause? Do you really want to? Or do you worry that I may be daring you to clap so that I can criticize you, for you may be clapping at the wrong time, for example, between movements in a performance of classical music?*

*"Confusing, isn't it? What do you want to do? And why? Don't worry, I have all possibilities covered in the script—clapping or not clapping, perfunctory clapping, robust clapping, ironic clapping, sincere clapping. The main point is that you reflect on yourself, your actions, and who you are. If you clap—or don't clap—are you truly choosing what you want? Are you being true to yourselves? Or are you just doing what you feel you should or shouldn't do? You don't want to be 'reactive' and not clap just because you feel you are being told to. But we know all too well the problems when a group timidly, fearfully, and unquestioningly 'follows orders' from dictatorial authority, don't we?"*

*"Don't worry, everything's still under control." (Then with wry smile, he adds) "But whose?"*

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*"As noted, besides myself, there are only four or five other important characters, depending on your perspective. There is my father, who is called brother by my aunt who is called daughter by my grandparents whom she and her brother my father call dad and mom. I will simply indicate who is speaking from my perspective as Grandmother, Grandfather, Aunt, Father. The nurse and doctor are irrelevant because they are powerless.*

*"As the play opens with Act II, I am sitting in a hospital room with my grandmother. She is dying of a malignant cancerous tumor."*

*(He begins to walk through the curtains, stops, and faces the audience).*

*"Don't be upset, it's all a play, you know. I wish I could offer you some wine." (He once again picks up the wine, not the glass this time, but the bottle, and takes a swig).*

*"Ah, let the agape love feast begin."*

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Another morning begins. A prayer of thankfulness. Done by rote, without thinking too much, just to keep the intention and feeling alive for now. "I thank You o living and eternal King."

Last night I was driving to San Francisco, Richard and Elizabeth passengers in the back. My eyes were clouded over, and it was hard for me to see. I couldn't tell whether we were double dating—was there someone next to me? Or was I merely a chauffeur?

I was trying to merge onto the freeway, and my driving was erratic. I was weaving in and out of lanes, but was not aware of it, until they told me to be more careful. I wondered if I would get a ticket. I pass two cars on my right that had just crashed. When I looked up, I was on the main freeway now, but there was a huge body of water ahead. I wondered if it was an illusion, like I'd sometimes seen on the road while driving in the desert. I told everyone to brace themselves, and shouted "Weeee" as I accelerated bravely and recklessly into the water. Was the water real? Even if it were, did it part?

Yes, it was real, and no it didn't part. I opened my window, climbed onto the car's roof, and told the passengers I was going to get help. I jumped from roof to roof across the stalled cars around me. I was having a good time, not at all scared, like a little kid playing a game of car hop scotch. Finally, I neared a restaurant, which was a place of safety and where I could get help. As I arrived, I realized I'd been carrying a little child with me this whole time. I hadn't even noticed him. He'd been splashing in the water with me and jumping from car to car, too. Suddenly he said to me "I'm having trouble breathing. I feel sick. Am I ok, or am I going to die?" I asked the waitress at the restaurant where the hospital was, and fearfully tried to find my way there, still carrying the child.

The dream ended.

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I want to put in a couple of hours of writing this morning on the play, before breakfast, and therefore don't want to spend too much time analyzing this dream. I make a few notes, that I can come back too later, if it still seems worth it. What is the child's relationship to me? A hoped-for child of mine? Is it too absurd at my age to even imagine this a grandchild, like the parashat where the grandfather blesses the grandchild? Does that mean part of me still longs unconsciously for a partner, a beloved in the passenger seat to make the journey with me?

Or is the child the small, vulnerable part of me, the part that is sick, fears death and tries to clings to life. Or a child that I didn't even realize was there, and perhaps hurt by my recklessness and ignorance as I leapt from car to car through the foamy, cold water.

My lack of competence is present throughout. I can't see well. I'm driving erratically, and don't realize it. I try to part the Red Sea, like a Moses, but fail. Was I really trying to save Richard and Elizabeth, or was I driving into the water to drown them from my life? And, even as I tried to escape, was there a part of me that drove into the water to try to kill myself, too?

What a glorious happy way to wake up. Gratefulness.

As I start to close my dream journal, a snippet of another dream pops in. Three children are playing. The older two run from the bedroom into the hallway, where I'm standing, and the oldest one slams a door (accidentally?) on the youngest, who is barely two, and is trying to crawl toward us. The door slams completely shut, and in cartoonish fashion, the head of the young child is in the hallway, and his neck has become like a cardboard thin piece of paper, crushed by the door, but still connected to his body. The door is locked, and I'm afraid to hurt him further by banging it in. I rush around the side of the

house, where I believe there is either an open window, or I can break it open, to try to unlock the door, and rescue the child.

At that point, I woke up and the dream ended. Is this another example of something that is my fault? Whether it is or isn't, pain and suffering seem to be everywhere, even my unconscious dream life. What's the point of further analysis of the dream? I close my notebook, and return to the play.

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*SCENE: The hospital room. The room has two big windows. The stage scenery has been painted so that one window appears to look out upon an idyllic pastoral garden below, a field of trees over which are white clouds and blue sky and under which little children run playing their recorders.*

*The walls are painted with flowers. J goes over to the wall and picks a rose--attached to the wall-- to place amidst the actual flowers on his Shabbat table. The rose is real, although the audience shouldn't be able to tell which flowers in the vase are plastic, and which are alive. He then takes the entire vase and puts it on the night stand by his grandmother's bed.*

*A nurse quietly walks in, carrying a picture of sunrise. Or sunset. How can you tell? She puts the picture into the one real glass window in the room, which has previously looked out over the wires and props back stage. A beautiful multicolored, multi hued sky is now seen in the window. Leading to the grayness of night? To a splendid sunny morning?*

*The nurse leaves. Grandmother begins to wake up, rubs her eyes, as if the light is too bright.*

GRANDMOTHER

*(Yawning, shielding her eyes)*

*Please pull the curtains. The light is too bright.*

*(J mechanically goes over to the windows, and pulls the curtains, blotting out the sun, and the garden setting. There is a third set of curtains, already pulled.) There should be music in the background: Mozart's Don Giovanni, Magic Flute, Requiem? Beethoven's Ode to Joy? Note to self: Ask my musician brother for help: how to match music to the different tones I wish to convey?)*

What time is it? I feel so groggy. Thank you for staying with me, even while I slept. Even sleep now feels lonely to me.

DOCTOR (entering)

Well, how is my little girl this fine morning, this fine day, this fine evening. (He goes over to the third pair of curtains, and pulls them, revealing a smog-filled Kansas City sky. He smiles awkwardly, "Oops," and quickly closes them, and opens the curtains behind which are the dancing children in the flowered garden. Grandma once again shields her eyes. The Doctor then flicks a light switch upward, and birds begin singing. He turns to the patient)

Everything to keep you comfortable and happy.

GRANDMOTHER  
(still squinting)

Yes, it's nice to see the sun shining in, the colorful flowers, to hear the birds singing. (She begins to choke, cough, tears rise. But she regains composure, and smiles). It makes me feel appreciative and grateful to be alive,

DOCTOR

And that's the way we are going to keep you. Just lie back and smile. Take a deep breath. You are in the midst of idyllic nature.

(The nurse comes in, with a flower-scented canister, and sprays the room with a natural flower scent. The three wise men go up and down the aisles, doing likewise.)

Well, I must be going. Oh, your meal is arriving, and goodness, so is the rest of your family. I'll leave you in their good hands. Enjoy.

THE REST OF THE FAMILY ENTERS.

The son, my father, is burly, tan, with wavy, neatly-combed gray hair. His gray-black goatee hides a weak jaw line, and there is a small gray moustache covering his upper lip. He's wearing a light blue pullover shirt, with a turquoise Indian tie necklace, and carrying the Wall Street Journal under his arm. He goes over to kiss his mother. She turns her cheek and lets him kiss her there. He says nothing and goes to sit down.

The sister, my aunt, is wearing a red bonnet, miniskirt, bobby socks and saddle shoes. Her cheeks are thickly rouged. She's in her late forties. She also goes to kiss her mom on the cheek, and as she does so says "Hi mom, you look great!" When she speaks, her voice is high and squeaky, like a child's. She then also goes to sit down. She carries a red book under her arm, and once she sits, she immediately begins thumbing through it.

Her father, my grandfather, looks like her brother, my father, only twenty-five years older. He has made his fortune, and is now relaxing in his old age. His laugh is more self-assured than his son's; but his jaw line is disappearing beneath a layer of fat. He sports a tightly clipped gray mustache, and his gray hair, though wavy, has thinned considerably and is combed from front to back. He, too, is carrying around a copy of the Wall Street Journal. He goes up to

his wife and gives her a tender kiss on the forehead. She opens her eyes and says "Hi Julie."

Then he turns to the other three in the room. There are hugs, and lots of phrases uttered in a jumble. "hi hello, it's good to see you, how'd you sleep."

The nurse wheels in the table over which the narrator initially blessed the bread and wine.

AUNT

Food for a queen, who sits upon her royal throne.

(She leaps to her feet, and props up her mom. The grandmother's face is seen for the first time. She is wearing a brightly colored nightgown which vividly contrasts with her pale, haggard, sickly white face)

Hear, let me freshen you up a bit.

(The Aunt applies a garish red lipstick and, with a powder puff, rouge, that makes the Grandmother's face look clown-like).

GRANDMOTHER

(Regally, almost as if she is consciously trying to play a majestic role)

Thank you. Thank you all. Yes, food for a queen. Yes, yes. Surrounded by the court of my royal family. Thank you.

(She raises her hand as if anointing them, but as she does so breaks into a hoarse, yet mucousy cough.)

GRANDFATHER

(Handing her a handkerchief, but otherwise ignoring the cough)

Look at that meal. All specially prepared. Best money can buy. Just what you wanted.

GRANDMOTHER

(Petulantly, like a small child throwing a tantrum)

Where is the parsley? I want my parsley. I always have parsley with my meals.

(All begin frantically searching for the parsley). The Aunt inspects each piece of food, lifting it, to see where it might be hidden.

GRANDFATHER (Roaring to his son)

Don't just stand there, do something. I've paid good money for this. This is unacceptable.

(The son rushes angrily off stage, shouting "Nurse, Nurse!" while J just stands and observes the scene, writing comments in his book).

NURSE (rushing in to sounds off stage from the father: "What a stupid bitch, can't you get anything right?"

*It must be here. I made a special note to the chef. They couldn't have forgotten it.*

GRANDFATHER

*There's no parsley. She has had parsley every single day three times a day. How could you forget it? You should double check everything. This is unconscionable. Do you know who I am? The Board will hear about this. If they weren't my friends, you'd have a lawsuit on your hands, young lady. And you still may. Now your job is now in jeopardy, do you understand what I'm saying?*

NURSE *(her face aghast, in a panic)*

*I'm so sorry. This won't happen again, I can assure you. I'll be back in a moment. Oh, oh, I'm so sorry.*

*(She rushes from the room)*

GRANDMOTHER

*Look at this food. I can't eat it without parsley surrounding it. (She takes her fork and pushes some of it around) It looks so stark sitting there. I must have the parsley.*

AUNT

*(Consulting her red book) I'll make a note to get some parsley mommy. That way we'll always have extra around. It was so silly and bad of her to forget like that. I don't blame you for not eating. We girls know how important presentation is. If it doesn't look good, it can't be good, right, mommy?*

GRANDFATHER

*And with these prices, too. You'd think we were on vacation at the Ritz. They'd damn well better hurry up. (He looks at his watch.) I'm timing her. This will make them look very bad in court.*

NURSE *(rushing back in with a gargantuan bowl of parsley)*

*Here you go, ma'am. I'm so sorry. The chef sends his apologies, too.*

GRANDMOTHER *(smiling wanly at the nurse, the tears now gone, takes a few small pieces of the parsley, crumbles them, and spreads them over the food. She now smiles more brightly and cheerfully, like a little kid with a new toy).*

*Now doesn't that look pretty. Almost a work of art. Such a pretty green color. Much much better. Thank you all so much for being here.*

*(She then bends over, blows the parsley off her food to the side of the plate, and begins coughing again. When she stops, she drinks a sip of water, takes one bite of food, and turns to her grandson?:*

*I'm tired now. Will you help me lie down again, please?*

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FATHER (returns from off stage, his face still angrily red, his cheeks bulging)

I gave everybody from here to heaven a talking to. That won't happen again, I can guarantee it.

AUNT

Ah, the prodigal son returns. Quiet. She's trying to sleep now.

FATHER (giving her a disdainful look as he takes a seat next to this father, and pulls out the newspaper)

Always have to be the bossy one, eh, sis. Putting your two cents in. For what it's worth. Nothing. (He makes a mean, angry face, then sticks his tongue out at her before turning to his father, and offering him a beaming, innocent, almost angelical smile).

You know, pops, we could make a bundle if we'd just gone into the parsley business. Look in your paper, Dad, PP, Parsley Peelates 17 1/4, up a point.

GRANDFATHER

You're right. Knew the manager there. Didn't think it was well run. Could have once bought it for \$4. In on the ground floor. Would have quadrupled my money. (They both continue running their fingers down the page). But your old dad did all right. Won more than he lost.

(They continue reading in silence).

FATHER

Damn. It says the government is thinking about changing capital investment to mean minimum stock holdings of one year between sales. Damn government, always trying to rob us.

GRANDFATHER

Tax, tax, tax. Though, son, you've got to make money to have to pay taxes. (He gives a hearty laugh). And you could learn the lesson of patience. Long term investments are important. And, of course, knowing all the loopholes. That's the way I made a pretty penny. Still, the government is always taxing, taxing. It's like they say, the only two things you can count on are taxes and dea. . . (He coughs awkwardly, his face in the newspaper) Dear me, you just can't make too much money these days. But glad to see you're following after your old father. Those business administration classes are beginning to pay off. One day you are going to have to handle a lot of responsibility. Want to make sure you're up to it. Have I told you about the recent monthly security investments which... (their conversation fades into the background, but they continue animatedly talking and discussing the stocks and various other articles in the paper).

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AUNT

(Sets her red book down, walks over to her mother while running her hand through her hair, giving it a little flip. On reaching the bedside, she begins to run her hands through her mother's wisps of white hair, as if brushing it)



*Mom, you look so grand. We'll have to get you to the hair dresser soon. We want you to look even prettier, if that's possible.*

GRANDMOTHER

*(Eyes closed; barely nodding, gives a slight moan).*

AUNT

*(Gives a final stroke to her mother's hair, then runs her hand tenderly down her mother's cheek, before turning abruptly and rushing back to her chair to retrieve her red book.)*

*Let me make a note of that. There's so much to do. Parsley; hairdresser. Oh, look at those nice roses. (She walks over and smells them.) I love roses. Don't you, mommy? They're so much nicer than those ugly chrysanthemums. I wonder who sent those? Oh (she looks at J awkwardly). I need to make a note to write thank you cards to all the lovely people who sent you flowers.*

*(She makes more notes in her book, then sets the book down, and continues to bustle around the room).*

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*(She makes more notes in her book, then sets the book down, and continues to bustle around the room).*

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*Note to Professor: I wanted to add after "bustle around the room," the words: "like an annoying buzzing fly." But I remembered you saying "show, don't tell." I also realized that those words could potentially create an unfair caricature of my aunt, as well as not demonstrating a very tolerant attitude toward the different ways in which people grieve. I write this so that you will see that I did in fact learn something in your class, and am trying to apply it. Extra credit?*

*Also, just for clarity, the enclosed play, The Last Scene, has four acts. It begins with Act 11. This is because, as you may remember, I wrote Act I while I was still in your class last spring. Although I don't have my copy with me, I did turn it in and hope you still have it. The setting was a Jewish family's --my family's--lox and bagels brunch near Passover. In it, my Grandpa Dave talks to me about the cardinal red birds and advises me to make sure I "made the story my own." In Acts II, III, and IV, I do just that.*

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*(She straightens things, dusting, darting hither and thither, while stopping occasionally to make add additional comments in her red book.)*

*J is observing all this, and making notes in the book from which he read at the beginning of the play. The father and son are no longer talking, but each is immersed in his copy of the newspaper.*

GRANDMOTHER

*(Opening her eyes and saying something unintelligible; all stop and listen to her; she repeats herself, louder, and her words are clearer, though whispery).*

*What is most important to me is my family. (All lean forward to hear her).*

And laughter.

*I remember walking down the street in the Philippines, and I saw these four people. I thought they might have been a family. They were all laughing. I didn't know their background or anything about them. Of course, they must have been poor, the poor things...most of the people there were.....poor, I mean (See pauses a moment, seemingly confused). In any case, I told Julie to give them something. It made me so happy to see those poor people laugh. They were laughing from deep inside. I don't see many people laugh like that anymore.*

*(She turns to her son) You have the best laugh in this family. (He smiles and shrugs, almost as if embarrassed).*

AUNT

*Don't you remember, mommy, when I used to sit at the dinner table and giggle. Once I got started, you couldn't stop me,*

GRANDMOTHER

*That's not what I mean. That's giggling. I mean laughing.*

*(The son and father return to their newspapers, J to writing in his book.)*

AUNT

*(Picks up her book). That reminds me I must call the man to clean my rugs and wash my windows tomorrow. He has a nice laugh, too.*

*(J who has been quietly reading and writing in the corner, suddenly becomes upset, and tears a page from his book)*

J

*Damn, this script is confining. Where's the wastebasket?*

GRANDMOTHER

*I made the nurse move it into the bathroom. I didn't want a guest to see it when they walked into the room. I don't want any trash in here. I can't have someone think I'm not a good housekeeper. Out of sight, I said to her.*

AUNT

*(as J goes into the bathroom with his torn crumpled pages).*

*Oh, thank you for reminding me, mommy. I've told them I want them to empty the trash in here every four hours. It's time. I'll go find someone to do it. See what happens when I don't consult my boo?. Everything falls apart.*

FATHER

*You and that book. It's like that communist guy's little red book. You'd be lost without it, a chicken with its head cut off, wouldn't you? (There is annoyance in his voice, which softens as he says the following, looking toward his mother). Just like you, mom. Monday shopping, Tuesday gardening, Wednesday beauty parlor. Everything by the book, right? (He goes over and softly tousles her hair. She smiles)*

AUNT

*You're right. Like mother, like daughter. Without this book, I couldn't do anything. I'd be completely lost. In fact, one day I did lose it. I literally had to stay in bed. Mommy and I understand each other. (She goes over to the bed, and starts stroking her mother's hair in a proprietary way. Her brother leaves the bedside, sits down and once again begins reading the paper).*

*But look who's making the criticism. You're clutching pretty tightly to that newspaper. I don't think the stock market is going to crash if you throw it away; but you might.*

*You probably won't admit it even to yourself, but you can't say anything without that paper to guide you, or Daddy to guide you. (The son turns bright red, starts to rise out of his seat, but then sits down, and pretends to shuffle through the paper).*

GRANDFATHER

*(looking over his paper)*

*Someone mention my name? (Looks around confused). Does anyone remember what time I took my pill this morning? I can't even remember if I took it. There are too many pills these days. (He lifts a huge plastic bag of multi-colored pills up, and starts pawing through them).*

GRANDMOTHER

*(begins crying)*

*I don't want to go. I'm sorry. I promised myself I wouldn't cry in front of everybody. (Sniffing). I know I've led a full life. (Looking at her husband). It's been so full. That's why I don't want to go. . . Will you be there in the other world? will you come see me? Otherwise I'll be so lonely, so lost without you.*

*(All papers and books are dropped by the husband, brother, and sister. Each rushes to the bed, surrounding it, as if they're attempting to insulate her from the pain. The daughter begins fluffing her pillow, straightening the sheets).*

AUNT

*There, there. Let me make your bed nice and tidy. That'll make you feel better. You're just tired.*

FATHER

*Maybe she's hungry. Would you like some food, MOM? some fresh squeezed orange juice?*

GRANDFATHER

*With these prices, we can get you anything you want. Is it time for your medication? Maybe that will help. (He looks at his bag of pills, which he is still holding). For the life of me I still can't remember the name of the pill I was supposed to take this morning.*

AUNT

*Let me put some perfume on you. Smell how fragrant this is.*

FATHER

*Where is the nurse. Never mind. I can go get the juice for you right now myself.*

*(J is conspicuous by his absence at the bed. He has not reopened his book, but is sitting there quietly watching the other characters).*

FATHER *(Still in the room)*

*Mom, I just read a fascinating article (hurries over to the paper, gets it, and points to the article). Listen, it'll make you feel better.*

*( He starts to read it, then realizes it's too long and her attention is wandering, and she still seems tearful).*

*Don't be upset, Mom. Look, it says right here how often society makes older people into stereotyped images saying they are too old, past the age of fulfillment, are degenerating. But this conference held in Chicago by Public Welfare people says that those stereotypes aren't true. The conference said that what old people really need is a sense of mastery so that they feel they are still in control.*

*(Looking up at her). So, mom, since you are the master of all of us, that should make you feel better, right?*

GRANDMOTHER

*(Smiling at him, even trying to laugh)*

*Yes, you're right. Thank you. I do feel better. I know I'm just being a baby. I still have a long life ahead of me. I'm not worried. That crying, that wasn't kosher, was it?*

*(There is an uneasy laughter as they all try to laugh from deep inside themselves.*

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*(A new character enters the room, throwing two tennis balls in the air and juggling them in one hand. She is young, perky, cute).*

AUNT

*(with annoyance)*

*Who is she? She's not in the script. (Turning to J): I can't believe you invited a date here. You're incorrigible.*

J

*Why are you so upset? Is it because she's pretty? Young? Are you jealous? Or is it because you're so rigid you can't tolerate and handle something unexpected that's not written down in your little book?*

(He makes some notes in his book then looks up at the audience and says) Don't worry, I don't date anymore. I have bigger fish to fry, so to speak.

AUNT

Why is it that when I try to maintain a sense of control with my book, it's limiting and rigid, and yet you are constantly making changes and altering scenes and dialogue in your book so that you get to have the ultimate control, and you don't criticize yourself?

J

(Laughing, but somewhat hollowly)

Because it's my play, my story. I am trying to provide for the unexpected, as best I can and even include it in the play--witness the shattering of the blue bowl in Act III. As you well know, even though you, and all of us try to pretend otherwise, we all have to prepare for the unknown. (looking at his Grandmother).

I mean, it's not like we don't know how the story ends. Eventually. For all of us. We may not know the content of what's going to get us. But that something will is not exactly a surprise, is it? (Pointing to the young woman with the tennis balls, who has now gone over to the bed beside the grandmother). For now, let's see if we can't bring in a bit of joy and amusement to distract us from the inevitable and make the journey more interesting. That should especially appeal to you, right? (In his notebook he writes "Or just highlight poignant pathos with the ludicrous, bathos, absurdity of it all").

YOUNG WOMAN

Hi, I'm your new occupational therapist. We're going to have some fun now. I'd like you to hold one of these balls in each hand. (She places them in the grandmother's hands, but she's so weak she cannot hold them and they roll out).

Here, let's try again. Let's start with just one. Are you right-handed?

AUNT

(Answering for grandmother, and in a haughty, disdainful tone which makes it appear that the occupational therapist is an idiot who has somehow made an egregious error).

No, she's left-handed.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST  
(in a calm tone)

Perfect, excellent. Here, let's put the ball in your left hand, and now help me curl your fingers around it.

There, look, you're holding it all by yourself. That's excellent. Look at her.

AUNT  
(clapping)

Oh, mommy, I'm so proud of you.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST

Now, let's see if you can squeeze the ball with your fingers and lift it toward your shoulder.

(The Grandmother groans and lifts the ball a couple of inches above her bed, and then lets her arm fall back again)

That's wonderful. Look at you. That helps strengthen your arms, and those pretty wrists of yours. Now a little further. Let's try again.

GRANDMOTHER

I'm too tired.

AUNT

Now, now mommy, remember when you read me about the "Little Engine that could." I think I can I think I can. Come on mommy, you're the one that taught me to never give up.

GRANDFATHER

(coming over to the bedside)

She's right, dear. Remember Winston Churchill's speech. Never give in. Never. Never. Never. You can do it.

(Grandmother grimaces and raises the ball several inches toward her shoulder. Both the daughter and grandfather now clap, and they along with the OT urge her on. "Just a little higher. A few more inches. You're almost there.")

GRANDFATHER

(proudly)

That's my girl. You're such a tough gal. Adversity only makes us stronger, right? That's what you always told me as you booted me out of the bed early in the morning. Look at you, now. You're a model for all of us.

AUNT

I read this cute little quote when I was traveling in Asia (She thumbs back several dozen pages in her red book). "When fate throws a dagger at you, there are only two ways to catch it, either by the blade or by the handle." You are strengthening your arms and hands, so you're going to catch it by the handle, mommy. Daddy's right. Never give up. Thanks be to God. Just look at the progress you're making.

GRANDMOTHER

(Looking lovingly at her husband, then her daughter, trying to smile, and grimacing as she continues to lift her arm toward her shoulder. They continue to cheer her on.)

She then beckons to J to come over, which he does. She pulls his head down and whispers to him, "Please don't forget me."

*As the lights dim, the narrator says "This Ends Act II". As the curtains slowly close, the fragmented red and yellow lines once again form into whole shapes.*

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GOOD FRIDAY; EREV PASSOVER.

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet are back, but I haven't contacted them. I'm not sure there is anything more I need or can learn from them. The task is really up to me alone.

As for good-byes, I don't really like them, but perhaps I will go to their Passover dinner this evening, and say my final farewells then.

I remember one of the last times I saw them. I was waiting for my appointment, and their office door was slightly ajar. "After I took a seat in the waiting room, I realized their door was slightly cracked and I could distinguish their voices. By shifting my position subtly, I could not only hear their conversation, but also catch a glimpse of Dr. Lisbet fiddling with her hair, putting short strands in place over her forehead, creating bangs. The Rebbe was watching her and, seeing her put the brush away, queries "Achieved perfection?" There was a silence in reply.

To keep it light, he added, "It's like a work of art, I guess. Van Gogh said a painting is never finished, you just stop working on it." Still more silence.

Then Dr. Lisbet glanced back at the brush, and mused, "I wish I were combing long brown hair, not trying to stick little stubby gray pieces into some kind of order."

If I were the Rebbe, at this point I'd know I was in trouble. Maybe he needed to read his Ovid on how to keep the beloved happy. "Well, I can see that would be a problem. But perhaps it beats trying to stick lack of hair into place," he joked as he pointed to his small, lightly covered cranium. Dr. Lisbet ventured a small smile. "I remember last week, after a swim in the Kineret, for a moment I forgot about my two artificial hips, my osteoporosis, my glaucoma, my

cancer surgery, my gray hair. My strokes were strong-back stroke, breast stroke, crawl. I was dancing with the waves. I was just a young girl frolicking and splashing in the water." She rests her head on his shoulder for a moment. Then they came out to invite me in.

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I didn't know about her hips or her cancer. As Joie's grandmother once commented, "Aging is not for the faint of heart." I never really looked at the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet as vulnerable to aging's infirmities. I wonder if there is a way to work that interchange into my play, maybe my grandfather and grandmother talking?

This past week has been nothing but writing and working on the play. And dreaming. And even several of my dreams this past week have been about plays. Waking life, dreaming life have intertwined.

Last night I had a dream about Reb Jonathan, and we were in a Shakespearean play. In this dream, as I'm talking to the Rebbe. I'm running my right hand through my thick brown hair, feeling my curls, while looking at his thin sparse gray hair.

"What worries you about getting old?" he asks. I wonder how he knows what I'm thinking.

"Well, I don't want gray hair for one," I reply. "And I don't want my chin to sag." (And somehow in the dream I retell him the story of the counselor at Stanford who mocked me for that very worry). Then suddenly I'm standing next to the Rebbe in a Shakespearean play, and we are both blowing a shofar. His shofar is much bigger than mine, much louder, and more resonant. I hold my shofar up and see how small it is. I place my shofar on my lingham, and try to mock him, at the same time thinking to myself, really, do you have to compete at everything? But he's not looking at me, his eyes are closed and focused on putting all his energy into blowing the shofar.



What is the interpretation? Freud would have a blast with this one. I smile at my unintended but good pun, a "blast" talking of shofars, linghams, and Freud.

It's interesting how I sexualize the dream, making a religious practice and new beginnings all about sexual prowess. It is about the part of me that is always competing. But actually the Rebbe is more virile than I am. Maybe it has something to do with youth's vanity, the wisdom of age, a virility beyond sexuality? And if I'm all parts of the dream, how one day that graying, balding man will be me. Perhaps the dream contains the hope that, in old age, I will be wiser and "more virile" in ways that count.

It's also interesting that the play in this dream is Shakespearian. I remember what seems lifetimes ago, in December before I met Mery, Richard rented a ski cabin in Tahoe, and during the week, when it was empty, allowed me to use it. I brought the book for my Shakespeare class to the cabin to study for finals. Went skiing in the day, and made happy tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. Then I immersed myself in Shakespeare's plays in the evening by the crackling fire, drinking hot chocolate with marshmallows floating in it, and wondering what cute skier I might meet tomorrow. Happier times? You don't even know what you don't know

I think of a well-known quote from Shakespeare's "As You Like It" where Jacques says

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts.

Although billed as a comedy, there doesn't seem much humorous about Jacques' discussion of the stages of life, from infancy...

At first the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;  
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel

...to the final phase

Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Frankly, that "comedy" doesn't seem too different in essential ways from  
Macbeth's view of life as a stage:

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Which of these two plays, comedy or tragedy, would I rather be part of?  
Does it make any difference; isn't the outcome in both the same? Is life nothing  
but a performance? We watch ourselves, and others watch us. But does it really  
make any difference whether I am the star or simply a supporting character?  
Whether I've thoroughly learned my lines or am just improvising?

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I go through and gather the other dreams about "plays" from the last few  
days into one section, and my interpretation of each, based on what Dr. Lisbet  
has taught me.

MONDAY NIGHT. I'm a character in a play, and my part is a poor,  
unhappy, existentially tormented person, running through the  
street, ready to burst into tears. I can't find the audience, which  
seems to have scattered from the street. I can't even seem to find  
the other members of the play. It's dark and I can't see my lines  
on the paper I'm holding, and not sure when I'm supposed to come  
in. But that doesn't seem to matter, as I have no interactions with  
anyone, and just react to and feel tormented by what I see. I  
vaguely remember rehearsing this act, and know there is supposed to  
be careful timing with the other actors, but everything is now  
unclear, and I really want to cry in the play, but am not sure I'm  
supposed to. Is this just effective acting, I wonder as I run off  
stage. Then, the dream shifts and I'm off stage playing music. I'm  
in an outside room, on my own. Others in the band are playing  
together on the stage inside. I hope I'm keeping correct time, but  
I can't hear them.

INTERPRETATION: Issues of inner pain, lack of belonging, not  
having a script on how to proceed; did I write this play, or  
am I just an actor in the play? End of life: exiting stage?

Trying to play music; to be connected, but not able to hear others. All parts of me?

TUESDAY NIGHT. A character in a book is giving a spiritual talk before an audience. Then the character leaps from the page into the crowd. I'm afraid to leave the page, or any scrap of paper, behind because that page is myself.

INTERPRETATION: my needing to leave the world of words and re-enter life? Fear of that because my "self" is words and I'm leaving fragments and scraps of myself behind).

WEDNESDAY NIGHT I'm directing a play. I forget my lines and don't know where to come in. I'm off stage, so I could read my lines, but no one can find a copy of the play. Joie threw them all away down a garbage hole that caused them to burn, or disappear or be shredded. We finally found one copy posted behind a glass, but because of the reflection of light, I couldn't see or read it well. I read one line, after a long glaring silence, and that line was, Whoever goes next, just go and skip me." I'm horribly confused. Why hadn't I prepared? Why didn't I know the overview of the play, where I came in, what my part was. Feeling just befuddled.

INTERPRETATION: a play as life? Not knowing my part, my identity. Doesn't play well with others, lets others down; (let's himself down?)

THURSDAY NIGHT. I'm a play. I'm dressed nicely, apart from it all, behind the scenes, but away from others, yet I know I have an important role. People in the audience, other performers are toffee strings pulled apart, seemingly fragmented and yet all interconnected. My job is to do something with the lights.

*INTERPRETATION bringing light to world; all people are interconnected; I'm apart but belonging, and have a central role to play.*

My play during the day, the dream plays in the evening. Yes, there may be glimmers of insight, creativity, connection and even joy and light. But aren't they also, like Macbeth and As You Like it, full of sound and fury, involving decay and death,...and signifying... what?

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At night, I become characters in a play. I'm writing and living a play during the day. I seem to be continuously surrounded by words and scripts. I wonder what Dr. Lisbet would say about these dreams? About the play itself. The dreams are intriguing, and I guess it's obvious that my unconscious mind is wrestling at night unconsciously with plays, while during the day my major task is wrestling with the content and writing of the play about my grandmother

and my family. Right now, there seems nothing more important to me than finishing this play. It's transformed from "an assignment" to something much deeper--a wrestling with God and mortality. It is nearly finished, as am I. I'm exhausted. Physically, mentally, spiritually.

For fresh air, and to break the confining routine of my shemenet breakfast in the basement of the Y, I decide to go out for a walk. Vendors are preparing their shops as I walk down the narrow sidewalks through the Christian sector to David Street. I stand outside a small café, where I am engulfed by pastry smells.

These smells were once a direct route to happiness, filled with such good memories. I think of me as a little boy with my grandfather, eating a thick red jelly donut, feeling innocent, loved and knowing that life was nothing more than delicious smells and singing cardinal red birds. Later those same smells were associated with the after-glow of nights of playful sexuality, awakening to a new morning, feeling virile, energized; and later, with deep conversations about life and meaning with Mery, to sweeten the mood.

But after leaving Elizabeth, the donut smells lost their luster. Donut shops became dimly lit places to overhear empty conversations, people trying but not able to connect. The Heidegarrian ring around the empty void. I wish I could somehow return to those joyous feelings once again. How wonderful that once all it took was the smell of a donut to make me happy. With that hope, I walk in, buy some tea, and lean against the window, watching faces outside hurry by. There are anxious glances at watches, people rushing, making last minute preparations for the evening's activities.

I walk outside, and, leaning against the same window, look in. Through the window I see a waitress carrying a tray of donuts from the back kitchen, which she places on the counter.

Some of the people rushing by me are captured by the smell. Their footsteps halt, they look through the open door, and dart into the café. Thick, gooey donuts are purchased, furtively, almost guiltily, shoved into waiting mouths with a kind of mechanical action. A last chance for leaven? Hand, mouth, swallow. Does the food give you comfort? For how long? It's just a momentary illusion of joy in the wilderness, one which will last only seconds.

Is that why you rush? Because it's too painful to face that you're seeking only transient illusions? Are you scared, fearful, guilty? Do you even realize what you're feeling?

Footsteps faster. Little ants, head lowered. Food, mouth, swallow, walking faster, scurrying, looking around guiltily. Feeding our faces with food and drink--hiding behind false spirits, intoxicants like those Falstaff--and I with my friends--once consumed at the Boar's Head Tavern.

Or we hide behind other illusions, like our material comforts, the modern day golden calves. The money changers routed by Jesus have not merely re-entered the Temple, they are the temple. In God we trust on our money. Money is our new god. He who dies with the most toys wins. Is this really the ultimate culmination of our collective wisdom? Or just another brick of hiding?

Rhetorical, my friend.

Or we hide in the womb of family. Home. La mensae preparata. You huddled close for comfort. You work for them, toil the fields for them, and they in turn toil the fields for their sons and daughters. Vanity, daughters of Zelophad. Generation to generation, each providing an inheritance for the next. Where is it going, oh little ants?

Stop your scurrying, step back, and ask, "Where are you really heading? For what deeper purpose than just mere scurrying to survive? Do you think it will really help to have your family around you as you face death? Ha. Ask my grandmother.



Look at your nation.

Jerusalem, the city that has the power to drive humans crazy. City of peace? Shalom. Pax vobiscum. Inshallah. Where? Outside. Hardly. Inside. Ha. An illusory pipe dream.

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Still carrying my tea, I begin walking. I find myself drawn to the grounds of the Church of All Nations. I look around at the symbol of our human togetherness and brotherhood on earth. How can we learn to face the horror of the Holocaust without being poisoned about humanity's chances for peace and harmony? How can we see the fighting all around us now, and not be cynical, disillusioned, and helpless?

Was Euripides the first man to cry out, to hear the women's agonizing torment, the children screaming, to see behind the heroic exploits of which Homer told?

The prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah too, heard the suffering of their people, and shouted in protest at needless slaughter. Martin Luther King heard. He had a dream. He was shot. What good is his dream? What good were your protests over 2000 years ago, Euripides, or yours Jeremiah? What answer do you have now? Answer me, dead people. Tell me about the virtues of pacifism and non-violence. Did you hear about the riots one year after your death, Dr. King? Do you know about Muslims and Hindus killing each other after your death, Gandhi? Where are your words now? Why don't you answer, any of you? Are the tears choking you? Is the futility crescendoing in your ears, deafening you to my plea? Hatred may only begets hatred, and deaths increase the cycle of death. What good does it do to cry out? Their efforts were all ignored, empty words passed down to us. The pacifistic pipe dream is just one more illusion to hide us from our helplessness and futility to change anything.

Am I angry at their message? No. At them for delivering the message? If I'm honest, yes and no. No, of course not, it's a beautiful message. But yes because it's a hopeless one that makes me believe in something that's not possible and not effective.

Where did all this dust--no not dust, Dr. Lisbet, poison--come from? How did we end up where we are? Is it part of our genetic inheritance? Our original sin? Does anyone really believe we can change the narrative arc, the ending of a story whose plot was cast thousands of years ago?

God, you tell us to be our brother's keeper, that Cain should be happy for Abel's success, that we should not feel disappointed when we don't get the praise we want and may even deserve, when our best efforts are rejected by you, God, like Cain's offering. Cain should learn to control his angry, envious feelings, and be content with himself "Surely if you do right, there is uplift." I agree. Though his feelings are understandable, Cain was wrong in how he acted.

So? What has changed? The Christian crusaders killed Muslims. And were in turn killed trying to take back Jerusalem for themselves, for a God in their image. And, of course, on their way across Europe, they thought why not get rid of those pesky Jews at the same time, giving rise to the first big wave of anti-Semitism in Europe.

People are still dying to defend Jerusalem's holiness, as they understand and proclaim it. And rather than a unified City of Peace, we have a city divided into separate quarters, even the separate quarters are divided and riddled with in-fighting. Sometimes Jerusalem seems to have more fragmented voices within it than even I do within me. Where is the religion of Jerusalem envisioned 2000 years ago in Revelations? Do you really see a heaven on earth, a City of Peace?

If the most religious peoples on earth, concentrated in the most holy city, can't bring peace, where can we ever learn the lesson?



Another brick must go, one more illusion less to hide behind. We humans, and our laws to create civilization, cannot solve our problems. *Judicium non debet esse illusorium*. The law is not intended to be an illusion.

No false spirits, no intoxicants, no illusory material comforts and golden calves, no false illusions about laws and nations, no time. What is left?

I hear the Rosh Hashanah plea coursing through me

O Source of mercy, give us the grace to show forbearance to those who offend against us. When the wrongs and injustices of others wound us, may our hearts not despair of human good. May no trial, however severe, embitter our souls and destroy our trust.

May we find strength to meet adversity with quiet courage and unshaken will. Help us to understand that injustice and hate will not forever afflict the human race; that righteousness and mercy will triumph in the end.

The perfect words for life, and for the play. To help heal the wounds of a family hiding behind trivia, hurting each other, and not knowing how to break out of their roles. After all, the is set during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I need to apply the lessons of forgiveness to my life then, in Act 111, and now. Life as art, and art as life.

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I've tried so hard in the past to keep words, writing and life apart from each other, to stand aloof, taking pictures, writing, as a way to maintain distance and a sense of control.

Why do I take pictures? Isn't it, at one level to hide behind reality, one step removed, to capture a moment and take in a scene, rather than put down the camera and fully participate. There's a part of me that's always holding back, protecting myself, afraid to enter into the moment fully and directly. But there's more. Something about a picture makes things real, a proof of living, keeping the past from completely disappearing. True, you can't hang onto that moment as you move forward, but a photograph makes it more permanent than a

flute note whose sound completely disappears externally. Also, with a picture you can help frame the scene. Light can be manipulated so there's shadow, mystery that cause the viewer to go deeper into the picture and want to see more when in fact they can't, creating a sense of yearning. I can also choose what I want to include, and what I want to leave out of the frame.

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And don't I do the same with words?

I know in the past that words were, and maybe still are, a way to keep experiences a sheet of paper away from me. And that sheet of paper was as opaque, as concealing as thick stone tablets. The poverty, the pain of those suffering, the exploitation of the vulnerable were abstractions for me-- to write about and get a good grade--for someone else to worry about. My job was only to get the suffering on paper, in black and white. My priority was a good, well-executed piece of writing. *Don't let it get too close to you, don't let it burn.* Words are cold, impersonal, passionless. Whatever fires may have been in the hearts of the men on Sixth Street, or the hearts and souls of the women I seduced, were codified and reduced for my benefit. A grade here, an orgasm there. Put these men down on paper, these women down on the bed, and then they no longer need to be in your life. Move on. Spill your seed, use words, or any other device to keep the experience from really touching your heart. *Nisus Formativus*, the vital body.

For me, the people in these encounters weren't really living, breathing, three-dimensional human beings. They were more like characters in a story I was creating to add pleasure to my life, or to create good, moving subjects for a term paper, to help me move forward and ahead. Once they'd served their purpose, I was immune to them. But I wasn't just letting them lie by the roadside, I was killing my own insides by not opening my heart to them. Perseus slayed Medusa by looking at her in a mirror. To look at her directly would have turned him to stone. I, by trying to live my life in a

mirror, always one step removed, turned my own heart to stone. And by turning it to stone, I really made sure there was nothing inside me. No emotions, no hurts, no loss. I was protected, a kind of photographic mirror--taking an imprint, a negative, placing light on it, enlarging then describing what has been photographed. Always from a layer or two of distance. A mirror has no essence. It is what it sees, experiences, but keeps everything outside. Move on. Next. Am I no more than that? Is there nothing more in me?

Yet a mirror also clearly reflects what is in front of it. I remember our creative writing professor saying that artists can be a conduit, who take what is in front of them, what life has given them, and then have the ability to put it into a form--stories, poetry, art,--which can be a gift to others to help see the world more clearly, more wisely, more compassionately on our shared journey on this planet.

I'm now at a café in Safed reading your play. It is not easy reading. To give myself a pause, an intermission before Act 111, I reach into my pocket and take out a letter from Grandpa which has just winded its way to me.

*As your grandma was dying we made a vow, each day, to celebrate in our own way, as best we could. We would look through scrap books of our travels, letters from our loved ones, little mementoes collected along the journey. The picture you took of us, when we traveled with you, showing us helping push each other up the steep road always touched us. We listened to songs that we hadn't heard in a long time, and caressed each other's hands. Your grandmother was a very accepting woman, except for her coffee. She loved her coffee hot, so hot, and would send it back if it wasn't to her liking.*

*Grandson, she's still here with me. I still talk to her. She was and is my best friend. I still celebrate our time together; it is saying thank you for the blessings I've had. She pushed me to be the best lawyer and person I could be. It was from love, always from love. I hope you can one day understand that my pushing you is from a similar love. I want you happy, to be the best person you can be, and I know she wanted that for you, too. You're our man, always will be, our first grandson."*

I feel an inchoate sadness. Partly it's missing both of them; partly it's feeling Grandpa's pain. And yes, some guilt at realizing the pain my absence is causing, and how my efforts to go my own way might be seen and even be a rebuff

to feeling pushed. They did care about me and Grandpa still does. I am so loved.

As I put the letter down on the café table, I see an older man at the next table take out a picture of an older woman, and place it next to his coffee cup. His wife? Is she dead? Is this his way of not being so alone when he ventures outside his home for coffee. Half an hour later, when he finishes his coffee, he takes the picture, puts it in his pocket, and goes on a walk with her. I write down the lines from Gibran's the Prophet that Al Hazrumi shared with me:

You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days. Yes, you shall be together even in the silent memory of God.

\* \* \*

ACT 111...

The narrator spreads the fingers of his right hand as in a priestly blessing, in the shape of a V formed, with the index and middle finger on one side, and the ring and pinky finger on the other.

*J as Narrator*

We have now finished Act II. Please note the V (tracing his left hand over the fingers of his right). It stands for victory, and for peace, as well as healing and blessing. That, of course, is what we want during these Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We have now arrived at Shabbat Shevuah, the holiest Sabbath of the year. It is a time of forgiveness and hope. The Good Book says that we cannot ask God to forgive us for sins involving other people. We have to ask those people directly.

(He turns his palm toward himself, and now extends three fingers upward: ring, middle and index). I hope you enjoy Act 111.

I'm sorry the intermission was so short, but we must abide by the rules of time, such as they are. For you the intermission was ten minutes, but in our play, the entire morning passed, and it is now late in the afternoon. Interestingly for the author, several days passed. It's all relative and relatives, isn't it. Now, please settle back in your red plush chairs so we can continue. I know you must have important things to do when you return home.

As the third act begins, you will note that my grandfather and father are in the hall talking when.... (the curtain is pulled apart, but there are no actors on stage. Stage hands are still setting up the furniture and props. They rush awkwardly and nearly bump into the actors, who are still dressing and applying make up as they run onto the stage to take their places. Everything appears disheveled and confused. There is a shout from somewhere):

*Who pulled the curtain?*

*(J is at the Shabbat table, looking confused, trying to wash his hands in a blue bowl while saying the blessing over the purification of the hands "al nitalit yadaim". Then there is a loud crash, as one of the stage hands bumps the table on which the Shabbat items are placed.. The blue dish falls to the ground, and shatters into little pieces.*

*He throws his hands upward in anger, and looks at the stage hand.) "How could you be so clumsy."*

*STAGE HAND*

*Why are you so upset? It's just a prop. I'll get another in the back.*

*J (Distraught)*

*No, this was a one of a kind. I made it one summer when I was at camp, with my own hands. It was the bowl for purifying the hands.*

*STAGE HAND*

*Sorry. Now I do feel guilty. I didn't realize it had such meaning. But why don't you practice what you preach. How can you get so angry about a bowl that's supposed to be used to help you purify yourself? That's defeating its purpose, isn't it--not very pure of you. Don't you Jews celebrate Yom Kippur as a time of forgiveness? Why don't you lighten up? Forgive me?*

*J (to audience)*

*I once heard that everything happens for a purpose and the world can be a university for the soul. Do any of you remember the line in Our Town when the dead Emily Gibbs asks the stage manager if anyone appreciates all the quotidian moments in life, to which he responds, "Poets, maybe." Maybe I, too, can learn from a stage hand, even in an unscripted moment in the play.*

*(turning to stage hand)*

*You know, there's a ceremony during a Jewish wedding when the glass from which the couple drinks is placed on the ground in a cloth and shattered. It reminds us of the fragility of life, even during the most joyous of times, and that there should always be awe and trembling.*

*(Turning back to audience).*

*There is also the hope that the shattered glass can be seen as a sign of forgiveness of past shatterings, and putting our disappointments and losses behind us. Everyone is then supposed to shout, Mazel Tov!, which means good fortune. We could use a little of that now. Please, join in. (Leads the audience in several rounds of mazel tov until they do join in. Ideally, there will be clapping and merriment. Then, when he wants quiet, J raises his hands like a rabbi offering in a blessing*

*"From this point forward, may our lives not be shattered, but full of forgiveness, fortune and joy.*

*(Looking at the audience seriously and with strong intention)*

The shattered glass is also a reminder to all in attendance at a wedding--and can similarly serve as a reminder to us here this day-- that the world is replete with imperfection. It's imperative to all to partake in tikkun olam, the mending of the world.

(Looking back at the stage hand)

Not bad, eh. Look how much I consequently this lucky audience learned from you and your blunder. You can see that you've taught everyone a good lesson, You're definitely forgiven. Now, let's move on, the play's awaiting.

(Then, looking once more to audience, with a wink)

A more superstitious view is that breaking a glass was thought to have magical powers, symbolizing the smashing of the powers of demons and ill-wishers. I'm sure there are none of those out there, right? Or in here

(He points to his own heart. He then looks briefly, and questioningly heavenward, before stopping to gather up a few pieces of the broken glass and puts them in a purple velvet pouch which is on the Shabbat table).

Tradition says you can keep the pieces in a purple pouch--purple, such a spiritual color--as a reminder. I guess for me, the message of the shattered glass is that I have to let go of certain objects from my past. Maybe the message is also that I have to internalize pure hands. As the stage hand said, practice what I preach more. The bowl becomes a symbolic vessel, shattered into words which I then can write as part of a life lesson. After all, it was just an object.

You know, it's almost as if it were planned. Everything for a reason.

Now, let's return to the play:

(There is a shout from the wings):

Who pulled the curtain?

STAGE HAND

I did, just as you told me to do. (He picks up the big book from which J has been reading): See, it says right here in the script, "Pull the curtain, early, so that everyone appears caught off guard, running around with their heads cut off. Then, after pulling the curtain, bump into the narrator while he is washing his hands, and knock over the blue bowl.

J

I know that. I wrote this, remember? (Turning to audience). Don't worry, dear audience, everything is going according to script, even the unscripted parts. After all, it's only a play. And we want to have a little bit of playfulness in our play, don't we? Even the question "Who pulled the curtain" is written here. (Holds up the book and points). Did you get confused at what was happening? Did you start to feel sorry for us? Annoyed at our lack of professionalism? Remember, it's best if you keep your objective distance from me and the other characters. We're just actors, after all.

*Let me ask you directly. Did any of you become embarrassed because you thought we'd made a mistake? Let's have a show of hands. (If no one raises their hand, he can say, "Good, Still keeping your distance." (If some audience members raise their hands, he can say): "Those of you raising your hands, please be more careful. It's sometimes dangerous to become too involved in a play.*

*Now, onward with the action. The father and grandfather, as you can see, are in hospital corridor. The Grandmother and her daughter are still in the hospital room. (Makes a motion as if letting the audience in on a secret.) Actually they are offstage, drinking tea, and getting their make up reapplied.*

*Now, if the curtain could please continue to be pulled apart. (To audience): Notice how the red and yellow lines, which are whole and make symbols when the curtain is closed, now become disconnected lines and fragments when the curtain once again is pulled open.*

*FATHER*

*We should have rehearsed that curtain scene more. I wasn't sure that my confused look was sufficiently convincing. After all, this has happened so often that it is pretty easy to take it in stride.*

*GRANDFATHER*

*What I want to know is what was that damn pill they gave me this morning, son? Or did I take it myself? Was it the cylinder-shaped blue one or the oval red? (He continues to rummage through his large, multi-colored bag of bottles and pills)*

*FATHER*

*Dad, would you stop complaining? I'm sick of hearing about you and your pills. We've got to focus on Mother now. (Pointing to the bag.) Look at that mess you've created there. It's total chaos. No wonder you can't remember anything. You've got to get more organized. (Tries to take the bag from his father). Where's sis? She's good at doing that?*

*GRANDFATHER*

*(Holding onto the bag tightly, and shouting) Leave this alone. This IS my organization. You can't help me. (Rummaging through his bag, pulling out sheets of paper, but squinting because of his poor eyesight, and holding them inches from his eyes).*

*Damn, I can't read my own notes. We rust out before we wear out. I need to find a doctor to review this. Hope he won't charge me again for the same information. I must write larger larger next time.*

*FATHER*

*Everything is money with you, and I'm sick of that, too. I've led my life the way I thought you wanted me to, the way you told me to, to make money. More and more money. Like a little shadow of you. Your reflected glory.*

*(As the father is talking, he is alternately stroking his go-tee and running his hands through his thick wavy hair, as if to say to his father, yes, we both*

have thin little mustaches, but I have much more hair than you. Look at me go-tee; look at your thinning hair and comb over compared to my hirsute virility).

Look at you. Look how you end up. Look how mom ends up. God damn it, I'm fed up with it. With all of it. I don't give a fuck about this stupid newspaper or what it stands for.

(He takes the Wall Street Journal from under his arm and starts tearing it into little strips; then grabs his father's newspaper and tears it into little pieces, too, and throws them like celebratory confetti into the air.)

That's what I think of the way I've lived my life, and this, all of this, stupid little meaningless fragments of paper that we all have been trying to hide behind. Buy short, sell long, commodity trades, stocks' high and lows. All worthless paper. White, green. Just paper.

GRANDFATHER

(Appearing startled, confused, starts to get angry)

So this morning it's ok for you to read it, but now it's hiding. You never could stick with anything. Go ahead, blame others again for your continued failure in life.

(Then, his eyes stare blankly ahead and he says in a disconnected voice).

What was that pill I took this morning? Was it the blue one?

FATHER

Dad, forget the script. Don't you hear me? This is the first time I've ever spoken to you about what I feel. It's the first time I've felt I wasn't playing a role with you, and saying to you what I thought you wanted me to say. Please listen to my words.

GRANDFATHER

(regrouping, hurt)

I thought we were sharing this morning, reading the paper together, father and son. It's what I would have wanted from my father.

(Then, looking confused, starting to get tearful. He wipes his eyes, and then, once dry eyed, directs his gaze towards J).

Grandson, I'm forgetting my lines. I know there's more I want to say, but I can't find the words.

(There is pain in his voice, as if he's trying to break out of his role, but realizes he's too tightly trapped and bound by it to do so).

Please, give me another copy of the script. (J hands him the book from which he has been reading and in which he has been writing. The grandfather begins to read, but very self-consciously, haltingly, and squinting as he tries to see the words):



Grandson, I'm forgetting my lines. I know there's more I want to say, but I can't find the words. There is pain in his voice, as if he's trying to break out of his role, but realizes he's too tightly trapped and bound by it to do so.)

Please, give me another copy of the script. J hands him the book.. .

FATHER

For Christ's sake, Dad, snap out of it, Just read your lines. You're reading the stage directions, too, Here (Goes over and points to where the Grandfather should begin reading). And frankly, if you wanted to share so much with me, where were you when I was playing football. You never, NEVER, came to any of my football games.

GRANDFATHER

(Pulling himself together, straightening up, adjusting his tie, looking over his son's shoulder, at the audience)

You can't imagine what poor is. My grandfather, your great-grandfather was a rabbi, and because we were Jewish, they had to flee the pogroms of Russia. There, our family didn't have much, but we always had enough food. But when we came here, we had nothing. Can you put yourself in his place, our place? Coming to a country where you don't speak the language and you have nothing. No relevant education, no skills. You don't know what it's like to feel hungry at night, to see him tired and begging to scratch out a living, my parents going hungry so I could have an extra piece of bread for dinner.

(He starts to tear up, then wipes his eyes, and looks at his son)

No, I never went to your football games. And you've told me over and over how much that hurt you. But when the Depression came I saw it all happening again. Your mom and I were just starting to build something, and I was afraid. I worked even harder, to make sure you would be safe from that, from what I went through. Not knowing if I could get an education; having to work several jobs just to pay my way through school. Borrowing \$150 to elope.

(He looks off stage, toward the grandma).

I--we-- wanted you to go to Country Day; then Wharton, to have the best education money could buy. That's what I would have wanted my father to give me; and so that's what I gave you: you never had to work when you were in school; you could just focus on your education and your games.

(He pauses, then looks over at the burning candles on the Shabbat table).

But it's the Season of Awe, and it's nearing the end. I always thought I'd be the one who went first. (Becomes tearful). Maybe you're right. Maybe the money wasn't just for you. Maybe it was so I could have the reflected glory of your being in the best private day school in Kansas City; a college man at the world's best business school. I'd look up at heaven and say "Dad, I did it. I did what you couldn't, I did it for your grandchildren. Please say a blessing over them...and me."

(He again tears up, again stops himself, turning back to his son).

Maybe you're right, because I didn't know when I had enough. I was always afraid I needed more. I wanted us to be safe. I can see now money can never make you completely safe, no matter how much you have. Money isn't human. It has no

emotions. It never cries out to you in pain. Damnit, I hate the way I sound as I'm reading this. And it's so clumsily written. But I mean it, son. Will you forgive me? I love you. (He begins crying).

FATHER

(Runs up to his father and hugs him).  
This is the first time I've ever seen you cry, It's the first time we've ever held each other; the first time you've ever talked to me where I didn't feel you were addressing a jury.

GRANDFATHER

I've begged for the opportunity. Every night I've pleaded, but he (points to J) wouldn't let me. After all I've done for him. He was too worried about dramatic effect, and how to stereotype me as a miser, hiding behind my money to let me cry. His view of me was as limited as yours. But now that it's all almost over, I feel free to unburden myself, to break free of all restraints, including these words.

(Both Grandfather and Father look with consternation and annoyance at J)

J

Careful, both of you. You're treading on dangerous ground. Remember, you're just creatures of my imagination, and any time I want to, I can cut you out of the script. As you said, these are the Days of Awe, and in this book it is written who shall live and who shall die. Now, come on, you guys, play it like it's written in the script.

FATHER

(Jumping to his father's defense)

That's not fair. What Dad said was written in the script. You can't get angry at him for saying what you told him to, even if it involves criticizing you.

J

You, too, need to be fair. After all, my response to him was also written in the script. As was your response to my response, and as is this response to your response to me. . .

(The aunt screams and runs in, panting.)

AUNT

Mommy's dying. She knows she's going to die, and she just told me she's been putting on an act for us so that we wouldn't feel uneasy. She's been protecting us. Mommy's dying. That can't be. Somebody do something.

(From the aisle, on the left side, a voice is heard)

WISE MAN, LEFT AISLE

Is it time for an Apology, Socrates? "The unexamined life is not worth living."

(His voice is followed immediately by another, from the right side).

WISE MAN, RIGHT AISLE

Is it time to awake, Tolstoy? "The syllogism he had learnt from ... logic ... 'Cassius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Cassius is mortal', had always seemed to him correct as applied to Cassius but certainly not as applied to himself."

GRANDFATHER

What was that pill this morning. The blue one. (Picks up his bag and rummages through it, mumbling).

FATHER

Dad, snap out of it. Don't leave me again, Dad. Not now. All of us need to quit hiding, We're hiding her death from her, and we're hiding it from ourselves, You dad, behind your pills; you, sister behind your red book, Mom behind that parsley; and you son, behind this script. We've all been putting on a play for her, and she's been putting on one for us. You heard the man (Points to the wise man in the left aisle): No more illusions. The unexamined life is not worth living.

AUNT

(Frantically, facing the audience)

You're not listening to me! You're not hearing me. This is not some abstraction that he's so found of (points to J). My mother, your mother, your wife, your grandmother is dying. SHE'S DYING!

(Then, turning to her brother, holding up her red book)

You're right. I need my illusions. I'm sorry, ok? But for God's sake, she's dying and you're worried about what happened in Act II, and criticizing us for hiding behind illusions. (Screaming now). How can you just stand there and talk. (Then, to audience): How can you just sit there and watch?

(She turns and runs off stage).

The curtain starts to close, but as the two sides get close to touching each other, J emerges, and walks over to the Shabbat table. He writes for a moment or two, then his father comes out and stands next to him.

J

What grandfather said in there was very moving, wasn't it?

FATHER

Yes, Thank you for letting him say it. Those are words I've wanted to hear from him all my life. I may have misjudged you. I always thought you were a cold, calculating, emotionless, self-absorbed person. But I'm beginning to see that you can take someone else's perspective. I'm sorry..

J

Thanks, Dad. And Grandpa wasn't the only eloquent me. What you said in there about all of us hiding, that showed a depth in you I've had glimpses of, but never have seen so clearly. I'm sorry I misjudged you, too.

FATHER

Apology received and accepted. (Both father and son clink a glass of wine, encircle their arms at the elbow and share a drink from their respective cups. When they set the cups down, the father continues).

There's a story that I want to share with you about my work at Merrill Lynch. I know mom told you I no longer work there. That's correct. I lasted there two years. But I stuck it out longer than anyone would have expected. Including me. I know everyone thinks I'm a raging bull, with no control of my impulses or temper. That's why I want to tell you this story about the first three weeks.

The first two weeks were our rookie training, and we were all flown to New York. I'm feeling desperate because I know I have to find some way to earn a living for my new family. In New York, I'm with all these young kids, early twenties, and they started calling me grandpa, because I was the oldest guy in the new training class. I was ok with it, they meant it affectionately, though I must admit, it hurt a bit. What was I doing at my age, starting over with these kids?

During lunch, and after work, we'd all go over to play football in Central Park. I tried a few of my old moves from high school, but my body just couldn't take it. I realized I could no longer play, so they made me the referee. My glory days on the field were over.

(He smiles self-deprecatingly).

So, oldest guy, trying to earn a living with these young pups, called grandpa. But I'm ok with it, laugh about it. Then I come back to Kansas City, and I'm busting my butt the first week. My supervisor is this young late twenties kid, and he's riding my ass. But I'm ok with that too. I'll show him. I bring in more business in one week than he's brought in during a year.

(He nudges J conspiratorially)

Grandpa's clients all threw some business my way. After an amazing week, the likes of which I know I'll never have again, the kid comes up to me on a Friday afternoon. The market closes 4:00 Eastern Time, and it's 2:45 in KC, so it closes in about fifteen minutes. The week's about over. I'm proud of myself, and looking forward to the weekend with my family.

(He looks at J with some awkwardness at the pronoun "my" realizing he's excluding J and then clarifies) "my new family." (By J's face, he realizes that is not much better, so just continues)

All our clients are gone, the market's about to close, I've been up since 6, I'm exhausted but like I said, feeling my oats. I'm the man. I've loosened my tie (which I hate to wear anyway) (Points to his loose fitting turquoise Arizona bolo tie he's wearing). The supervisor---not more than a few years older than you---calls out to me, Heh, gramps.

I look up expectantly, thinking maybe he wants to single me out in front of the others for a great week; or invite me to a beer to congratulate me. Instead he says,

"Take your feet off your desk, and straighten your tie."

I sit motionless. His use of the word "gramps" has no affection in it. It's a sniveling little power hungry piece of baby shit who's disrespecting me, calling me old man. I feel my face become red, and my right hand instinctively clenches. I want to cold cock him right there, and see myself jumping up and the little punk bastard running scared and crying with his devil tail between his legs.

Then I think of my young, new wife; the two little babies I have at home. I need this job. I think of you and baseball and anger management classes and needing to take a breath and all that, count to ten.

1. 2. 3 4... As I'm counting, he walks over to me, threateningly, and says, "Didn't you hear me. Feet off the desk, now." 5. 6 7

(The Father's face starts to bulge and turn red as he's recounting the story)

He takes my feet and hurls them to the floor. Then, standing above me, he looks down menacingly and says, "Now, straighten the tie." 8 9 10.

The whole thing probably takes no more than forty-five seconds. At that moment, I stand up, and look him in the eye.

All he sees is a twinkle in my eye, and a smile, as I graciously and quickly straighten my tie. "Won't happen again, sir" I say.

And it didn't, for the next two years.

(There is a silence and awkward pause. Neither is sure what to say next. They both reach for the wine glasses and take a drink)

J

That's a great story, Dad. Thanks for sharing it. You were always able to tell a story so much better than I could. But why now? Why this story?

FATHER

Thanks for the compliment, but I actually think you can make my stories seem ever better than I can. Almost as if you're putting words in my mouth.

Why now? Maybe because facing death--mom's--makes us think of our own. I know I haven't always been the best father. Maybe it's my way of sharing a bit more of who I am. And also of saying I'm sorry for some of the ways I treated you, son. Sorry I wasn't there for a period as much as I know I should have been--just sort of disappeared out of your life. Sorry for the times when my temper got the best of me--you know what I mean. I promised myself that as a father, if I had a son, one thing I would do is go to all your football games. What I wanted most from my father. That I did. For the rest, I'm truly sorry, Please forgive me.

(They turn and walk through the curtain, backs to the audience, arms around each other, the curtain closes behind them as the middle wise man says)

MIDDLE WISE MAN IN AISLE

Facing death gives us an opportunity to consider what life is all about. It gives us a perspective, makes us think of what we have, what we've lost, regrets for which we may need to ask forgiveness--from others, and from ourselves.

*That concludes Act III; there will again be a brief intermission.*

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After I leave the Church of All Nations, I have no idea where to go, and for some reason, I feel as if I'm being guided. I allow myself to just walk, and see where I end up. Soon I am standing before, then enter the Dormition Monastery.

I stand beneath some ornately crafted mosaics, and read the Latin inscriptions. I knew that four years of Latin training would pay off. I just thought it would be in law. Little did I know. Little did Grandpa know. Humans plan, and God laughs.

I remember Grandpa telling me that he was sure he would die before Grandma, and how unsettling that was to him because of the way he had set up their wills. He showed me in his will where he had set aside money to be used for fresh flowers to be regularly placed on his grave, and hiring someone to ensure that happened. He asked me if I would be willing to make sure that the flower shop didn't rip him off, placing inordinately expensive flowers, or overcharging him.

When the money ran out, the will stated that permanent plastic flowers be placed on his grave.

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I walk downstairs into the crypt with its replica of Mary when she fell into eternal sleep. The dimly lit, dank atmosphere of the room gives me an eerie feeling. There is an inscription I can't see in the dim light. I'm curious about what it says, and think of Elizabeth Mery, with a few pangs...of what? Loss? Grieving? Vulnerability? Is there still some anger? Any gratefulness at birthing me to this new phase of life?

As I move closer to the altar, entering the roped-off section so I can see the inscription more clearly, I'm startled by a deep male, strongly accented voice, which shouts "Leave. Enter you that holy place not." I turn and see a

German monk, in a dark brown Cossack, glowering at me.

I think of dad and his Merrill Lynch supervisor. I also don't like being told what to do by anyone. I watch as my mind creates a story to justify my dislike. Is it because he's German? Is it because he's German not polite, but commanding? Making me feel I don't belong? But I realize these are just a stories, because no matter what the situation, I hate being told no.

The German story is most interesting. How dare a German, after what they did to my people, order me around in a holier than thou way? He's got a lot of nerve even being in Jerusalem, much less speaking to a Jew in that tone. German arrogance. Roman Catholic pomposity. Suddenly I hear "It's your entitlement, thinking you can tear a page out of the telephone book for your private use. You break too many rules you aren't sensitive to the community's norms and rights."

Anger arises. No matter what I do she finds a way to fault me. I want to be a lawyer, she is the voice of the people, Miss "laws are so impersonal and unfair." I break a norm, and again I'm chastised. I'm too materially oriented, and now it is she who now drives a Mercedes and carries a Judith Lieber bag. I dismiss her comments like the annoying buzzing of a fly at a picnic table. (Ah, I can write whatever I want in my journal and get to use what I felt my professor wouldn't want me to say in describing my aunt in the play).

Who knows if she still believes in the "community's norms and rights." I smile, if she does still believe, she could never have articulated her words as clearly as the voice in my head did for her.

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This rope is protecting a symbol, not a holy thing in and of itself. Mery, the German, all of them, are caught and trapped by symbols. "Enter you that holy place not." Don't get too close to "holy places." Symbols. Is it worth trying to awaken him to his illusions--the illusory, meaningless laws of man

which he thinks are made on behalf of God-- the illusory symbols of God? How can you act unkindly and yell at your fellow man, while protecting a symbol that points to love and healing? Hypocrisy and shallowness abound.

I stare at him for a moment. Is he justified in shouting at me? From his perspective, yes. From mine, no. I trespassed upon a symbol, at least in his mind. But, there is an infinite distance between finite symbols and that to which they point. He's hiding, whether he knows it or not, behind his symbols. But would trying to talk to him change his understanding? No. Why get angry at him or put in more time and energy? He's just an ignorant servant of God, following the rules, investing the symbol with too much meaning. It's not worth trying to enlighten him. Better to pity him and leave him be. I decide to go quietly.

But then I turn and say, "I have a story to tell you. There is a man in the Bible named Eli, a Judge in the book of Samuel. In the course of the story, his sons die, but he doesn't react. Yet when the Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant, he became so anguished he falls over backwards and break his neck. The Ark was only a symbol, his children were flesh and blood, and yet he reacted with more distress to its loss.

"Let those who have ears to hear, do so." His face is expressionless. Is it the language barrier, or am I too deep for him? In any case, I'm done here. I give him a little formal bow from the waist, turn and leave.

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As I walk once again through Zion Gate into the Old City, I realize that I still have the sarcastic, intellectually snobby edge of Johannes, but now I have substituted religious content for legal content. I still have my dust, this holier than thou attitude and it's an illusion to think otherwise. Still a work in progress being born.

We all hide behind something: illusions, symbols. Why are we so afraid to face the truth? Do we fear seeing ourselves and being disappointed? I've been



there, done that. Do we fear seeing Oz and being disappointed? O'Neill, You say in The Iceman Cometh, that without our illusions, there is only despair. You may be right. But that is not a way I'm willing to live. Just as I have committed to unearthing every illusion I have about me, I am committed to facing every illusion I have about even You, God.

No more hiding behind symbols. It's time to face the last brick in the tomb that we, Your little ants, have spent our lives constructing. It's time to stop pretending that the suffering of Job is justified by how his story ends; that the suffering servants of Isaiah are comforted by his words

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her...that  
you may suck and be satisfied with her consoling breasts,  
you shall be carried upon her hip and dandled upon her knees.  
As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you.  
You shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

I am here in Jerusalem, Lord, but I don't want your comfort. I want the truth. I don't want my journey to be from my mother's womb and breasts to Mery's breasts to your consoling breasts. Don't infantilize me. Don't make me a little baby comforted on your knee. No more hiding in wombs of comfort. Here I am. Hin ani. I stand on my own two feet before you. I'm not a baby to be cooed at, the price of my obedience is more than two gigantic breasts and nipples to suckle.

The price of my obedience is that You show and prove to me that You are a loving, powerful, all knowing God. The burden of proof is on you. Beyond a reasonable doubt.

I'm in Your city of Jerusalem, not to be comforted, but to face You--the last brick-- without illusions, without symbols. Here I am. I am ready.

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*(They turn and walk through the curtain, backs to the audience, arms around each other, the curtain closes behind them as the middle wise man says)*

*MIDDLE WISE MAN IN AISLE (Continues)*  
*That concludes Act III; there will again be a brief intermission*

*We have coffee and cookies for you at the back of the theatre, just like a good Jewish Oneg.*

*(The lights dim, and the daughter waits until the audience begins to get up and head toward the back of the room).*

AUNT

*(rushing out from behind the curtains)*

*Wait, no, please, there is no intermission. She's dead. (Sobbing hysterically; she throws her red book to the ground with a crash).*

J

*(to the audience)*

Please, don't become upset, she's just saying her lines. Even though the actors' illusions are breaking down, remember that the play itself is still an illusion. So we are safe and she is safe and you are safe.

*(At this point the curtain opens a bit, and you can see the father and grandfather sitting on some reclining chairs, like on a cruise ship, relaxing, yawning, taking their break, even shuffling a deck of cards).*

*(Looking back through the curtain and pointing at them) See, they know that this is an intermission. (Pointing to the aunt). She's working overtime, and she won't even get paid for it. She's really quite a fine actress, isn't she? Did you see the way she threw her book to the ground, symbolizing the breaking down of the actor's illusions? But she is only an actress acting as if she is hiding behind illusions, as are we all. This Book of Life and Death, her red book, the newspapers are really ingeniously disguised scripts in case any of us forgot our lines. Pretty clever, huh? (He smiles, pats himself on the back, then continues)*

*And those tears, amazing how she can cry on cue. But again, don't worry, as the program says, there are four acts. We are just completing Act III. There is still one more to go.*

AUNT

*No, you don't understand, this is not part of the play. She's actually dead.*

J

Shh. Don't say that now. It's intermission time. That line isn't in the script,

AUNT

*(picking up her red book and pointing)*

Yes it is, right here.

J

*(looking at his Book of Life and Death)*

No, I don't see it anywhere.

AUNT

Right here; after you say, "No, I don't see it anywhere."

J

I don't see it anywhere, How the story ends depends on how the story ends.

AUNT

Quit reading your lines. Mommy's dead. God, you're cold.

J

Ah, yes. I see your lines now. God, you're cold. That's a clever line, isn't it/ Does it refer to me, or God? Here, let me hold you.

(He very formally and rigidly holds her, as per the script's instructions)

Don't cry, Auntie. Look, it says here, cry gently, if at all. (She continues to sob, while the Grandfather and father are still in their lounge chairs, taking their break, alternately yawning, and playing cards.

AUNT

(Pushing J away, then taking his hand and pulling him backstage)

She really is dead. Come with me behind the curtain and look.

J

I'm not going to look till the next scene.

AUNT

But this is the last scene,

J

(exasperated)

Auntie, that's part of the name of the play, *The Last Scene*. But you're forgetting the subtitle: a play in four acts. This is only the third act.

AUNT

(Turns in a huff to leave)

It's no use arguing with you. You always want to be in control. No matter what, even with your dead grandma, you'll always make sure you get the last word.

(She leaves. The other two characters who have been playing cards also get up and leave, and the curtain closes. J comes forward. Only the table with the candles, bread, and wine is outside the curtain with its yellow star of David, within which is the red J.

There are sounds of tears, "Oh no. It can't be" from back stage, then all is silent, and the stage becomes completely dark.

The darkness is to last for thirty seconds. Is this an intermission? Should the audience clap, and go take a break for cookies and punch? There may be ambiguous sounds: a "shill" who starts to clap; another who says "Shhh."

Then, after the thirty seconds have passed, , on the left aisle, a small light appears, and words are spoken): "In the beginning was darkness and the void, and the Lord said let there be light, and there was light, and it was good."

On the far right aisle, another light begins to shine, and these words uttered, *In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen. Introibo ad altare Dei.*

*ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam." "I will go unto the altar of God, to God Who gives joy to my youth."*

*Then the light in the middle aisle comes on, and we hear these words: As I was with Moses, so will I be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you."*

*J*

*(Walks slowly to the table, picks up the glass of wine and holds it up)*

*Introibo ab altere Dei, Ad Deum qui me affligit. I approach the altar of God, to God who afflicts me. (He looks to the audience)*

*This is the final act. In this act there are no more illusions, no palliative words of consolation, no intermediaries. You may stay, if you wish. But this is also a time when you may wish to go home.*

*(Then, looking back at heaven)*

*In the beginning was the word. In the end was the word. It's time for us to talk, God.*

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y last day of work washing the lunch dishes. Talk about an absurd intermission in my life, between writing the final act of the play: A morning at the Church of all Nations and the Dormition Abbey; and now my sense of duty pulling me back to cleaning beans at the King David Hotel. I also want to say good-bye to Karim. Once I quit work here, I don't know what I'm going to do, or where I'm going to go. I may never see him again.

As I'm walking toward the hotel, I see the back of a young woman ahead of me, who looks familiar—the gait, the long reddish brown hair, the slender legs. I realized it's Joie from the Rebbe's class. She's walking with an older woman, who must be her grandmother.

For some reason, I feel an excitement and fluttering in my heart. My first instinct is to approach them. But then I realize this is an old Johannes reflex response, and I slow down so as not to get too close. But I continue to watch them, and see that they enter the King David Hotel. At that point, I speed up, and decide that today, I will go through the front entrance of the hotel, too, rather than the special entry at the back for the helpers.

I take a breath, and walk up to them. Keep it simple.

"Shalom."

They turn. I wonder if she will recognize me. "Oh, wow, am I surprised to see you." She greets me with a little pat to my shoulder. "I'm back visiting Grandma for Passover." She looks at her grandmother. "Bea, this is the guy I was telling you about from my Chanukkah class all those months ago. The one who asked all the great questions."

I stick out my hand to shake hers. "Naim meod. Nice to meet you." She says nothing and just looks at me. Though she's short, she's tough, and I can feel

as if she is staring right through me. I feel very uncomfortable. Why? I have no designs on her precious granddaughter.

"Well, I'm working today. I have to go."

"Where do you work?" the grandmother asks pointedly.

I feel immediately defensive and inadequate. My reflexive response is to tell her that I'm a Stanford Phi Beta Kappa, am planning to go to Harvard Law School. How quickly old ways return. I could tell her this is my last day on the job. Or I'm a writer. Instead, I say, "I work in the kitchen washing the dishes."

"Oh," she replies. "We're planning on having lunch here."

"Excellent. Please clean your plate well, it will make my work that much easier." I smile ambiguously.

Grandmother Bea turns to Joie. "I see what you mean. A little rough-hewn." She smiles. "But fearless. I like him, too." She then turns to me, "Would you like to join us for Passover dinner this evening." She writes down her address. "We'd both welcome you."

I take the paper, and thank her. Then I smile at Joie, and head into the kitchen, saying only, "Enjoy your lunch."

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As I put on my apron to prepare for washing, I look around for Karim, who is not yet here. I put on some rubber gloves, turn on the hot water, and begin a slow circular rinsing of the first of many plates that lie before me. I'm glad this is my last day at work. It's really a stupid, meaningless job, but I'm pleased with myself that I showed myself I can do it. As I wash the plates, my thoughts drift to my play. Is it done? Devarim. Beginning with words, ending with words. Do I need to write a conversation with God? What more can really be said that hasn't already; either you speak like Job, and cry out, then capitulate, or Jonah, where you run away, then return and serve.

I return to the circular motion of cleaning the bean plates. How is this serving my goals, or God? It's just boring. How is it that I who am struggling toward and with God, is in a kitchen cleaning plates. Clearly this is beneath me. I deserve something more.

I catch myself and my negative thoughts, reminding myself that at every moment I can "wake up" and find God in this moment.

I decide to notice and label these thoughts and feelings "dust"--bored, entitled,--as a way of staying more aware. It's frightening how I can be trying to be so dedicated to purifying myself, and yet falling so short, and not even recognizing it until moments, sometimes days later. Today I see dust I had yesterday and didn't notice. But in the very act of seeing that, I'm creating more dust--as I become angry and self-condemning.

But just now, I did notice my dust almost immediately. I need to remember the slowness of the yoga stretch, the Rebbe's one or two degrees at a time. The progress is so slow. I am seeking the infinite. My journey for that seeking is a fearless non defensive self-examination. Shema, Israel. It's okay to be wrestling with God. Wrestling with your plagues, polishing your dust. That's where you are, right now. In and through.

Geez, how far in can you go before you start to come through?

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My thoughts drift to Joie. Even with my simple life, I feel like I'm trying to juggle several balls, some of which are contradictory. What a kind invitation to their Passover Seder this evening. Was it just coincidence that I ran into her, or part of divine providence? Maybe there is meaning and purpose, and I am allowing one person's death to be an indictment against God, when it is really I who should learn to accept the natural cycles of life. Flowers bloom, flowers fade.

After a half hour of the same mind-numbing circular motions, I pause and take a break, walking to the doors leading from the kitchen area to the main

dining room. Does "same mind=numbing circular motions" refer to your cleaning the plates, or the mental reflections you're addressing. Sorry, just the old Johannes wordsmith still within me.

I want to take another look at Joie, when she's not aware of me. I'm surprised how full the dining room is this afternoon. I'd have expected more people at home making preparations. I guess it's the tourists. Jewish and Christian. The Last Supper and Passover on the same night. As it says in the Gospel of Mark (14:12), Jesus prepared for the Last Supper on the "first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb." And this year also occurring on Good Friday and Shabbat. Coincidence, or an auspicious time for Joie to reappear in my life?

Finally, I spot her, and my heart gives a startled leap. She's seated with her grandmother. But there is also a good-looking, athletic man also at their table with whom she's talking animatedly. As I watch, unable to pull my eyes away, she puts her hand on his shoulder in an intimate gesture, and leans closer, laughing and smiling at him with those beautiful blue eyes.

I turn away and return to my dishes. I'm angry. Not at her, but at myself. How quickly I forget my task and my path, and let myself be lulled back into hope and the ways of the flesh. Either the man is her husband (though I didn't see a ring on her finger); or her boyfriend. In either case, the invitation to come to dinner was obviously nothing more than kindness, taking in a lost, lonely stray dog. I don't need their pity. And I certainly was wrong to be lulled back into thoughts of relationship. Flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit. I need to keep reminding myself of that, of what I am trying to point the way toward....God and spirit.

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Back in my room, I put on my tallit. To pray, and to write. I look



at the blue tassel on my sleeve, and gently and affectionately touch and twist it with my fingers. I close my eyes, feeling the soft, silky thread, trying to find comfort in it.

God, I felt that if only I could keep Your commandments, written in the books of the law, I would become sinless, pure, worthy. I wanted to know Your law, Your ways, Your heart directly. Not through words, written long ago; not interpreted by men, who are untrustworthy. No intermediaries, just You and me, God. No priestly class telling me what to do, no fallible human interpretations. I want, I need to know You directly.

I've tried to become bare before You, to leave behind my unworthy habits, my socialization, my selfishness, which could create obstacles to my knowing You, to my having faith in You. I want to leave behind my desire for social status, to be the best, the Harvard lawyer, which only prevented me from knowing You. I was like Ramses II, enslaved to myself. I feel I have slowly led myself out of that bondage, as well as my enslavement to the body and sensual pleasure."

I remove my hand from the blue cord I'm still twisting, take off my shirt, and look in the mirror. My ribs are sticking out. I look gaunt, haggard.

See, God, no more using my body for pleasure. Instead, I try to decrease and diminish my body, so that I no longer am a person interested in flesh. In fact, I'm desperately trying to become like You, of the spirit, so that I can face You directly, to feel You within me, surrounded and comforted and held by You. I want to hear Your words directly, to feel Your love of all creation, all neighbors, revering, honoring, respecting all life.

Am I there yet? Am I ready to stand before You naked and unafraid?

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Next year in Jerusalem.

At Passover last year I said those words, as part of the bloodied time in Carmel with Mery. And lo and behold, by some miracle, now, a year later, I am here, in the Holy City. The first night of Passover, the first of the three pilgrimage festivals. Last year on Shavuot, the second pilgrimage festival, I was climbing the streets of San Francisco. Where will I be seven weeks from now on Shavuot? What mountain will I be climbing? Will I even still be here? I've already climbed Sinai. Naturally, in my messed up life, out of order, after the third festival pilgrimage, Sukkot.

At Sukkot last year, I was in such pain, physically with my cut fingers, and mentally lost. I was living in a temporary shelter, like I am now, willing to face the rawness of life with a sense of trust in You. An old timers on the Kibbutz, Dov, one of the only spiritual individuals I met there told me a story he'd repeated many times to himself while in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, a story he had heard from his grandfather.

In ancient Jerusalem, there were no wells; all water came from the cisterns, which depended on unpredictable rain to be filled. On Sukkot, the people would take whatever water remained in the cisterns, and pour it onto the altar, an apparently extravagant waste of precious water for purely ceremonial purposes. They did this because of their complete trust in God. In their minds they were saying, "God, even though there isn't yet rain, and our cisterns are practically empty, we won't fearfully hoard the water that is left, but as a symbol of our faith in You, we pour it onto the altar.

Dov told me that when he was cold, shivering, hungry, sick, alone, scared, he would tell himself that story, hear his grandfather's words, and be comforted. That is the faith I want.

God, please help me gain it. Help me serve You. I believe I heard You after Sinai. I am to serve water. Let me be poured where You want me. Let me, like the water the Polish children gave from their meager rations, be used to grow a tree, to grow life in others, in Your world. Guide me to Nineveh.

Help me learn to trust myself better. You see, even in my dreams, when I try to serve water, I spill it. It becomes the blood of

others, leaving an indelible stain. Even with good intentions, I can't seem to trust myself to do good, to be a healing presence.

I want to serve you, God. Make me, once again, the love bubble I tried to be in my childhood. I wasn't a perfect boy, but I wasn't so bad that I had to be exiled from my home, kicked out and left by my mommy and daddy. Please don't exile me again, heavenly Father, heavenly Mother.

I know that "no man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or he will hold to the one and despise the other; you cannot serve god and mammon."

It is you, God, only You that I want to serve.

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I close my eyes, and I must have drifted off, for upon awakening, I realize I've had a dream. In the dream I may be a teacher, and I ask a sensitive adolescent boy--my student?--what are his goals. He writes something down which I read, and then say to him "That's a content goal. Let's look deeper." I can see he is both confused and hurt by my response.

I reread his words "apple trees and the weeping softness of the apple's taste." I realize this is about process and is deep, and I missed it. I tell him it's so creative and touching, and I'm sorry my response didn't acknowledge that. "I was only trying to be helpful, but I realize that what you really need is a father figure that you're looking for and don't have. I can't be that for you." It's a sad dream---for the boy, for me and my inadequacies. Thinking of Dr. Lisbet's method of dream interpretation of me as all characters, I am the young sensitive boy searching, and I am the older person also searching for a father figure, and trying to figure out my goals.

Again I drift asleep, and this time I'm a professor giving my last talk to a class, in the basement of the school. I realize I've forgotten the student feedback forms in my office on the first floor. I want the forms so I can see how my talk is received. I don't question in the dream why that is so

important to me, as opposed to what I would actually say as part of my life wisdom and legacy.

There is still time before the lecture, so I rush to the elevator but get on the wrong one, and it leads to a top secret bio hazard lab on the fifth floor and skips the first floor. I should have taken the stairs. Why am I so lazy and stupid? I get off and am met by a sergeant-at-arms whom I ask how to get to the first floor. He points to a different elevator, saying there are no stairs. There is along line waiting for that elevator, including a pregnant woman, seated in a wheelchair. She's going to take up a lot of the space on the elevator, and there may not be room for me. I'm trying to stay calm, but time is ticking. People in line are nice, chatting with each other, but no one is particular helpful, offering me a spot in front of them. I then end up on a bus which is going away from the class and the building.

"No, I shout, this is not what I want. This is my dream, I'm going to stop it here, I don't have to have it end this way." And with that I wake up. My first dream, was sad, yearning. This dream is fearful. Panicky. Why am I so needy about feedback? Why is there nothing in the dream about what I have to share? Is the elevator to take me "higher" toward God? Do I fear that and run away, calling that space a bio-hazard? T

The pregnant woman? Is that me seeking to give birth but not willing or able to?

Waking up? A part of me that knows when I am going in the wrong direction?

\* \* \*

God, I'm seeking you as that Father Figure. To hear your wisdom.

Is the problem in me?

Why can't I change faster? Why do I run away? What is the essence, the goal I would like to share, if given the chance?

Sin, the Hebrew word meaning separation. That which separates me from God. Why? Why do we have these sins? Why did Adam and Eve, in the Garden

with every possible pleasure and happiness, want the one thing they were told not to have? Where did Cain's jealousy come from? Why could he not accept that Abel's offering was simply more favorable to You? Why did we humans use our new technology--bricks-- in an over-arching hubris to try to reach You? Greed, jealousy, hubris. I know them all.

"For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self but see in my members another law at work with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

Yes, I have felt hate. Toward my family. Toward Mery. I've worked so damn hard on myself, but change seems so slow. I fight with all my strength to rid myself of the bitterness within me,, but it's still there. Why can't I forgive? I think of the letter from Richard about Elizabeth. I hate her. I hate me for hating her. She is a goddamn false womb in which I tried to hide, a seeming refuge that expelled me, left me abandoned. Why did she forsake me? "I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares, and nets, and whose hands are fetters." I hate her for leading me to the chaos of the ocean.

Please help me, God, reduce the sins which separate me from You. Please help me feel, not just say, "forgiveness." Let me have the qualities and be like the God I read about on Yom Kippur. How do I address you, Holy Father? Holy Mother? Let me be that person, who, like You is slow to anger, Who is forgiving and pities Nineveh, the God Who cares for Your creation, and Who suffers when they suffer, a Lord who punishes only when it is necessary. Yes, punishes, and judges, as I know this is what is necessary for me. "Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." I need to see when I'm getting off the path of serving You, to be brought back to awareness of You as my only goal. I see clearly how gevurah --judgment, boundaries, limits- are part of the spiritual sefirot.

God, it is only You that I'm seeking. You, who feels pain when You have to make Your own creation suffer. Pain as if over the loss of an only child. God and Jesus, Abraham and Isaac.

Put false ways from me, teach me Your law, Your ways, Your heart so that I can strive to be divine, to emulate You. I'm not strong enough to do it alone. Help lead me back from my sinfulness. Hear my cry, please hear it. "There is in me a spark of Your divinity." Help me realize and grow that divine spark. Help me seek You more earnestly, to submit myself to Your will; to say to You: "Hinani, Here I am. Mold me, guide me, command me, use me, let me be Your co-worker, an ingredient of Your redemptive purpose. Help me always, but especially on this sacred day banish from myself whatever is mean, ugly, callous, cruel, stubborn, or otherwise unworthy of being created in Your image. Purify me, refine me, uplift me.

I hate when I hate. I hate those who hate. Anti-Semites. Those who hate Arabs. Arabs who hate Jews. Where is love? where is forgiveness?

Forgive my past and lead me into the future, resolved to be Your servant. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable until You, oh lord, my Rock and my Redeemer, Amen.

You are the all that is left for me to trust.

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Maybe all these words have already been said to You, God. But I didn't want to let myself off the hook with that excuse. I have thrown open my heart, once again, to You.

Now, it is time for me to address You, God, so that you are not let off the hook, either. Are You trustworthy?

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#### ACT IV (CONTINUED)

*The family is huddled around the bed. A sheet is pulled up completely covering the grandmother.*

AUNT (weeping)

*She really had a long and beautiful life. I shouldn't be sad for her. But she didn't want to go. And I didn't want her to. It's going to be so hard to live without mommy.*

FATHER (WEEPING)

*I'm so sorry, mom. There was nothing I could do. I'd wake up each morning knowing that you were dying, and I'd watch you and talk to you, all the while knowing there was a cancer eating your insides apart, tearing you to pieces.*

*I could do nothing but sit and watch, helpless to do anything more. I'm so sorry I wasn't the son you wanted me to be. Even at the end, I couldn't come through for you. Can you understand that? Can you forgive me?*

GRANDFATHER (STOIC, CALM)

*Leaning over her body, whispering to her)*

*Remember the story we read by Bashev Singer? Love is stronger than death. Even in death they were not parted. I am here with you. You are still here with me. Don't worry. We will grow old together. The best is yet to come.*

*The lights fade, the theater grows dark.*

*Then, on the far left, a small light goes on, as the first wise man begins walking down the aisle, saying*

WISE MAN ON LEFT AISLE

*I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever virgin. . .to blessed John the Baptist. . . to all the saints, and to thee, Father, that I have sinned exceedingly in thought, word, and deed.*

*The light of the wise man in the middle comes on, as he starts walking:*

WISE MAN IN MIDDLE AISLE

*The Lord Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and giving thanks broke, and said, 'This is My body which shall be given up for you; do this in remembrance of Me'" (1Cor.11:23,24)*

*Then the third light comes on, and the wise man on the right aisle, while walking*

WISE MAN ON RIGHT AISLE

*Contained therein are three sacred mysteries - the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and the Holy Priesthood, all of which **Jesus Christ** instituted at that Last Supper. This is our precious heritage, which defines us and makes us His true children.*

*Their lights are turned off as they reach the back of the theater, and a spotlight illuminates a cross now placed on the right curtain alongside the yellow star of David with the Red J in it.*

The light then shifts onto J, who has moved center stage.

J

God, I have a question for you. As my grandmother was dying, my father said to me, "If she had been unhappy with life, or had hurt someone and been a cruel woman, maybe I could understand her painful dying. But she never hurt anybody. Why did she have to suffer and die?"

Well, God, that's the question. From my father to the Holy Father. My grandmother was a fat old lady who sat in her rocking chair with her few strands of gray hair and blue eyes that warmed you to your depths. Now, God, it's your turn to speak. How can we awaken every morning, praising You, yet knowing everyone we love most in the world will die, and we will die, and there's absolutely nothing we can do about it. How can we even think of starting a relationship with another person? The best you can hope for is what they had: fifty years of marriage. And yet how does it end? He sits by her bed pathetically and heartbreakingly murmuring "the best is yet to come."

My father also said "If only it could have been a car accident, or a random sniper-- we would have been saddened, but bad random human caused acts happen."

Is it random, God? Would that have let you off the hook? Does the type of death matter? You God gave her cancer. You, God, killed her. And you're going to kill me. And you kill innocent children every day. One day You will get us all.

Oh, we can joke. Put words in your mouth.

God is dead.

--Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is dead.

--God

You, Lord, kill us all. You win. Yes, God, You will always win. You will make sure that each of us die. But isn't it a Pyrrhic victory? Does it really bring You satisfaction? Is it truly the way You wanted life to be for Your creation? Our inevitable deaths--even of those innocent and kind-- cannot be the best You could have done. I must tell You, I'm sure there was/is a better way.

Now is your chance to explain. I want to know why a woman as sweet and harmless as my grandmother had to die. Did you hear her protest "I don't want to go to the other world?" Did You see my aunt and father's hearts breaking? I want to hear from You. Not lines people put in Your mouth: "See the beautiful comfort loved ones can give each other in times of suffering. Suffering helps us grow. Knowing there is death helps us feel gratitude for life."

No, God. I want to hear from You directly. Just You and me Lord. In dialogue.

GOD (an opportunity to respond) If silence, J can continue)

J

God, I presume You know you always had the opportunity to speak in the previous Acts. Yes, we heard You might be detained. Therefore, we've tried to proceed without You. But now, we're at the final scene. This is Your part. No more hiding. You are center stage, allowed to come in and say Your lines, whatever lines you choose, and do whatever it is You want to do. Your manager said You weren't willing to be bound by what was written for You by a mere



*mortal, so I've kept the script free of content, merely noted: "And God says. .  
."*

*GOD (anything? More silence?)*

*(J pauses, looks at heaven, looks at the symbols on the curtains, each  
of which is spotlighted one at a time. Then, crying out....)*

*J*

*God, this is Your part. Where are You? Are You hiding? Are You there?  
We're waiting.*

*GOD*

*(He looks at the audience and is silent for about thirty seconds)*

*Then he turns to the audience. Finally, to fill the awkward space at God's  
continued silence, he says)*

*J*

*When I was a young boy, my parents took me to a ballet, Swan Lake. When the  
ballet ended, the audience clapped. "Beautiful," they cried. "Beautiful." .  
According to my parents, Swan Lake had a happy ending, just like the Titanic not  
sinking. The Prince and Odette lived happily ever after. Since this was a  
ballet, the choreographers can choose any ending they wish. And over the  
years they have. Most, like my parents, chose happy endings, although some were  
tragic.*

*I feel I have a duty, an obligation, to help remove the childish  
innocence that we adults try to keep ourselves wrapped in.*

*What difference does the ending ultimately make, really?  
If it's a happy ending, and Siegfried and Odette go sailing off into a joyful  
life accompanied by Tchaikovsky's magnificent chords, we know that eventually  
death still will tear them apart. And in the tragic ending, they didn't sail  
off anywhere, and death (by drowning) simply captures them earlier. Either  
way, even though we try to create stories that pretend otherwise, to hide the  
tragedies in life from "the audience," there is no ultimate happy ending.  
Death and the accompanying sadness ends life for all of us. If I were to see  
Swan Lake now, I'd want to stand up and shout to the dancers, "You're an  
illusion. Look how you've deceived the people in the audience, trapping them  
into false beliefs. None of us gets out alive....or happy."*

*I mourn the innocence of that young boy. Now I see the dust, the poison  
and darkness in all of us, in life. I see how even in the best "play" -a love  
of fifty years-beloveds are torn asunder.*

*Am I right, God? Do You want to contradict me? Are You taking the Fifth?*

*GOD (shorter waiting time of silence)*

*J*

*Will they really ascend together into heaven? I don't hear You, God. What  
happened to direct communication? Wasn't it You who said we humans can't get  
off the hook during the Days of Awe by asking Your forgiveness for sins we've  
committed against other humans? Didn't You command us to go directly to them  
to ask their forgiveness?*

What about You? I want to talk to You directly. I believe You need to be forgiven for what You do to us. I believe You need to ask our forgiveness.

GOD

(J looks at the waxing moon) then continues

J

*This is Shabbat Teshuvah, Lord. September 3rd. Three days after Rosh Hashanah. The moon is three days old, a little crescent. I don't want reflected light. Or partial light. I want to talk to You directly. I don't want intermediaries or symbols. I want to see and feel Your light, such as it is.*

(Looking at the symbols on the curtain, then back up at heaven)

*Do You enjoy being an audience to this play? Did you like the second act, watching the characters hiding behind their illusions, putting on a performance for grandmother, as she did for them, as they all did for You? I bet You, God, like it when we bury our heads in the to try to deny death. That keeps our attention diverted from You. We spend our lives pretending death doesn't exist. Murderer, I challenge You. I won't bury my pain behind illusions, or relieve it by tears. I won't sit still like those slaves.*

*(Pointing to audience, his voice rising, admonishing them, like a Biblical prophet, as he paces back and forth across the stage*

*Do you, dear audience, not see the tensions between upstairs and downstairs,-- between you in your raised seats and those on the stage? You are there in comfort, having paid to be entertained. The actors work to make their living by gratifying your amusement. In a sense, these tensions may not be dissimilar to those between God upstairs and we humans down below. Perhaps we exist only for **God's** amusement, and our lives depend on keeping **God** entertained.*

*What is the theatre, Teatron, but a place of seeing, so that, by seeing yourself in the play you can give a narrative arc to life. I want the words of my play to be a vehicle for life, for seeing. In principio erat verbum. In the beginning was the word. And these words will be a mirror to you, the audience. Genet brilliantly put mirrors in the balconies at the back of the stage to place the audience in the play, about the brothel. "Et Verbum caro factum est." And the word was made flesh. Oh, John.*

*Proust noted that art is not contingent on the specific circumstances of the artist's life. Rather, the artist transforms experience into a reflecting mirror for others.*

*So, what do you see, dear audience? Is there any tension in trying to remain aloof observers, is there any upper class guilt as you, the moneyed, privileged audience, sit comfortable in theatre seats? Do you feel any need to atone for the inequalities of the system that put you there? Do you feel others' suffering, or do you just feel self-satisfied that you can view others' suffering with an enjoyable balance of sadness and relief? Even if you do experience a genuine emotion, what good does it do to merely share another's pain from a distance? Does it change anything? Then stop these self-congratulatory tears, wipe your eyes.*

Maybe in watching a play the doors of normal perception will be cleansed. Maybe the theatre can be a lens you look through: revealing, something you haven't seen before. A new pair of glasses. And what will happen at the end of play? Will normal vision return? Will it have any effect?

I don't want the metaphorical eyeglasses I hope to create for you to be removed. I hope your vision will remain permanently altered. I don't want to let you hide and I don't want to let myself hide.

(There is a moment of silence as he stares at each person in the audience pointing to them one by one)

You, and you, and yes you are going to die as surely as she did, and as I am. Why are we dissembling? (He begins pacing faster, his voice rising) like actors in a play, when we know the inevitable outcome of the story? We are all going to die. Yet none of us faces it. Is our life nothing more than a serious of props, facades with which we struggle to find ways to dissemble and shield our deaths from ourselves?

(Still looking at the audience)

How did you feel watching the last scenes, knowing cancer is literally devouring my grandmother? Not really the stuff of ennobling, uplifting theater is it?

And my aunt was right. Grandma did have a long and beautiful life. This is the best it gets. Platitudes. We use them to conceal other's and our own pain from ourselves. Should we tell the bereaved, "Everything is for the best. It's all part of God's plan. You'll meet up with her again in heaven."

It's like a big fucking joke that isn't funny. Everyone is afraid to say anything to break the illusion for fear they might disturb the others sitting next to them.

(Talking to himself. Pointing to the audience). How quietly, how passively they sit.

(Then addressing them directly)

You'd like me to tell you tonight that this is all an illusion, wouldn't you, the tricks of the theater. You'd like all the actors to come back on stage and say, it's all ok, she's alive. We take our bows and you clap. Bravo. Bravissimo.

Then you could all go to the foyer, saying "Intriguing, wasn't it. The lie that reveals the truth. Non-linear theater, quite innovative. Even courageous. Bold." Then you would leave the shelter of the theater and go back to your comfortable little brick and mortar shelters.

But It's all too close to home, isn't it? She's dead. I'll never see her again. Why aren't you clapping, audience? Because you know one day you and everyone you love will be her. Dead.

Like I said, you can go home now. I don't need or want any intermediaries. There's nothing more I have to say to you.

*(His voice is thick with sarcasm and anger. He mutters under his breath)*  
"Little puppets, shame on you." *(Then, anger turns to contrition and he holds out his hands in supplication to the audience),*

"I'm sorry. Why am I getting angry at you? Please forgive me. I apologize. It's not your fault. You didn't cause this. Am I getting angry at you because you're here and in front of me? Like yelling at the dog after a bad day at work? My issue is not with you. You're just observers, and you're going to be engaged in the same scene at some point in your own lives, whether you want to or not.

Please, forgive me. It's not my fault either. I'm merely a messenger. And an observer, too.

*(Looking up at heaven, with anger, and admonition).*

God, You're the One who sends the message. I'm through hiding. This concerns you, God, and You alone.

GOD

J

Are you still silent, God. You realize it is you who are on trial. You and your laws. Deuteronomion, the second Law. I was hiding behind the law of the Word. I wanted so badly to believe and trust in you and your Words.

But no more. Your laws are absurd. Uzzah was pulling the Ark of the Covenant in his cart. His oxen stumbled, the Ark started to fall, and he tried to keep it from falling. His reward? He was smitten and died. Why? Because he violated the law of Numbers 4:15 that we humans are not supposed to touch a holy object. Kill a human because he touched a holy object? Is that law really worthy of you, the best You can do? But perhaps it makes no difference, for with or without ridiculous laws, you kill us all.

Of course imaging our death causes us to be afraid, to cower from you. David said this fear brought us wisdom "The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord."

I used to fear you, Lord. If I'm honest, some part of me still does? No one wants to be your enemy. You who said to Moses "I will make My arrows drunk with blood and My sword shall devour flesh. . .from the long haired heads of the enemy."

But my fear has turned to anger. My wisdom is to see Your inadequacies. Am I wrong? This is Your last chance. You are now on trial. Any words of further wisdom for us, anything I'm missing? Speak now, or forever hold your peace. There is no longer an escape for You.

<Silence>

The play is over, God, It's You and me. Why did she die, God? Answer me. And I don't want that original sin bullSHIT. You put the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden, and the snake and their curiosity. You told them not to eat from it, but gave them no skills or wisdom to avoid temptation. Then You blame them, and kill them and everyone who followed, all of us. Even innocent babies. I shout at you Lord, killer, cosmic Hitler, You kill us all.

Do You enjoy seeing people suffer, Lord? The people in the Wilderness were starving. They cried out to You for meat, and You sent them quail, But, "before

*it was yet between their teeth; You smote them." You give them quail, lured them to eat, then kill them for their greediness. But Who put the hunger in them?*

*Should they have said nothing, and passively died of hunger, shriveled up while saying, the Lord is good? What about the six million Jews? Should they, too have just submitted, saying, I have faith in the Lord?*

*We have a lot to be ashamed of as people. But Lord, aren't you ashamed of Yourself? How do You forgive yourself?*

GOD

*<More silence>*

J

*You' don't answer, do You God? You don't like it when someone yells at You, do you, cries out that the Emperor has no clothes, is a cosmic illusion? What are you going to do, kill me? Hah. You'll do that no matter how I act.*

*(He turns and faces the cross on the curtain)*  
*Dismisso non tuum peccatum. I don't dismiss your sins. You must ask me to forgive You. No longer do I need to strive to show faith in You. You must show me a reason for faith. Quia peccata vestri opere. What are Your sins?*

*(Picks up the cup of wine)*

*Here is the cup of wine. Hic est calix meae sanguinis. Bibite ex eo, Domine. Here is the cup of my blood, drink from it Lord.*

*(Picks up the bread, brushes off the parsley)*

*Hoc est enim corpus meum. Manducate ex hoc.*

*(Looking at the sky> Look, Lord, I now dip the bread into the wine. Is it holy, or is it chametz? See how it's reddening. Bloody red. A symbol of our blood that You spill?*

*God, damn You. I damn You. Why don't You answer? I challenge You, oh merciful God,*

*(turning to the star of David) Shema Israel Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*

*Hear of the wondrous Lord, o Israel, the Lord is One.*

*Allah Akbar. There is no God but God. (J points to a new symbol on the curtain, to the right of the cross, a crescent moon with a star.)*

*All three great monotheistic religions point to You. The ONE God.*

*Where is Your Oneness, Lord? Do YOU fear we humans becoming unified as one? Wasn't it You who became so frightened when we humans started to work together to build an edifice to the heavens? You called it hubris. Perhaps, but couldn't You also be proud of us, that we were reaching up to explore, to seek, to quest, to find You? Are You hiding, and afraid to be found? Is that why, after the*

*Tower of Babel, You created so many languages, so many different words so we have more difficulty communicating with each other, making it more difficulty for us to join together and find You?*

*Do you relish in our divisions and egoic battles. You tell the Jews feel they are the Chosen People; the Christians that Jesus is the only way to God; the Muslims that Mohammed is the only real Prophet.*

*Is that your strategy to keep from being found, oh One? Keep us fighting among ourselves?*

*You're still silent, always silent. Are You afraid? Afraid of anyone that challenges Your all powerful authority? Do You fear that someone might get too near and see You for what You are?*

*Why did You swallow up Korah? Korah, the existentialist Messiah, wanting to know why. If that is what it means to 'despise the Lord,' then I will never cease. Long live Korah!*

*(He raises the wine glass, as if in a toast to the Lord, but doesn't drink from it, and instead smashes it on the floor, shattering it into pieces. Then falling to the floor himself, as if shattered, crying, he yells out)*

*Lord, I hate You. God... damn You. Where are You, wondrous Lord? I've searched through the fire and the earthquake. I've searched through the wind, Where is the still small voice? Where are You?*

*GOD*

*(After a brief silence, there is a change of voice and tone, from accusatory and angry to pleading, impassioned, and sobbing)*

*J*

*Please God, show me that voice. I'll forgive. I won't ask what brought the fire, the earthquake the wind that preceded. Please let me hear it. Please answer.*

*I didn't want to write this last scene. I didn't want Grandma to really die. I don't want to upset people. I wanted to avoid facing her death. Lord, I want to be shielded from death by my faith in You. Please answer me.*

*I know I've sinned. I know I can only be forgiven by Your grace. So I have to believe in You. Please help me understand, God. Did she die because of me? Why do we all die? I'll never see those blue eyes again. Why? I'm desperately looking for signs of Your presence.*

*(He buries his face in his hands, falls to the floor, sobbing).*

*Oremus (kneeling before cross).*

*(There is a twenty second silence then he rises and upward. At first his face seems peaceful, then it turns to rage).*

*Why am I praying? Blind resignation? For peace by hiding behind illusions? What do I hope? For a postponement of the last scene? That my grandmother live another five years? Another twenty-five? Is that what You want us to pray for, a suspended sentence? Like Hezekiah. You gave him fifteen additional years of*

*life. Then You killed him. Are we supposed to thank You for that? Answer me, I'm waiting.*

*(He pauses another thirty seconds, then gets up, brushes himself off, and calmly turns to the audience).*

*Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid that this play has come to an end. I'd hoped it would include a dialogue with God, but unfortunately, the big Guy doesn't appear to be showing up. I offered to pay overtime, even time and a half. But with those fees, and in spite of assurances from God's agent, I'm afraid God's missing in action and not going to respond. There were plenty of chances for God. I wrote the Name God into the script at several points. And of course God the all-powerful could have spoken out at any point. But unfortunately, God's a no show. It's time to go home. I'm sorry it has to end like this. For you. For me. For God.*

*(With that, J walks down the steps into the audience, and moves toward the exit at the back of the theater. If there is no applause, he himself turns toward the stage and initiates clapping, shouting "Bravo, Bravissimo. How courageous." If there is applause, he holds up his hands, and says, "Please, this is not a play. This is life. And the God who caused its creation doesn't deserve our applause."*

*(No matter which ending, he then continues walking toward the back of the aisle. As he exits, the lights once more traverse across the symbols on the curtain, then dim and go out).*

\* \* \*

*It's six o'clock. The play is finished. I put it in an envelope, address it, to send to my professor. How absurd. Why am I seeing this through to the end even as I recognize its meaninglessness? Well, Grandpa, your money won't have been wasted. I'll be a Stanford graduate. I lick the back of the manila envelope. What a bitter taste. Then I toss it to the ground to be mailed.*

*Karim didn't show up for work today. I'm sorry, I would have liked to say good-bye. And thank him for my rudimentary introduction to Islam. The Crescent moon and star. He loves that image, and says many Muslims also do, though there are some who object to any image being used to represent their faith. Just like in Judaism, divisions within the religion.*

*I'll miss him. Maybe I should give him a footnote acknowledgment in the play? I look at the sealed envelope. Too late.*

*Oh well, maybe I'm not sorry he wasn't here today. I don't really like good-byes. I didn't call the Rebbe or Dr. Lisbet this week for an additional session. I don't feel there's anything more they can give me. I told myself I*

would see them tonight for Passover at their home. But I know I'm not going there. I'm not going to say good-bye to them. And I'm certainly not going to go to the home of that singer girl and her grandmother. Why does she get to still have her grandma while I'm writing a play about the death of mine?

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Nice try, God. I thought maybe You'd sent Joie and her grandmother to the hotel to comfort me. I lose my grandmother. I write a play about it, asking for you to respond. I think You're being silent, but then you surprise me by sending a surrogate grandmother to love and take care of me, and her granddaughter to comfort me and teach me about love. Hah, what a pipe dream. No, just another way You mock me and show me how weak I am, how easily lulled back into vain, empty hopes.



\* \* \*

I think of the story of "The Raft and Life" told by my professor in his class of Existential Thought. Early on in a person's journey, there are lots of people welcomed onto the raft. The person let everyone on. Work colleagues, community members, church associates, friends, a wife, family, children, grandchildren. But as he got older, he starts to let go of those least essential, as they fell off or drifted from the raft. First work colleagues, then acquaintances. It was time to let them go. Soon he was leaving more and more people behind. Then, as death grew near, he had to let go of his grandchildren and children. Each begged, please don't leave us, but he had no choice. Finally, only his beloved wife was left. He promised he would never let her go. But in the end, even as her fingers reached out to him, and they held hands, he had to loosen his grip, as he was too weak to hold on, and now he was completely alone on the raft.

I imagine those alongside the raft, swimming, saying, don't leave us, with tears in their eyes, as he himself had tears in his eyes.

God, right now my raft is empty. I will not refill it. No, God, tonight is my last supper with You. Just You and me. No intermediaries. We still have some words to exchange. You still may not speak. And You may not listen. But that doesn't mean I'm going to keep silent.

No play. No theater. No audience. Like Michelangelo's Prisoners, I am freeing myself from the stone in which You have encased me. I am pulling myself out of the play, out of the words in which I have been hidden from You, and You from me. How ironic. I come from a play being written in the Book of Life; and now come into life for the Last Supper. And on Good Friday, a day of death; and on the first night of Passover, where we make the story our own. I have stepped out of the play and into life. As I've heard You say so many times, "The Word lives in living." Fine.

Now, there are only two actors now. You and me.

I look toward the sky. The crescent moon on the Play's curtain, three days past Rosh Hashanah, has been replaced by the full moon, illuminating the City of Jerusalem, on this Good Friday, this night of Passover, the Seder, the Last Supper, when we release ourselves from our bondages, read the Hagaddah, and make the story our own.

\* \* \*

I pause and stare at the moon. I can see clearly by its reflected light. I think again of the astronauts, in December, looking down at the earth, the little blue ball in the sky. Even though they are scientists and understand the physics of celestial bodies, they must have wondered what holds it up? It must have looked so groundless, just hanging in emptiness. The way I feel now. What is holding me up? There is nothing but void and darkness all around.

I think of something the Rebbe told me about how he felt when his wife was dying of cancer. Could I add it to the play? Who would say it? Maybe Grandpa, although I'm not sure it would have been in character. It makes him too empathic on the one hand, and too wise and accepting on the other.

It's funny. I've already finished the play, and yet ideas still come to me, even as I try to exit from the play into life.

Perhaps I could create a private scene just between the two of them, maybe in the second act right after the grandmother does the physical therapy. She lets out a cry of pain while doing her exercises, and my father says, "Someone find the doctor. She needs pain medication now!" My aunt commiserates, "How is she supposed to get better and exercise if she's in this much pain?" and then she reprimands the physical therapist "Don't push her too hard."

Then they all rush out, looking for a nurse. My grandfather leans over--a different grandfather wiser than the grandfather I know, and whispers to her:

WISE GRANDFATHER

I know this is hard for you. I know how much pain you've been in these last few months. But I want you to know I've been so happy just to have you here

with me each day. I don't want you to go. Please stay with me. Please, I don't want you to go. Please stay here with me.

Then, at the end of Act III, there could once more be a private moment between grandpa and grandma. He sees the suffering in her face, and, hearing her moans, takes a handkerchief from his pocket and lightly and tenderly wipes the perspiration from her forehead. He bends over to kiss her on her cheek,

#### WISE GRANDFATHER

You know how much I love you, and how much I want you to stay here with me. I'm going to hold onto you as tightly as I can. But I won't hold you so tightly that if it's time for you to go, even as I embrace you, I will let you go. If you are ready, then I am ready. You don't have to stay any longer for me.

\* \* \*

Wise words from the Rebbe, at a time of heartbreak. I wonder, if I ever were to have a relationship of fifty years, if I could be that wise? My thoughts drift momentarily back to Mery from the past, to Joie in the present. But I stop myself immediately. I'm once again ruminating, writing lines for a play, and this is still hiding from You, God. Human wisdom does not justify or explain Your actions, God, nor does it let You off the hook. A wise Rebbe. A wise Granfather. What about a Wise God?

For all my braggadocio talk, I must still be afraid to confront You, but now, all other illusions are stripped away. Now, God, there's no one left to confront but You.

The path to You was not easy, but I can see that it's been inevitable. I've opened and gone through all the doors that You use to deflect us from You. Family. Relationship. Laws. Society. Country.

You're the last door. I've knocked long enough.

Yet even here You stall, and place additional obstacles. You place gatekeepers at Your castle to remind us lowly humans of Your greatness. Who am I, a plague-filled sinner, to approach the bench and argue with the great God?

What hubris. But I gain courage because some at least were brave enough to challenge you, at least a little. Like Abraham, arguing with you about Sodom and Gomorrah. Job shouting out to at You. I wish Adam and Eve had stood up to You in the Garden of Eden, rather than Adam's timid response "I'm hiding." How about instead, "What the hell are You thinking God, putting that apple there, and telling us not to eat it, explaining nothing, and giving us no skills or understanding, then when we fall, telling us "Too bad, now you're all going to die." I wish Job hadn't let you off the hook at the end, too.

But we are intimidated by You, and most of us realize that we certainly aren't without sin. How then, can we cast the first stone? Yes, I realize my sins. Yes, I've wondered whether and if it's appropriate that I, a flawed human, am worthy to face and confront You. You eventually silence all into submission. Who was there when the rivers were created? A good two prong legal strategy, God. Attack the victims, lessen their credibility. And at the same time, spread Your peacock feathers in intimidation, showing Your impressive credentials and assets to the community.

But this time it's not going to work. I see through both of these strategies and will not back down. I've knocked long enough. I've come to the end of my reflections about me and my issues. I've come to the end of blaming me. No more intermediaries, God. No more pointing the way. No more hiding behind my writing, reading what others have said about You, reading about me and trying to find myself through my past. No more words to hide behind. The Word lives in living. I come forth to face You directly.

Yes, I am afraid standing here. Yes, I have had to cut through the "fear" and "awe" of the Lord by which You keep us enslaved. But I'm no longer willing to be thwarted by the symbols around You, the rituals and ceremonies of Your "law"; or Your angels, intermediaries, and emissaries, even the lamb bone of the seventh plate at Passover.

If I am going to wrestle, it must be with You directly. Do you hear me, I've knocked long enough. Now I open the last door, to face You.

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It's fitting, isn't it, God, that I began this final scene of my life on Christmas day, just having returned from Bethlehem. I set myself the challenge to discover where and how I had fallen and broken into fragments, and then to see if I could put myself back together in a new, better version. As part of that task, I also committed to looking at the world around me which also was broken and in fragments, and to understand how that could be. I wanted to figure out, to the best of my ability, what is the nature of this universe, at the deepest level, that we live in, that either You created, or some random process of evolution evolved.

Now, God, within these next hours, on Good Friday, I'm going to end the scene that began on Christmas. This is the Final Judgment.

Let me tell You what I see, God, about You. Not about my flaws, or my family's, or Mery's, or nations', or other people's, of which there are many. But about Yours.

I see suffering that You God have caused and will forever cause. If humans don't kill each other, You kill them, and much more reliably.

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What's wrong, God? Are You stunned into silence when someone admonishes and is angry with You? Are You angry in return, preparing Your next chess move? Do You fear Your children growing up? Let me ask you again, as I asked You in the play, what was wrong with humans using the new technology of bricks to build a tower to the sky? Hubris? That's blame the victim again, God. What about You? Are You afraid of humans rising too high, do You fear our becoming too strong?

Do you want us to remain like swaddled infants, forever in Your debt? Like children, begging for Your attention, wanting to feel chosen and special,

fighting each other for the limelight? We fear your neglect, and have a primitive gratitude for the gift of life. Please don't kill us, Master. Is that really the best metaphor, Master? Maybe, if we are slaves. Or how about captor, or abusive parent? Our gratitude becomes affection and love. Please don't be mean to us, or punish us. Please hear our primitive sobbing prayers toward You, oh Giver of Life. We are all battered children who love the parent no matter how cruel or abusive. What choice do we helpless people have?

We fear You, destroyer of life. And of course we say we love you, just as there can be love and fear in any abusive relationship. You like having the power, all the control, don't you Big Guy? Sometimes nice, creating beauty and joy. But not always, right? And we have to be ever watchful, hoping we don't displease You.

But no return to swaddling clothes for me. I am a man, an adult. The only control You have over me, God, is my death. Now, facing You, I take that control away from You. I am writing my own script in my own book of life and death. There is nothing left for You to take from me. No more fearful little boy begging and pleading with You. No more trying not to be like my father, afraid of my anger, pretending not to be angry when I really am.

And I am angry. My father blamed others, the world, my mom, me, for his problems, I didn't want to be like him, so I blamed myself. I'm the plague. But enough inward blame. I see my faults.

Do You see Yours?

Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.

Great defensive line, God, a superb chess move. No self-reflective person can fail to realize how many flaws they have within themselves. If they follow Your counsel, and concentrate on introspection and healing themselves before they address You, then You will never be criticized. But, You, God, are not blameless either. You Yourself are not without sin.

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What's Your next move? You've attacked our hubris, and admonished us as sinners not to cast stones. Now what? Ah, we shouldn't be angry? Sorry, Big Guy, You already beat me to that one. You know as well as I that anger can be a useful strategy, can't it, Almighty, You of the flaring nostrils of the Old Testament? You Who smite the enemies who don't follow Your judgmental ways, who don't believe as You want them to believe.

And how much better are You in the New? Even Ol' Jesus is not just lovey dovey, turn the other cheek meek, is He, God? He tells a deranged man to shut up and then causes him to writhe in pain (Mark 1:25-26).. When he is later interrupted by the leper, is it pity that moves Him, or anger? He becomes exasperated with a crowd and his disciples: "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you?" (Mark 9:19). He curses a fig tree (Mark 11:13-14). He drives people out of the temple area (with a whip, according to John 2:15), overturning tables, and physically intimidating people to prevent their passing through (Mark 11:15-17).

His attitude toward authorities is hardly respectful, either. He castigates the scribes and Pharisees at length, mocking them as "blind guides" and "hypocrites" (Matt. 23:24-25), and practically curses them, saying, "You are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth" (Matt. 23:27).

I guess You and Your anointed can get angry, but man are we punished and castigated if we get upset at You.

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Look at the lesson You teach us about Cain. He certainly was not malicious in giving you his offering. "the fruit of the ground" You were the One who "paid not heed", and "had not respect for it." Then when Cain was much distressed at Your rejection, You ask, we assume rhetorically, "Why are you distressed?" Duh! Who wouldn't be?

Is this supposed to be another of your teaching lessons about our human inadequacy, from You the all loving God? Why not honor Cain's efforts too, and encourage him? Was Cain wrong to kill Abel? Of course. Humans are flawed and jealous. But don't You share some blame, too, for what happened? What kind of a loving parent rejects the best his child has to offer, while praising another child more? Is this an example of Your unconditional love that we are supposed to admire and respect?

And don't You share some blame for what is happening now for the unceasing conflict between the the descendants of brothers Issac and Ishmael?

God, perhaps Your own lesson needs to be directed back at You." Let the One without sin cast the first stone."

Why should I be my brothers keeper if You're not? You let my older brother die at six days old. You let my grandmother die.

How did they displease You?

The ground is wet. A wind is coming up. More shells explode.

Shells being shot at a monolithic enemy by a monolithic enemy.

The enemy, who is the "other" though my brother, whom we seek to kill as if he doesn't have flesh that sings when burnt, a physical heart that pumps blood that courses through veins and arteries and sustains life; a fragile heart that cries when hurt, as loved ones weep and wail and ache at their loss.

But I digress, don't I, God. As You hope we all will, becoming distracted by the human caused pain and suffering all around us. I'm back to blaming humans, even blaming the messengers.

Hosannah. Please Lord, save us. We beseech you. Save us from ourselves. Wouldn't that be a nice tidy ending, God? It would get you off the hook.

But where did it all start? With humans? Or with You?

Forget about the Church of All Nations, forget about finite humans.

Where are Your tears, God?



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God, You are the last brick that must be removed before I can be totally free of all illusions. I'm falling God. I'm groundless, but I'm also on the top of the mountain, on a pinnacle above you; I look down and can see through you. Do you even deserve a capital letter?

I no longer fear you. Do You fear me? I who am willing tell You that it is not just Adam, or Cain, or Leporello, but it is also You Who are hiding. I challenge You to come forth. Come out from behind Your words; Your Word. Kai ho logos sarx egeneto. I have. I am here in the flesh.

Who am I? I am all before me who have not been afraid. I am the lawless one. I come in my own name. Nietzsche may be dead, but through his words the Uberman lives. Who we all must be. We need to be our own oracle.

Non sperar, se non m'uccidi ch'io ti lasci fuggir mai It's in vain, even if You kill me You can't escape.

The trumpets. Do You hear them? Do You smell them? Two white angels' trumpets, gloriously scented. And every inch of them is poisonous. Is that Your creation, God? Creating angels of death?

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Fourteen days ago, the crescent moon first became visible. Tonight, there will be a full moon. The sun's reflected light. The son reflecting Light. What did the Gospel of John say?

Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

Look around You, God. Do you see swords turning into plowshares, wolves and lambs, calves and lions dwelling together. Look at Your garden and You will see every night it is a battle of eat or be eaten. Look at Your world. Your Holy City. Where do You see any sign of peace, or love or hope?

See the Jews at the wall bobbling up and down like little puppets; hear the Muslims praying five times a day to You; notice the Christians in Bethlehem, at Christ's Church, worshipping You. They all want hope. They don't want death, they want resurrection. An eternal kingdom. Life everlasting.

Do You hear the mortar shells? Do you hear the wailing voices crying out? Is that the soil for resurrection? Do You spill a drop of wine for them? Do You cry out? Do You shed tears seeing those You've created kill each other?

Everywhere is death. If we don't kill each other, You kill us. Show me a sign of the resurrection.

What did we do, what did Jesus do? God, damn You. Do You hate Your creation? Jesus dies, and people say, "Ah, God's revealed Himself." Do You reveal Yourself through death? Is that Your way of showing Your power?

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How foolish and naïve I was on Christmas Day, sitting in that small cafe, having just come from Bethlehem, hoping that with Jesus' birth there would be a rebirth in me. That I would find light amidst the darkness, that the candles of Chanukah would illumine my path.

At the time, I didn't know what else to do. I hoped that by taking amorphous words, which are defined only by other words, and using those words as tools to look back at my life, I would be able to find some direction and clarity. And yes, I prayed to You. I uttered a silent prayer that by the time I caught up to the present, the words would have given me a base, and that, through the words, I would have reached the Word.

Tonight I am here. How ironic. The night the Word dies. The night the suffering servant dies for us so that a remnant might be saved. Sheerjashub; a remnant will return, a living reminder of the message. This is also the night the slaves are freed from bondage. Those who will be allowed by You to wander

in the wilderness toward the Promised Land. Though they weren't allowed to enter it. The next generation did. And look where we are now.

Are we the remnant? Is this what all of our past has been about? Is this Your vision? Is this all of which You are capable?

Is this really what You wanted me to see? After all, isn't this why You have chosen me, and have guided me to You? Isn't this why You have led me to break the nets that trap your conventional subjects in the day to day tasks of life? You made me feel I was given special privileges and circumstances so I could see through the forever enslaving cycles of family and relationships and children and laws and society, all that keep lesser souls bound in the world of the flesh. You allowed me to break through all those to search for You, only for the world of the spirit.

Well, God, Hin ani. Here I am, God. Alone, at the edge of the abyss, with no more bricks hiding me from You, no more nets of the world entangling me.

Yet, now, I feel and fear my own inability to stand on this dizzying precipice trying to face God, and beyond. Yes, part of me wants to retreat, to run away. Isn't a forever endurable mechanical, robotic, non-conscious life better than unendurable screaming chaos?

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Once again, I have been guided back to Gethsemane. This time I lie down under the gnarled trunk of an olive tree to rest. I can see the dappled light of the full moon as it trickles down through the branches and leaves.

Luke said the kingdom of God is among us, God is everywhere if we only we can recognize Your presence. Jacob, awakening by the river marveled, "God is in this place and I did not know it."

How can that possibly be true? I think of YadVaShem and Hitler. But I don't even need such an extreme example to convince me of how ridiculous that statement is. Yet, now there is a quiet stillness in the garden. There is beauty in the trees, the light, the flowers. There are no mortar shells at this

moment. At least not that I can hear. Isn't it too simplistic to dismiss all this as an illusion? I think of my picture-taking days. We all keep only the good ones, and throw out the bad, unflattering pictures. Maybe that's fair for a photographic album, even though it creates an unrealistic and inaccurate illusion. But that can't be how we should live life, pretending that bad, terrible things never happened...and are still happening.

At least in reviewing my life I've been honest, looking at the good and the bad, and yes, Clint, the ugly. It's not fair to say it's been all ugly or bad, just like it's not fair to say life is all ugly or bad. But if there is to be a God that I want to believe in, doesn't this God only make sense only if God is all good, all powerful, and all loving?

Then how does this world make sense?

Maybe it's not supposed to. Maybe it's truly about the Kingdom of Heaven to come. Here on earth our task is simply doing our part to repair the world, to heal it. Tikkun Olam. Each of us suffering and using our suffering to become wiser and more empathic; each of us Jesus, dying on the cross, to make the world a little bit better for those who follow us so that one day there truly will be a kingdom of heaven on earth.

Suppose this Sunday, Jesus is resurrected, and actually returns. The Messiah coming for the first time for the Jews; the second time for the Christians. And suppose this time there really is ushered in this new world of lion and lamb together in peace, and the men on Sixth Street no longer feel the pain of existence, the Arab children no longer have to beg, Jew and Arab no longer fight, but became brothers and sisters?

I lie back and watch the wind blow the leaves, smell the blooming fragrance of the flowers, and let the light of the moon caress my face as I enfold myself in this peaceful, harmonious image, and amazingly, I feel at peace.

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You do comfort me, at times, God. You have comforted me at times this past nine months. I felt like a baby, suckled and nurtured and held by You. Like at this very moment. At times like this, --and like the moment at Sinai--You restore me, give me hope, so that I have the courage to go on. I think of Isaiah:

Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary

I feel stronger now, God. Thank you.

I feel strong enough to realize that I'm not finished with You, yet.

There still needs to be the final Judgment. About You.

If I look beyond this immediate moment at solace, I see around me a world of suffering, crying out for help. If that brokenness and devastating heartache is the price of brief moments of respite, or the entrance fee we have to pay for future harmony, I can't accept it. The knowledge of the perfect kingdom to come sometime in the future does not decrease one bit the pain of those children in the streets. I echo Voltaire's mocking challenge to Leibniz efforts to address evil in a Panglossian worldview -- that evil and suffering are integral, though inexplicable parts of the order that God has ordained. Everything's for the best in this best of all possible worlds. You, Alexander Pope, and your Essays on Man: "Whatever is, is right." Look around. Aren't you the least bit embarrassed? And yes, even you, Elizabeth's favorite, Teilhard de Chardin. I so want to belief your image of an Omega point of love, and that we are moving inevitably in an upward positive direction toward that Omega point. But too much has to be buried in the garbage disposal of twisted logic and distorted narratives to truly justify all the suffering that has been and is being endured. Even one death--an innocent child's, my grandmother's--is too much.

God, You have argued Your case well--through your intermediaries--but your defense is simply not acceptable. That view, of the inexplicable now, or the

imagined kingdom come does not, in my view, lessen in any meaningful way the pain and suffering within and around me--does not decrease the hunger of those children in the streets. It leaves me lying here, still begging for something to hold onto, but finding nothing but a cold Eastern Wind, which is impossible to grasp. There is no wizard behind the curtain.

Sorry, Kierkegaard, this is where I get off. This is not the stuff of your Knight of Faith, Abraham. I am with you up to and including the fear and trembling, the sickness unto death. But once we come out from behind the words and face and see the Word, we have different perspectives.

And I'm sorry to You, too, God. Even with this most beatific image of a future Kingdom of Heaven, I do not find sufficient solace or comfort or meaning to allow You to go unjudged, or unpunished.

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I leave Gethsemane. The sky is becoming partially covered with clouds. From where did they come? A starry night entwined with wispy, moon-reflected swirling clouds. I approach St. Stephens Gate, and enter the Old City. Walking straight ahead, I pass the Pools of Bethesda, and once again hear the shelling resume.

Jerusalem, the City of Peace, over which there have been and are so many battles over religion, over God. Two thousand years ago Jesus arrived here by jackass. Now we arrive by technological marvels, bus, train, plane. But are we any wiser? Aren't we all still jackasses, our ignorance, our stupidity, our senseless killing of each other? I see the pain that I have caused and still do cause by my callousness and sometimes plague-like nature. I see the suffering that we humans cause ourselves, by our insensitivity to others, our pseudo superiority, our fears, our selfish and hubristic need for control. And the worst form of control is when we marry our needs to an illusory God and proclaim our actions to be in God's name, with God's blessing.

I am at Station Number One. I look back at the sky, and see with perfect clarity the fullness of the moon. I image the moon swelling the ocean waves by pulling them toward itself, then releasing. The waves enlarging like kneaded breasts, heaving, surging. I watch the clouds dancing to the rhythm of the Eastern wind, coquettishly hiding and revealing parts of the moon.

Seeing the remnants of Eros within nature even as I face Thanatos?

I feel within me a clarity about what it means for me to "serve water."

The world around me is dying, people killing other people in the name of religion, for *their* God. The world needs to be awakened. I think of the Vietnamese Buddhist monks immolating themselves, dying in the hope that others might wake up and live.

My task of serving water is to help awaken the world. I offer my life as a gift to others, the gift of someone who has tried to see as clearly as is humanly possible, who has sought to break down all the illusions we use to hide behind. By challenging God, judging God, and finding god to be just one more illusory brick, I remove the final illusion and give humanity a chance to see reality as it truly is. I am the reverse of Jesus. I do not die to forgive their sins. I die to awaken them to their sins, to help them realize the illusion of false hope, and thereby realize they must clean their own dust, find and bring peace to themselves and others.

There is no one to do it for them.

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But what if I am wrong? I hear others saying, "How pretentious. How arrogant. Such anger and cross words. Does he really believe at such a young age he has seen everything that is humanly possible? He was still such a young man." "What a troubled soul. Too bad. He had so much to offer. What a waste." "How can he compare his death to Jesus'? Jesus had direct communications with God. This troubled young man occasionally heard God's voice, but then dismissed it when God wouldn't continue to communicate with him. He hubristically demanded

more from God than God chose to give. He couldn't accept and understand the important role of suffering in our lives and reconcile that with God. He felt he could set the terms of communication. What a poor, lost soul."

Faith involves doubt, Tillich said. Are these doubts part of a reasonable faith? Am I so afraid that I want to back off the ledge, and see my doubts as part of a progression?

Or are these doubts honest impediments to faith? Yes, I'm afraid. . And so doubt is creeping in. Am I too young? Well, Alexander had conquered most of the known world by 13. Mozart wrote beautiful music at 4. Jesus was 33 when he died. Age is relative. Who knows that I wasn't placed here to see everything that I was supposed to see by my age?

Faith involves doubt. So does choosing a self-determined life. The difference is it is up to God to be perfect. God's not. God demands too big a stretch. And the consequences of that belief are creating a horrific human bondage to religion, that leads only to conflict and illusion

Though the moon is bright, I don't notice a place where the cobblestone are uneven, and lose my balance, stumbling and falling. I seek to brace the fall with my right hand, scratching it on the jagged surface of the stones.

The pain is muted. I've had my hands cut before. For a lesser cause. The fertilization of date trees. Now, I push forward for the fertilization of all humanity, so that my words may impregnate them with wisdom.

The giving of my life's blood for their growth.

I continue walking forward.

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Make the story your own.

My words document how I freed myself from each false god, each golden calf, each brick that entombs us, each womb in which we try to hide: our physical body with its lusts; our greedy grasping for material possessions; our



blind desire for social status and recognition; the empty promises of the adversarial legal system; the entangling bondage of family; untrustworthy, jealous friends; deceitful hypocritical false love; blinded nationalistic fervor; hateful and ignorant religious bigotry and persecution.

And now I'm freeing myself from the final ensnaring net, the last illusion that hides us in an enclosed prison of our own making—following God's law; believing in God. You, God, are the final womb from which I must emerge, the final brick which I must cast aside.

You, Judge, are being judged and found wanting. You cannot be all loving, all powerful, and all knowing.

If You are an all-powerful Controller, then You are limited in Your love and compassion; or in Your all knowingness, showing an ignorance, if You don't know what a mess it is down here.

If You are all-loving, then You are either powerless to effect changes, or are again ignorant of the suffering that is occurring.

If You are all-knowing, then You either are heartlessly watching this suffering without intervening, or You are powerless to change what's happening. If the latter, and You are both all-knowing and all-loving, but not all-powerful, then I'm sorry for You, too, because You, too must be suffering and crying at the carnage You see.

But, God, no matter which of these limitations You have, and You must have at least one, then, unfortunately, You cannot be God. Not God as I need God be, that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have said that You are. The One without a second. The Echad. No God but God. No, I'm sorry, but You, Judge, are being judged have been found wanting, and are stripped of Your title. Again, I'm sorry.

For You. And for me. For all of us.

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Isaiah's moving words, the resurrection of the suffering servant, the Word, these are just illusory pipedreams, words to keep people passive and waiting. Marx's opiates of the masses. You God did not create us. We created You. And do You know God, the deepest reason we create You? If You were all knowing, You would. It's not nurturance; nor strength. But because we need to have something, someone to fight against. Otherwise, we have to stare out at an empty, heartless, indifferent abyss that is even more frightening. Without You, there is nothing to yell at, resist, fight, or fight against. There is just the clarity of the nothingness. Behind me is family, nation, God. Before me is the abyss.

Beyond the womb of the Lord, there lies only the abyss.

And the leap....

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Across.

The air is damp. For all my courageous words, I do nothing, but continue to lie on the slightly moist ground. Leap where? There is nowhere else to go.

I close my eyes and imagine I am once again on Sinai, asking for the one word or phrase of wisdom that I most need.

The only word that comes up is "Across."

I must leap "Across" the abyss, wherever that takes me. Maybe this is my way of serving water. Not as a lawyer, like I once thought, but as a judge, of God. And in this courtroom, the standards are higher than any court of human law. The defendant needed to prove innocence not just beyond a reasonable doubt, but one hundred percent. This is a case where there is only black and white. If God is lacking in wisdom, power, and love in any way--if God does not manifest those qualities 100% of the time, then God is not God, and does not exist. Then God is only a figment of our imagination, a story of our hopes. God didn't create us; we created God. And as ennobling and sometimes majestic as that vision can be, the price of its illusory nature is too high.

You may be right, Ivan, that without God, everything is permitted. But with God, look at the carnage created in God's name. No, the price is too high, and someone needs to declare that message. I will be the one long wailing flute note, the piercing shofar blasts awakening us to the dangers around us, opening us to clarity and honesty, to helping us realize we need to take more responsibility and self-determination for our own fate.

I must take the leap across. That is for me, and for all of us to bear.

A cross.

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I feel both heavy and light. Heavy, like Atlas, bearing the weight of these feelings of hopelessness on my shoulders, the cross I carry for seeing too clearly. A weight that is too much for me to continue to hold. A cross that no one can help me carry. It's mine alone.

Yet light. Light that I'm nearing my final letting go, free of the last brick that weighs me, and all of us down. I am near the end of the story, the final words. Then nothing more will be left of me other than the light that may come from the words of my story.

My physical life will be over. But—and this is important—by my hand, my control, my choice. I won't allow my life to be taken at the whim of some illusory God. My death will be a supreme act of free will. I don't have the strength to stay alive, but I do have the strength to end my life.

I know that this world, as it currently exists, is not a world I can continue to live in. Yet my death will not be an act of selfish self-destruction, but a gift of myself to others, a gift given in love. May my life and these journals be a story that can help awaken others, to call attention to the suffering, to see it clearly, to see that they, our world is in deep trouble. May they be moved by my journey, stronger for having read my story, so they can continue to stay in the world while helping to make it a wiser, more compassionate place for all to live.

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I fall again. Another uneven stone? My own loss of inner balance?  
Fear? Darkness, as the moon is now hidden behind the clouds?

My death is a way to fulfill what I have longed to achieve in life, a way for me to be a loving person, to somehow show my love for all humankind. My hope is that I, as the secular Word, will leave behind a manuscript of words which can show how one person faced each test of life, words of loving wisdom for those still living on how they can free themselves to be truly human. May these words, this message, be heard by someone, somewhere, so I can at least save a remnant. May my death hopefully help my brothers and sisters realize that unless humans change their ways, there is no hope for us.

I am the canary in the coal mine. Canaries are used because their highly sensitive metabolism detects the presence of methane gas and carbon monoxide—which can lead to explosions or poisoning with greater exposure. Canaries demonstrated more visible signs of distress in the presence of small quantities of these dangerous substances than mice, who only showed limited struggle and mostly just squatted before they died. I am that sensitive canary, the one-eared deaf person, who hears more clearly than most others. For some reason, my psychic metabolism is more finely tuned than other peoples to the poisonous toxic aspects of life. Yet the threat is the same to all of us. Some pretend it doesn't exist. I was like that. Mery, who loved yellow, was a canary to me, helping me awaken, before she then gave up to drive a Mercedes.

Others, like mice, squat in immobile fear. But I sway and flutter, become visibly upset and distressed, before I fall and die. And that is not my weakness, but my strength, my gift to the world, a way to make the cave safer by warning of the clear and present dangers. Right, Justice Holmes?

Humanity must turn aside from its current course. People are killing themselves, literally by their actions, and symbolically by their blindness and lack of awareness. Their eyes are unseeing, their ears unhearing. They need

to see themselves and their demons, their dust, their poison—within and without—more clearly before they can decontaminate both. They have to strip away the illusions—just as I have-- that keep them from seeing they are living in a poisonous cave. Forgiveness is not enough. Change is needed, seeing and altering the mental entrapments we all fall into. I know. I've been there.

By my death—and my words--I can show them that unless they change, they are going to all be killed. I am the warning siren to help them awaken to strip away their illusions, the need to build a better, more loving world. The message may seem harsh, but it's being sent with love, for the benefit of all. May they awaken and choose life.

I am willing to suffer and die as the world's servant, to help save the world. This is how I serve water.

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I look up again at the darkened sky. I know the moon is there, full, alive, even though it is hidden. I know the sun exists and will rise in a few hours, even though I cannot see it.

I'm tired. I decide to lie down to take a brief rest, but before I do so, I try to unbutton my shirt, to take it off so I can scrunch it together to use it as a pillow. My hands are shaking and clumsy. I feel spastic, unable to undo even one button. I feel rage in me, that I should be so afraid; anger that I'm still wearing remnants of my past life, a Brooks Brothers button down shirt, khaki pants for my last day of work. I shout as I pull and rip at the shirt, making it tear and tatter as I strip it off, falling to the ground a third time, and this time cutting and bruising my knees. I pat away some of the blood with my shirt, then smile at the absurdity of my actions. I am within hours of my death, and I'm trying to clean a few bloody scratches on my body, still clinging to the world of the flesh.

I fold up the shirt, and place it under my head. I want a few moments of rest to regain my strength and will before continuing. I close my eyes. I feel

the freshness of the night air. For the first time in nearly a year, my senses are completely alive. The wind is cutting at my face. I imagine that I am lying in the back yard of my family's castle-like house in Kansas City. I smell the crispness of the night air, the honeysuckle and mint of my childhood. The smell of the freshly cut grass reminds me of the football field, and the joy and pleasure and aliveness of the pain of pushing myself to my limit, and of taking that strong body and fearlessly tackling and running and blocking, crashing into others for a purpose.

I hear my father's voice. I am in the breakfast room and looking out at the green lawn, the swing set. His voice is deep and strong, and he's telling my brother, sister, and me about how we've just tracked down the evil giant in Kokomo land. While the giant was sleeping, we tied his feet and arms with a special vine, and as he awakes, he starts bellowing and yelling, "Who has done this to me?"

He shouts this in a loud, scary tone. Even though I am the oldest, I rush from my seat and jump into my father's arms and feel him hold me. He gently strokes my hair. "Now, now, brave son, you have nothing to fear." He lets me go and, reassured, I retake my seat.

"Then the giant looks over and sees the three little children.

"'You, you little whipper-snappers, have done this to me. Why, that's not possible, when all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't capture me.'" He roars again, but this time the three clever strong children are now giggling as they hold hands and sing and dance around him. Soon, the King and Queen come from the castle with their vast army, and when they see what these three mighty children have done, they, and the whole country, break into applause, cheering the three children, and proclaiming them as the saviors of the kingdom."

When I open my eyes, I see that the sun is beginning to cast its first light onto the earth. I look down at my bloodied knees and bruised hands, my once pure and white Brooks Brothers shirt, now dirty and tattered. I feel tears in my eyes. Where is my father?

"Daddy," I whisper.

"Daddy, please hold me tightly in your arms. Tell me another story."

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The sun is beginning to rise. The moon has disappeared. No more reflected light. Daddy, the father is gone. It is only I, the son, who is left. It is time to arise and continue the final steps of my journey.

I look around at my papers that I drag everywhere with me. I think it's time to leave them behind, too. My legacy for those that follow. Grandpa's legacy to dad was financial security, but not intimacy; dad's to me was football games, but not emotional honesty; mine is to leave behind as honest a record of who I am as I am able.

As I start to arise, a dream floods me with clarity. I must have fallen asleep at some point. Out of all the people I could have invited into my mind; out of all the possible dreams, who should show up but Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe in diaphanous Chagall-like images.

"I admire your chutzpah, son," Reb Jonathan smiles toward Dr. Lisbet. "An amazingly articulate and impassioned Good Friday tirade. Thank you for sharing it with us." They both look down at me lying on the ground, their shapes amorphous, though clearly recognizable.

"What are you doing here? I didn't want to see you anymore. I'm not coming to your Passover party tonight. We've already said our good-byes." I try to focus my eyes. "And why are you smiling? What's with the mirth, the laughter? These are serious, life and death matters."

He reaches out and places a calming hand on my shoulder. At first I recoil from the touch, but then, when he keeps his hand there, I relax into it and appreciate it. Though I am nervous and frightened, they seem at ease.

"We've come to help you explore what you're feeling, and why you're feeling that way, independent of the 'external' truth of what you were saying."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you do, that's why you summoned us here. Let's assume there is some truth in everything you say." I just stare at him, wondering what is going on. He continues, "But let's assume that perhaps it's not the whole truth, or a hundred percent of the truth. Are you really willing to die for a partial truth?"

"But clearly I believe it is the whole truth."

"At least part of you does. But there is another part of you, as you know from our work together, that realizes that you have a tendency toward black and white thinking, and that's why Dr. Lisbet and I are here."

Dr Lisbet adds, "For example, how does that truth you've expressed integrate or jibe with your experience after you climbed Sinai, the very first thing you told us about when our counseling sessions began?"

"Exactly, it doesn't fit. Both can't be true."

"Again, we're asking you, independent of whether one or the other is 'more' true, would you be willing to look at yourself as the one who is experiencing these truths? That's all we're asking."

"Fine." I acquiesce in the dream. I'm tired. I'm comfortable lying down, and I'm willing to let them talk.

"Your journey has been about growing up, hasn't it, about increasing your self-reliance?"

"You always were good listeners. Right. And I'm proud of that. That little infantilized, dependent boy has left the castle, and each step has been an effort to remove the nets that ensnared me. The absent suckling breast of my



mother, or her surrogate wet nurses and maids, and then of Elizabeth. The sheltered womb of society, with its unjust laws and materialism. And now finally the false security of God, who asks us to submissively suckle at Her breasts."

"So," Dr Lisbet responds, "you see your life and journey as one upward spiral, a progression of increasing independence, self-reliance, personal independence, and responsibility, breaking through the bonds that ensnared you?"

"Exactly."

"And what does that give you?"

"It gives me me. I am no longer dependent on anyone. It give me freedom. It gives me control. Now, will you all please leave me alone?"

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The Rebbe strokes his beard for a moment, while still looking down at me smiling, and as he begins to speak his voice has a lilting, sweet quality to it.

"Once there was a little boy born in a beautiful castle, who would pick acorns with his brother and sister under the multi-colored foliage of the oak trees. He would pull those acorns in his little red wagon around the circular driveway in front of the white columns of his beautiful castle-home. In the winter, he would sled down the snow-covered street giggling with his brother and sister. His parents watched, hand in hand. In the spring the father would practice baseball with him, and the mother was the head of the PTA. There was a sign in the big circle of park in front of his house that said

'Caution, Children at Play.'

"Then one day, his world fell apart. His parents got divorced. The castle disappeared. His father disappeared for long stretches. He felt abandoned, helpless, alone. Then he was exiled by his mother from the new apartment, forced to leave his brother and sister. The illusion fell apart. No more signs to protect him. There was no one for him to count on but himself.

"So he built a self-protective wall, a castle within himself, becoming a Don Juan seducer, never allowing anyone to get close. Then he gave his heart away to a woman, Elizabeth Mery, who said she didn't want to be with him; and his best friend threw that information in his face.

"This little boy, now a young man, was forced to relive all over again the pain of feeling exiled, defeated, helpless, and abandoned. And he chose to cope with it by becoming more independent, stronger, self-reliant, leaving behind the ways of the flesh, and seeking the world of the spirit. Each rejection only made him tougher and stronger.

"So he rejects his family, so that they could never abandon him again. And he rejects all women so that they can never reject him again."

The Rebbe smiles down at me, kindly. "Do you see a trend in this story?"

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"But what about law school. In all your examples, I'm rejected first. I was accepted to law school,. I was the one who chose to reject it."

"A good rebuttal, counselor. Seeking the exception to disprove the rule. You might have made, and might still make a good lawyer! But let me ask you, how do you feel you would have done in law school?"

"You're right. I don't think I would have done well at all. I would have hated being buried in books of dry legalistic language in cold weather for three interminable years. I'd already grown to dislike the adversarial nature of the law, of the assumption that truth can rise up out of hostility and trickery. I was tired of being a puppet jumping through hoops for rewards like Mr. Red; and once my eyes opened to the pain in the world, the law seemed futile and meaningless. Ok, I wouldn't have made it. I would have done terribly. Without motivation, I'm like a balloon pricked by a pin. All the air goes out."

"So, you rejected it before going because you knew you wouldn't

succeeding." Dr. Lisbet notes, pointedly.

"Right. I just said that. Are you a lawyer or a psychologist? I feel like I'm being cross-examined" by two semi transparent floating creatures.

She doesn't change her rather severe expression, but continues. "And in the past, before Mery, with other girl friends, when you felt a girl might reject you, what did you do?"

"I'd never let it get that far. I'd always break up the relationship first, and beat her to the punch." Ah hah, I think. Just the same as law school, I reject first because I know how I'd fail. I don't say this to her but wonder if she knows what I'm thinking.

"Now you're grieving your Grandmother's death. You're angry with God because you feel God killed her, and will kill you, too, one day, too. So you're the new Underground Man, beating God to the punch, proving that you have free will, giving yourself an illusion of control. Dostoyevsky's character had to show himself he had free will. If he thought others expected him to act one way, he'd act the opposite just to prove his independence. But then, he wondered, if even that action could be determined and predicted ahead of time by others, his only act of free will was to kill himself. He was so afraid of not being free. It's the same thing with you. With all these rejections, with so much pain that is out of your control, with the inevitability of your death at some point, you'll take matters into your own hands, take your own life, and, by this last act, finally feel completely self-determining and in control."

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During this exchange, Dr. Lisbet has been in the foreground of the dream, and it is hard for me to see the Rebbe's face. I respond to her, "I guess that's one way to look at it. But I don't like where this is going. Is this my

equivalent of the Last Temptation of Christ? Are you here to tempt and challenge me with my own hubris and need for control?"

Suddenly the Rebbe's face drifts into the foreground, becoming clearer. His kind expression is no longer there, and he looks like an Old Testament prophet. His voice is harsh and stern. "So, you create an illusion of Nietzschean Uberman self-reliance. To keep from getting hurt by others, and feeling vulnerable, you become the exiler. You see the dust and limitations of everything, so reject it all. One blemish, one piece of dust, and it's poison. And what does that provide you?"

I know the question is rhetorical, and wait.

"It lets you feel in control. You coped with your past rejections by becoming more self-reliant. Now, to protect yourself against future pain, you find others' faults and reject them first. This lets you feel you are dependent on no one. No one can make you vulnerable, or hurt you anymore. Including God.

"Isn't that your goal? Isn't your quest really to be God of your own life?"

The Rebbe's face now seems to float over me. His face is amorphous, yet when he speaks, each of his features is clearly delineated. I want to swat him away, but each time I try to move, my body is paralyzed. When finally I am able to reach up, my hand goes through his face as if it isn't there.

"After all this time and therapy, you don't know me very well, do you? As long as others don't affect me, I don't want any control over their lives, or to curtail their actions. I don't need any omnipotent powers over others in general...just when they intersect with my life. It's true, there was a time when I wanted control so that my life could be as pleasant and happy as possible, all my needs and wants filled. Who wouldn't? But I don't want to be God of all. It's too much responsibility for others' lives. I can barely be responsible for my own life. But if I were God, and took a broader perspective

than just myself, I'd certainly do things differently, and not just for me. I would want God to do a better job that He's done so far. I would resurrect a different God with a different world. That's the God I was searching for, that I wanted to find. I'm certainly not that entity. But neither is God."

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Dr. Lisbet's face emerges from the Rebbe's and floats toward me. It is harsh, severe, and her tone pointed and sharp when she speaks. "Look at how you've imprisoned yourself in your search for freedom and control. Your Gethsemane is an isolation so severe, so pronounced, that your self-protection wounds you to your very soul. Look at yourself, now. Under the guise and rhetoric of freedom and control you're about to commit the ultimate act of self-destruction, and therefore loss of control."

Again, I try to thrash my arms to remove her face, but I am still unable to move, and they remain limp at my side. Then her face takes on a kinder appearance, and she even seems to smile.

"In any case, my friend, I don't completely believe you and all this nihilism and self-isolation. In spite of your rhetoric, you have a kind heart, and a sensitive soul. That is why you are so aghast when people treat each other with cruelty, selfishness and even hatred. Of course you would like to awaken them from their callousness. Indeed, there is a part of you that hopes your final act can do that. All we ask you to consider is whether that is your best piece of the puzzle. Is that really why you think you were put on earth, to end your life now at this young age."

I feel tearful, and in a weepy voice, almost whiny, I say, "But I so am alone. There is no one to help me. Everything seems dark and hopeless. Aren't we really ultimately dependent only on ourselves? What else is there?"

The Rebbe's face reemerges from Dr. Lisbet's. I expect them to look with comfort and solace at me, but instead their distorted faces look at each other and begin smiling, giggling, then breaking into hysterical laughter.

"What?" I ask, drying my eyes. Finally, my hands are allowed to move. Once again I've let myself be vulnerable, and rather than comfort, I get mockery. "What's with the smirks and giggles?"

They look at each other, as if each is waiting for the other to provide the answer that is so obvious to them. Finally, the Rebbe looks at me with a shrug, and in a mocking, heavily accented tone, repeats my words:

"Vat else is there? Vat, I ask, Vat! Aren't we really dependent only on ourselves?" He again bursts into laughter...at my expense, I am sure. As I watch, wings emerge from their bodies, and they begin to fly away towards the olive trees. The Rebbe pauses mid-flight, turns, and says, as he points to Dr Lisbet and then to himself, still chuckling, "And we, vat are we, chopped liver?"

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I awake smiling. Malachi, the end of the Jewish Bible. Messengers. Angels. Could God have sent these two characters to me in a dream to save my life? A combination of Old Testament prophets and borscht belt humor comedians?

The sun is rising. I no longer care about the son. I smile. Johannes, in his prime, would have a ball with this: the second cumming.

There are still traces of the ol sophomoric, reflexive humor. Am I procrastinating?

Beneath the joking and sharp words, what was the essence of their message? I think of what Dr. Lisbet taught me about dreams--that they are really parts of myself. I created them. It is as if, while I have been asleep, the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, as internalized parts of me, have been trying in their own way to heal and help me. Maybe to save myself, and give myself one last chance to think through my actions.

Still, at the deepest level, I believe they are just more illusions to hide behind. And, they, too, are abandoning me, leaving for Europe after

Passover. They are trying to trick me, to make me crazy like the Underground Man so that I don't know who I am anymore, or where my freedom and control lies.

God, I didn't ask to be born. It's not my fault I'm here. I had no control over that. And the world that I entered, once I emerged from the castle, is not a fair one, but one filled with suffering. Maybe my death won't help heal and awaken anyone. But no great loss to anyone, either. No one cares whether I take my life or not. I have no children to worry about. No real family. No real friends. I don't owe anyone anything.

As I begin to stand, to finish the final stations of my journey, I realize with some embarrassment that I have to what my nana would properly call "have a bowel movement." I find that absurdly humorous. Do I stop and relieve myself, then end my life, or do I die filled with shit?

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I find a restroom. Why? More procrastination? Fear? Doubts? As I sit and wait for the turd to come, I remember that one of my dad's joys was reading on the toilet. In this case, like father, like son. I riffle through the hundreds and hundreds of pages of my notes and journals. Words, words, and more words.

As I look back, I try to summarize, in just a few final words, what this story all means. Am I James Joyce writing the portrait of the spiritual seeker as a young man? Have I been writing a story of how I broke free from the limits and confines of family, country, religion? How I left the temptations of the flesh and fame and materialism behind, broke the nets, and now stand alone facing God?

I wonder how and why I was guided here. Have I been pulled forth and led by God toward the spirit, destined to be a light to show those who are still living unnecessarily hurtful and suffering lives, trapped by the snares of the world, hurting themselves and others? Could my writing be a beacon shining alight in their eyes to wake up?

Why do I need to die? To call attention to my writing and my message, like the Vietnamese monks who set themselves on fire? . My death underscores and underlines the value of the message. The way the world is going, I see no hope for humans unless they change course. If only they would heed and hear me. I think once again of the yellow canary giving its life so that others might live.

And, if my death does not help to awaken the world? If no one listens, if the pages of my writing flutter away and are never read by anyone? That is beyond my control. Like the canary, I am so sensitive that living in a world of such suffering is impossible for me. Either way, I see no choice but to exit.

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I feel I've finished, and start to get up and wipe myself. Then I realize I still may have more stool in me. I push. Nothing comes. I push harder, feeling my face turning red, my neck muscles bulging. Nothing. I get up, feel some movement, and sit down. Then a huge turd emerges. I find that frightening. How can I trust myself to know all that I'm thinking and feeling within me and whether there is hidden, unexplored "waste material," when I can't even tell when my bowel movement is complete?. And there wasn't just a little bit left. I was filled with lots of shit, even when I thought I was cleansed.

I look up at the heavens, amidst the sordid stench of defecation.

God, do You exist? Does any of this make any sense? Am I a piece of the cosmic puzzle; do the words of the crossword puzzle fit together? Is this my final piece, or is there more in me of which I am not aware?

I have removed everything around me to face You, all the distractions which keep us from You. But I don't feel I really know You completely, yet. And frankly, the part I know, I don't completely like. I feel anger. Cross words.

Worse, I don't even know if You even really exist, and I am raging against, imploring emptiness, the indifference of the universe.



Is my task to end this story, and my life, by showing the world that once you remove the distractions from God, you discover that there is no God? Is God just one more illusion, one more net that traps us and keeps us from being totally free, from growing up and throwing off our infantile ways? Maybe that has been my piece of the puzzle, to say that there is no one who creates the puzzle.

By doing this, I am killing God.

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I wipe myself again, and throw the paper into the toilet.

I smile at the irony of the image of myself as the Nietzschean Uberman killing God while in the toilet wiping himself on the way of the Stations of the Cross.

But I wonder, is that message, even if true, really helpful? Can we humans live without the illusion of a divine Presence Who imbues this crazy life with meaning and purpose? I think of Chekov:

A clever man says: 'This is a lie, but since the people can not do without the lie, since it has the sanction of history, it is dangerous to root it out all at once; let it go on for the time being but with certain corrections.' But the genius says: 'This is a lie, therefore it must not exist.'

Dare I think of myself as a genius? Is that the tall tree returning? Aren't I more the clever person? Or maybe the ant, too clever for my own good. Wouldn't I be better off in a Chekov play, or in O'Neill's *Iceman Cometh*, continuing to live with illusions? Is revealing God as an illusion really helpful to others? I thought I wanted to break through all illusions, but maybe it is too much for me, not something I can handle.

I imagine Grandpa Julius putting his arm around my shoulder. Well, son, there's an old saw about the young man who killed his parents, then threw himself on the mercy of the court because he was an orphan.

Maybe I'm not really going to awaken anyone, nor should I. Maybe my quest is just my quest and doesn't mean anything beyond me or even for me. I've been

too protected from life, and emerged from the castle, I simply am not able to handle reality. Others seem to do just fine, and their illusions and strategies work well enough for them. Maybe other people are just tougher. Maybe this all boils down to my being hypersensitive wuss, as dad always said. I need the Titanic not to sink. I can't handle pain and suffering. Maybe I'd do better if I'd learned from how others cope rather than trying to do everything myself. Maybe the nets are really an interconnected web that keeps everyone safe.

I guess I can't have it both ways. I can't both kill God, and then whine about how hard life is without the illusion of God. Either I am an orphan of the world, or an orphan of You, God. Either way, I am totally alone. But I am choosing that position. I don't want to be a child any longer. Of God, or of the world. If this is the price of adulthood, so be it.

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I wonder if there is any more poo in me as I get up and leave the toilet. Am I letting God off too easily by killing Him? After all, as the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet pointed out, there was the Sinai experience. There are moments when people are happy and loving and charitable. Isn't that God?

God, if you exist, as You watch me, listen to me, are You distressed? Are You a loving God? Then, why do you tease us? Why do you give us majestic moments....and then so much anguish?

Why do I keep going over these questions, recycling them? I'm still trying to find ways to excuse, explain God. Even if God is loving, and does hear my pain, there are plenty of good human listeners, lots of people who can weep and wail at other's pain. But if they can't do anything about it, then they are not God. A helpless, impotent God is not God.

I realize I'm once again treating God with kid gloves, afraid to hurt god, poor baby. I should confront God with anger. God is cruel and vengeful; and God is even more cruel if all god is, is an illusion. If I'm wrong, and God exists, then I won't let You kill me, cruel one.

I walk outside, with my manuscript. These are the words, after I'm gone, that will be left behind. Words that showed that I faced you boldly and challengingly, and fearlessly, not meekly like Jesus or Job or Jonah or Moses.

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What are You going to do about it, oh Mighty One, kill me? Your ultimate power. You, the author of the Book of Life and Death.

Where are you, Adonai Eloheinu, the Lord our God? Here is your City of Peace, but where is there a sign of peace! Even if humans don't kill humans, You kill us.

You killed my grandmother. "Natural causes? Cancer?" No, You. In the Holocaust, humans killed a million and a half children. Horrific. A Sin.

Yet why do You let one innocent child die of illness?

Also horrific. Not justified. A sin.

Why have You forsaken us?

You have Moses tell the people of Israel: "If you will be careful to do all these commandments which I command you to do: loving the Lord your God, walking in His ways, and clinging to Him, then the Lord will drive out all these nations before you... no man shall be able to stand against you."

What kind of Lord are You? Don't You realize that all humans are brothers and sisters, living on one little planet? To try to convince humans that we are all in this world together seems nearly impossible. Why should I have to try to convince God?

Don't pass the cup from me, God, I don't want You to take it away, for I drink it to the dregs.

I, catholic man, everyman, tied by You, pierced by You, sacrificed by You on an altar-- nailed to a cross, bleeding. Are we all nothing more than Offerings to Your might? It's where we all end up. Is that the price You require of us so that we might have our small portion of life?

Well, Scribe, Your price is too high, and I will not allow You the satisfaction of choosing the time and place of my death. I am going to beat You to the punch.

I won't let You take my life, Killer. I am going to write my story on my own terms.

Now who's in control, oh Powerful One? Are You shocked and hurt that I am removing that power from You, taking away that satisfaction from You? I choose my death. I voluntarily take my life. What are You going to do, God? Now You're powerless. In times past, You killed other people for cursing You. You threaten in Revelations to kill all those who don't strictly follow Daddy's rules. But not me, I beat You to it. Sorry, Powerless One, but now You're reduced to nothing. Now, I'm free, and I suck away your last bit of power by my death.

Do You hear me knocking? You don't deserve my respect. You don't deserve a capital letter.

In the name of the father, son and holy ghost, blessed is our lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive; from thy bounty through christ our lord. Amen.

It's late now. Across the City, the Shabbat candles, wax dripping, grow dim and their light is about to vanish. I close my eyes. I imagine my parents and grandparents lighting the candles at the start of Shabbat, hands over their eyes. I then hear the blessing over the children. Is the image based on a real memory? An imagined place in the heart?

Where are they now, as the final light disappears?

God, if you exist, can you see my tears? Via Dolorosa, the "Way of Grief," "the Way of Suffering". Tears for me. For you. I can't imagine this is how you hoped your creation would use its free will, fighting, greed, so much human-created suffering. I embrace Your sadness. But it's not just our fault, is

it? If you exist, you really screwed up, too. And therefore, from my pinnacle,  
I spit down on you even as I embrace you. Tears and spit mingle.

Serving water.

I remove the last brick, and open the door...

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t's dark in the church. I can't see anyone.

And it's dark within me as well.

Something has broken. Friday night the Word and words died.

Now, it is midnight of Easter Sunday. I am in the Holy Sepulchre, attending a Greek Orthodox Service, about which I know nothing.

Whether my eyes are open or closed makes no difference, so I close them.

I see myself climbing a ladder from Bethel. The ladder leads to an open door. I walk through the door, and no one is there.

No faces. No bodies, just one large throne, empty.

There is a table of showbreads before the throne and seven bowls, three on each side of a large bowl placed in the center. The bowls on each end--numbers one and two-- are filled with blood, blood that will once again turn the rivers red. The first plague.

The next bowls on each side--three and four-- are filled with darkness. Darkness that is used to cause anguish in our human soul--the ninth plague.

The two bowls next to the center--numbers five and six--are filled with foul sores: boils, leprosy-- the fifth plague

There is one bowl left in the center, the seventh, the



largest one. The one bowl that is central, yet hidden, mysterious, frightening

I image it to be the bowl of death, the tenth plague, the killing of the first born. My brother is dead. I am now the first born. It is calling to me.

I can see there is something in it. I look closer. I hear a buzzing-like rustling and then it's as if I'm attacked. A non-sensical, multi-syllabic word leaps out at me. Looking over the bowl, I see a figure on the throne, reading from the Book of Life. More words start to emerge from the central bowl, like swarms of locusts, or wasps droning. The words are engulfing me. My breathing feels labored, as if I'm gasping for air. Ruach, air, that which is supposed to bring creativity and order in the book of Genesis, is receding.

The words, Logos, which according to Heraclitus and the Greeks, govern all things are swarming out of control. The Logos, which, according to the Book of John, is supposed to breathe on us, and infuse us with life...those words are strangling me.

At first, I try to fight off the shapes, forms, and spaces but They become larger and more intricate, entangling my arms, crushing me beneath their weight. Exhausted, I resign myself to their will.

The sound grows louder and I clearly hear a voice:

En arche en ho  $\bar{\text{lo}}\text{gos}$ .

In the beginning was the Word.

I open my eyes and mainly see darkened shadows. My eyes are drawn to the center of the church where there is a row of candles. At first there are just a few that are lit, and I'm reminded of lighting the Chanukah candles in my little room. From the

darkness, light. The Festival of Lights then, Chanukah and Christmas.  
A festival of new light, now.

In a slow, ritualized walk, the lights begin to move, and I realize several individuals, royally attired--deacons and clergy?--are marching in ceremonial fashion. The Archbishop's head is covered with a crown of jewels. Shadowy shapes move toward the walking procession of candles. Flames of the resurrected Christ are passed as each figure lights a candle.

The Archbishop side steps an impression in the floor which marks the half-way point between the site of the crucifixion and the site of the resurrection.

As more candles are passed, flickering light increasingly fills the church. People start singing, and I only recognize an occasional word, far fewer than at a Hebrew service. The candles remind me of the children killed in the Holocaust. I imagine that mocking, impotent sign, "Caution, Children at Play" and I am filled with despair and, though embarrassed start to sob softly.

A fat old lady standing next to me, whom I hadn't seen in the dark, unbidden, puts her arms around me. I feel hugged, and don't pull away. Exhausted, I let myself be held, swaying, hypnotized by the flames, seeing shadowy forms taking shape.

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At the entrance of the door is an Israeli soldier, armed. He looks like Lieutenant Judke, but I know that it can't be because Judke is dead. His wife told me last week when I called to wish them a Happy Passover "Killed in an ambush while on patrol, protecting his country." Now, he is replaced by another Israeli soldier, guarding a

mass.

I look closely at the soldier and see that he is much younger than Judke. As I watch him, he puts his gun down, and offers his lit candle's flame to the candle of a small Arab girl. The girl looks uncannily similar to the little beggar who crossed my path in the Old City. Is she here to beg, too? As I watch her candle burst into flame, I realize that seeing a Jewish soldier give a Muslim Palestinian Arab girl a candle of the resurrected Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre makes me feel, for the first time in a long time, a sense of hope, and even some happiness.

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Voices are singing, in Greek I imagine. Though I can't understand the words, they sound and feel to me like Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh. Holy holy holy is the Lord God Almighty.

I continue looking around the room, past the Israeli soldier, the Arab girl. I feel the old woman's arms around me, holding me, the song drifting through me. The Arab girl offers her candle to a Hassidic rabbi, who resembles the rabbi I spoke to in Mea Shearim, and who, to my surprise, receives the flame, though carefully and gingerly, so as not to draw too near to and touch a female. As he does so, he catches my eye and smiles in recognition. When his candle bursts into flame, the room grows still brighter.

He is standing next to a middle aged couple holding hands, gazing lovingly into each other's eyes, and cradling an infant who is only a few days old. As the rabbi shares his candle with them, the darkened forms of the couple become clearer, and I see in them my parents reunited, holding my older brother in their arms.

They offer their candles to Mery, singing with her eyes closed, her red hair darkly glowing and softly framing her face. I hear a song in my mind as the minister from Glide Church leads us:

Every time I feel the spirit,  
moving in my heart, I will pray.

Upon the mountain, when my Lord spoke,  
out of God's mouth came fire and smoke.  
Looked all around me, it looked so fine,  
till I asked my Lord if all was mine.

Jordan River, chilly and cold,  
it chills the body but not the soul  
There is but one train upon this track.  
It runs to heaven and then right back.

Every time I feel the spirit,  
moving in my heart, I will pray.

Mery gives a candle to Richard, who shares it with Mac, who offers his candle to a group of men from Sixth Street. The old men touch their candles to the candles of an old, stooped couple.

I notice that while the old couple reaches out with one pair of hands to receive the flame, their other hands press into the middle of each other's back, trying to hold the other erect. I look at their faces, weathered, flawed, bewildered by life, but somehow still jubilant. Their faces glow in candle light reflecting the blue eyes of my grandmother.

A young baby wails, and is quieted by a discretely nursing mother. The mother who never nursed me now is---in my heart; all is forgiven.

I look across the church, and see thousands of candles. I close my eyes and think back to the first night of Chanukah, the darkest night of the year, and how my arrival here today began with a single candle that night. That lone candle, on Chanukah, to bring some small light to

the darkness, represents for me a crucial such from Johannes' use of candles for seduction. Same object, yet such a different intention. Such a change in perspective.

The old woman on my right still has her arms around me. I am no longer afraid of my body, disdainful of it, no longer afraid to let it be touched and held.

I reach out, and putting my arm around whoever is on my left, feeling myself gently swaying, trusting, holding and being held. The tears come again, and this time I am not ashamed.

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I once again see, feel and hear the letters and words from the seventh bowl. Their sound is much softer this time, as they flow and glide past and through me like a peaceful meandering river, serving s life affirming water, as it bathes the banks and brings life to all it touches.

Past the banks of the river I see a field which has been barren and dusty turn green and fresh, and little children begin dancing on the grass to recorder music, surrounded by blooming, festive plants. Two boys at one end are throwing a football back and forth. The ox is eating straw with the lion. Humans are living in brotherhood and peace with each other. The Holy City Jerusalem has descended from the skies, and no more will nation lift up sword against nation.

God's ways are finally made clear to me. The violence of the Old Testament, the cruelty of the Book of Revelations, God's harshness, our human pain and suffering are revealed as part of the Divine Plan to bring about this idyllic community of love and understanding. Everything is going to work out.

The words-- no longer needed-- suddenly vanish, and I am cast

back again, standing before the figure on the throne, reading from the Book. The Figure closes the Book of Life, then walks over to the seven bowls and drinks them to the dregs. The wrath of God vanishes forever.

I hear trumpets, see flashes of lightning, peals of thunder.

I see swords turn into plowshares, wolves and lambs, calves and lions lying down together.

There will be no more poor, no more suffering. No more begging children, no more dying discarded old men. No more terrorist, no more refugees, no more dead soldiers. The answer to the seventh bowl has been found, a completely good, pure essence. Meaning will fill the world. God exists, and is exactly the all loving, all knowing, all powerful God for whom I have been searching.

I feel my personal and spiritual quests converge. The Word and the world are no longer in flux.

The Figure on the throne gets up and begins walking toward me, incorporeal. Male? Female? Both and more. I bow in honor, and as I bow, I feel the breath and spirit of God on and in me. My form and breath disappear into and become part of the Figure's essence.

A wave rejoining the ocean. Serving water. Composed of water. The same. I, and the Father/Mother are One. We are all One. Our breaths join as One.

The arms of the woman next to me gently draw away. I reopen my eyes, and see, within and between all the lines and wrinkles, a translucent glow in her face. Her joy, her rapture, mirror my own revelation. It's like looking at my own reflection in a gently windswept lake. I throw my arms around her, and give her a kiss on the

cheek. She starts to jump back, then laughs, blushing like a teenager, and smiles a huge gapped-tooth grin.

Easter, the first Sunday after the first full moon follow the equinox. The resurrection, the dawning of new life, a new beginning, a universal embrace. Sunlight is filling the Holy Sepulchre.

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he long slow note of the shofar sounds, piercing the night. "This is to signal birth and new beginnings," I say, as I place it in its holder.

"The Havdalah candle has just been dipped into the wine twenty-four hours ago, ending our Jewish Shabbat, and the Days of Awe have are entering to fill its space. From one holy day to another. "Rosh Hashanah, the birth of the universe, a time for creating order out of chaos, the start of the new year. The Gates of Heaven are opened."

In the beginning. . .the earth being unformed and void. . .and God said let there be light and separated the light from the darkness..."

The moon is new, and dark. As I run my hands through the soft brown earth I can barely see, by the distant light of the myriad of stars, the dark hillsides of Safed, sitting like shadowed undulating waves.

Safed, from the Hebrew word tzofeh, meaning overlook, high elevation, an ideal place from which I can view the havdalah braid of the candle that is my life, and see, from the present, the intertwining of my past and future. From the nexus of present, catching up with the results of my past, and looking ahead to try to envision how I would like to be a cause of my future.

"As your Shabbat ends," Reverend David Noel says to me, "our Sabbath begins. Our holy days are linked hand in hand. When I met with Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet in Jerusalem, he taught me a lovely saying he prays at the end of the Havdalah service: 'Into your arms, your loving arms, I commend my soul.' I instantly recognized this from Luke 23:46 In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum, Jesus' last words on the Cross which also are in Psalm 31:5: Into your hands I commit my spirit. Of course, Jesus as a Jew would have known



that. So many linkages between us. And in three days, we celebrate St Francis of Assisi day." He turns and speaks to Al Hazrumi. "Did you know he opposed the crusades and went to live with Muslims for five months to understand their path of prayer."

"Ah, my brother, more connections of tolerance and faith." Said Al Hazrumi responds to Reverend Noel. Then, turning to me, "Your Rosh Hashanah with its new beginnings is similar to our Ramadan, the most venerated sacred lunar month of the year, when our holy Qur'an was revealed. When Ramadan approaches, we Muslims gather in an open place and look toward the sunset, where a new crescent moon may appear shortly. Like your Days of Awe, it is a time for us of fasting, prayer, self-accountability, inner self-awareness, and a focus on spiritual cleansing and strengthening our reconnection and dedication to Allah." Al Hazrumi nods at me and Reverend. "I am happy at the strange twist of fate, and Allah's ways--Allah akbar, God be praised-- that allowed me to end up here sharing this time with you." Al Hazrumi looks at the food. "I have also completed my fourth prayer session, and am starving. May we eat?"

Akishige makes an encircling gesture, as if gathering us all together "Form is the emptiness and emptiness is the form." He then leads us in a silent meditation, after which we all reach into the fire and pull out the foil wrapped corn that has been cooking.

"Do you know that this is also a sacred time for Hindus, the celebration of the birth of Gandhi in two weeks. He was born just over a hundred years ago." Shakti Prem Devi reaches in, carefully, and pulls out an aluminum wrapper. "He was a man of great peace, always respecting his 'enemy' and seeing the non-duality, Advaita, even as he created non-violent disobedience, ahimsa. He understood well the different planes of reality and how to integrate them."

"Yes, Gandhi seemed always to come from an understanding of the great

cosmic void--xujing--a centered, calm place, before he attempted any 'dongjing' action blending yin and yang." As Lin Zscho reaches for his corn, he says, peacefully, "It's fascinating, isn't it? The spiritual Oneness of Prem Devi's Advaita non-duality; and the Jewish and Christian Bible beginning with the void. Then, from the void, from non-duality, come light and dark. Thousands of miles away, different cultures and times, yet how similar to our Chinese Taoist void, xu-jing, from which emerges separation--the yin light and yang darkness."

I'm rapidly taking notes. So much wisdom and clarity. Too much information and convergences. I look up, feeling a glow within me. "Rosh Hashannah, a time for new beginnings. It represents both the start of a new year, and shana' meaning change and transformation. What a blessing that we can sit here as a group, during these Days of Awe, to see if we can create a communal integration, a multi-religious 'holy' day, reflecting our different particulars, seeking universal reconciliation, seeing the interconnection of all life and religions."

"Ugh. I don't know how much of this harmony and light I can handle"

Jacques Sorenson is speaking animatedly, throwing his hands into the air. "For me, the void is an existential abyss and nothingness. You all make it sound like it's a lovely place from which light emerges--either from God," he looks over at Reverend, Al Hazrumi, and me, then at Prem Devi, "or by some natural process of creation" he glances at Lin Zscho and Akishige. "All of you have too much focus on light and harmony and oneness. It's just one big dog eat dog world. Of course, I am thankful that some of us, like Gandhi, and of course the present company, are able to create themselves into more authentic, wiser people. But it's only by our own human Herculean efforts." He takes one of his hands and thumps his chest. "At least I can agree with Lin Zscho and Akishige that there is no Prime Mover, no God in the sky that creates the light." He smiles, as he reaches toward the fire to retrieve an ear of corn. "Perhaps it is really Prometheus we have to thank for this light!"

I watch as the light reflects off the faces of each of us sitting around the fire, as we begin to eat the corn. It feels like a magical blessing to be in the company of such wise individuals who, through a strange twist of fate and circumstances, have all come to Safed to explore Jewish mysticism, and each other's traditions.

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I rub the butter over the ear of corn and sprinkle some lime, chili powder, and hot sauce. Then I add a touch of salt, a bit of parmesan cheese, and just a tad of mayonnaise, and take my fingers and smooch all the condiments into the crevices between each kernel. I recently read in the Jerusalem Consular Chronicles that just over a hundred years ago, there was a scarcity of corn in Safed. Now, we are sharing a feast together.

As I bite in, I am struck by the corn's natural sweetness, and the smokiness of the charred kernels. The coolness of the mayonnaise balances and serves as a counterpoint to the chili's heat. There is a crunching sound as I bite into the kernels, yet then they become soft and tender. I think of the sabra, the Israeli cactus, prickly on the outside, but soft on the inside.

I look at my companions joyfully eating, and say "Let me tell you a story that I heard last year from Reb Jonathan, a teacher of mine. It's about Sukkot, the ingathering festival that occurs right after Yom Kippur, where we are instructed to live outdoors under a frail structure, a sukkah. He pointed out that the Zohar, the foremost book of Jewish mysticism, explains that the sukkah generates such an intense concentration of spiritual energy, that the divine presence actually manifests itself there in a similar way as it did in the Garden of Eden. During Sukkot the souls of the seven shepherds of Israel -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and King David -- actually leave Gan Eden to partake in the divine light of the earthly Sukkot (Zohar - Emor 103a).

"The Garden of Eden, according to Jewish tradition, is a place where

worthy souls, having passed from this world, enjoy the light of the divine presence as they await entrance to the World to Come -- the post-Messianic age (Talmud - Shabbat 152b. I still don't really understand the vagaries of each of your journeys enough to know how it is that you ended up here, in Israel, in the hold city of Safed, at this sacred time of the year, but I am so thankful you are here. I feel I've been given a glimpse of what that Garden of Eden world looks like during my time here with each of you."

I look at the wise elders surrounding me, watching them eat, occasionally looking up and nodding. "This feels like a miracle to me. Last year at Sukkot, I listened to Reb Jonathan during his 'fall preview' as he discussed sukkah-- a time to be under the stars, in a flimsy shelter, to remind us of the impermanence of life, and that God is our true home. We are allowed to invite guests, Ushpizin, into the structure. I was weak, depleted, and with a bandaged hand, and felt no desire to be around anyone, or invite anyone into a Sukkah. This year, I'm amazed at how the universe provides. Even though Sukkot is still almost two weeks away, look at who has been invited."

"We have a similar story, though without the heaven." Wang Lin Zscho puts his ear of corn down long enough to speak. "In China, we honor the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, Taoist poets who lived and shared with each other in ancient times. That has always been my ideal, too. Now, please, tell us more about your seven wise men."

"They are like seven holy shepherds. Each one of these Ushpizin, corresponds to a fundamental spiritual pathway, *sefirah*, through which the world is metaphysically nourished and perfected, according to the Zohar. For example, Abraham represents *chesed*, love and kindness; Isaac represents *gevurah*, restraint and personal strength; Jacob represents the integration of *chesed* and *gevurah*, called *tiferet*, beauty and truth."

"Ah, that sounds like our yin and yang, soft and hard, light and dark, yet integrated into harmony with each other" Lin Zscho adds.

"That's perfect." I reply. "The next three sefirot have the same sense: Moses represents victory; Aaron, his brother, represents receptivity to divine splendor; and Joseph represents the integration of victory and receptivity in holiness as the spiritual foundation. Finally the last sefirah is represented by David, who stands for the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth."

My eyes travel over each of their cherished faces. "Truly, with heartfelt gratitude, I am so thankful that you all are here. I feel in some mysterious way you are helping establish the kingdom of heaven on earth, to create a greenhouse for the next evolutionary steps for our species toward a kinder, wiser, more compassionate human being. I feel blessed to be a participant observer."

Akishige bows silently toward me, then says, "More parmesan, please."

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I feel like I've found here in Safed, for the first time in my life, an older brother. Actually several. And older sisters. All the members of our little spiritual ecumenical community qualify, all being more experienced in life and wiser than I am.

Although I've always said I longed for an older brother, in the past, every time one came close, I reflexively pushed him away, seeing all his flaws, and resenting him for his strengths. Richard at Stanford, Mr. Suck Butt Peter in the Rebbe's class. I was like Jacob, struggling to grab the heel of Isaac, and pull myself out first. I wanted to be the best, in the spotlight, at the center.

Maybe it's more accurate to say I've finally allowed older brothers--and sisters-- to enter my life. I am now content to be a part of the group, am by far the youngest, and I'm definitely not its leader. As I told Elizabeth, when I thought of music as a career, I could only see myself as the leader, the

conductor, the maestro. Now, I can just be one of the flute players (first flautist?). Joke, sort of.

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Said Al Hazrumi, a Sufi, is a magnificent whirling dervish dancer. He pointed out to us that the origin of the blue doors we see everywhere in Safed is Muslim. Kabbalists now say the blue doors both symbolize heaven, and help point us toward God, and also help ward off and confuse evil spirits. He was attracted to Safed because Sufis, like Kabbalists emphasize mystical experience over book learning, not unlike his Zen buddy, Akishige. Akishige is our Zen curry/hummus aficionado, who also has traveled to and lived in Tibet. He told me "Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures, no reliance on words."

Our Benedictine monk, David Noel, is a monastic, advocating the practice of gratefulness. He came to Israel to study and Dead Sea Scrolls, came to Safed for a week, and has stayed for two months. He asks us to call him "Rev David." He also is fond of gently mocking me and all my journals and daily writing. He pointed out to me, as have Said Al and Akishige from their own traditions, that John the Baptist, and Jesus, both claimed you can't concretize in words the deeds and actions of life's inspiration. The Word lives in living.

Shakti Prem Devi, an Indian scholar, who has studied Balinese Hinduism and tantra, as well as at Dakshineswar in Calcutta, is a devotee of Ramakrishna, and is our only woman elder. "Do those names have meaning?" Jacques inquires.

"Yes, they each do. Shakti is divine goddess energy; Prem is love and affection; and Devi is heavenly, divine one." She laughs, "Clearly my parents put no expectations on me!"

Jacques Sorenson, who asked the question, smiles, too. He describes himself as an existential humanist activist. He has the requisite goatee, beret, and gaunt, beleaguered look. Jacques's best friend, ironically, is Wang

Lin Zscho, a spry, gleeful tai chi master, who studied at the Shaolin Temple at the Yellow Mountain in Northern China. He continues teaching me in his early morning practice what Dr. Lisbet began in her Jerusalem class. But it is Jacques who has become his best pupil.

And then there's me. I'm not exactly sure either how to categorize myself, or what my role is. Maybe I should call us the six and a half sages of the Safed bamboo grove. I'm still very much a work in progress. I guess you could say I'm the one that helped bring the group together. For some reason, it seems that in mystical Safed, I feel quite comfortable with these six. As soon as I saw them, I was drawn to each one, and wanted to hear their story. What journey brought them here? Eventually, I thought they should all get to know each other, and we began having regular gatherings.

Why did I choose this group, and not fellow Jews here? I think I'm drawn to outsiders, free spirits, who understand their tradition, but want to learn from other view points. I'm learning most either from these non-Jewish "sages"; from rereading my notes from the Rebbe; or from those who are Jewish, but physically long gone, like Reb Luria and other sages who are buried in Safed.

As I said, I'm still a work in progress.

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I feel a bit like when Dad called me in to be a pitcher at one of my Little League games. That wasn't the position I normally played. Balls whirled by me, but the shortstop, first baseman, and outfielders made dazzling plays. I was out of my league, but I was being supported by the others surrounding me. It's the same now. I feel like I'm here just to witness and learn.

When I'm asked a question about Judaism, I either riffle through my notes from the Rebbe, or ask our Jewish representative here, the received and pervasive spirit of the Kabbala, which I read and study daily, and which permeates this city. The text, the Zohar, was reportedly composed here in Safed by the second century Rebbe Shim'on Bar Yocahi, who wandered these hills.

(Though probably written down, some say, by the 13th century Moses de Leon in Spain). Plus I have Rebs Sholom Alkabetz, Joseph Caro and others as guides.

I have appointed myself as the faithful secretary or scribe of the group. The irony is not lost on me that in my role, I take notes, from Sufi, Zen, Christian, Hindu, Taoist, and existential individuals who say there is no use in trying to transit the ineffable through writing. From the Jewish perspective, Reb Luria told his followers that his message couldn't be transmitted through writing. He didn't try to systematize or record insights in any way; "Impossible!... for all things are interrelated. How shall I express what my soul has received?"

But though it may not be possible, I still try, for my own benefit, if no one else's. Who knows, perhaps this written "finger" pointing to the moon may be of help to others along the way.

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Besides being a scribe for the sages, I've also trying to finish addressing, putting together, and chronicling as coherently and honestly as I can the task that John began in Jerusalem nine months ago, catching up with my past, and hopefully creating a foundation for the future. All while seeking to live a relatively peaceful, contemplative, reflective rhythm in the present.

I feel this phase of writing and reflection is coming to an end. The nine month journey which John began is nearing completion, and I'm ready to end this phase and give birth to whatever new phase life brings. Of course I have some question about what to do with all this writing and reflection about my journey.

Has this just been a task of questing and self-discovery for me alone? Is there any way my sharing of this journey with others could be helpful and have any value for them, or is it too idiosyncratic? I guess I still don't know what my piece of the puzzle is, either to create, or to uncover.



My creative writing professor finally wrote back after reading my play. He said, to his great surprise, given where I started in his class, that I may have some talent. Could I see myself as a writer, is that my gift, the way I can contribute? I'm not clear. But my sense is I'm still too young. Rilke said if he'd had the self-control and patience, he wouldn't have written or published anything until he neared the end of his life, when he would have written the one, wise, summative poem.

So, maybe it's best to think of this writing as for myself only--a personal project--a way to use words to help make me flesh, that I might understand and thereby live. This is "writing for the drawer"--something to put aside. Maybe one day, this journal can be offered to others. Perhaps even my older self, as an example of how I tried to "birth" and evolve a new me.

I'll let that older self decide what contribution, if any, this journal might make to his understanding of himself when he was just a young man, seeing the world and himself as if for the first time, trying to make sense of it all. I'll also leave it to him to decide whether it is something that might be worth sharing with others.

As I write this, Joie has come up to visit, and is singing Lech Lecha. This beautiful song describes a journey going forth from the house of the father, to a place you do not know. "And you shall be a blessing."

May our journeys be a blessing. We are always, all of us, going forth to new places, to places we do not know. When I hear her sing, sometimes that soulful voice gladdens me so much that I begin to cry. Yes, I still cry up here. But she's told me that's ok. Joie says her grandmother told her that tears are really the sound of our heart breaking open, and that's the way some people sing to God.

This week I saw a little boy, maybe ten years old, in a wheel chair, pushed by his mom. They reached a mild downhill slope, and she began to jog down it. She was a little heavy set, wearing jeans, 40ish, singing as they picked up

speed. They reached the bottom, maybe a total of 15 yards. She slowed down. Stopped. I can't see the boy's face or his reaction during the "descent." But when they get to the bottom, he turned around and looked at her over his left shoulder, his eyes nearly covered by a big baseball cap, and gave her a huge smile. I cried at his courage and joy in a situation that certainly wasn't 'his choice'; and at her dedication.

It was like watching a beautiful flower of love opening to the sun.

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One thing our group here agrees on is that there are many paths up the mountain, and I continue to struggle up. Said Al Hazrumi regales us with Rumi's poems noting that we all fall off the path a thousand times, the trick is to get back on the path a thousand and one times. I'm working at it, tears and all.

Come, come, whoever you are.  
Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.  
It doesn't matter.  
Ours is not a caravan of despair.  
Come, even if you have broken your vow  
a thousand times  
Come, yet again, come, come.

The season is changing. There is a coolness in the air.

In Kansas City, the oak leaves will be dazzling in their multi-colored glory. At Stanford, the maple tree will be bright red.

Then they will lose their leaves.

There is a time for every season.

A time of endings.

Rosh Hashanah, the sounding of the shofar, a time of new beginnings.

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I recall a dream I had last night. Or the night before. I'm in Kansas city, on the plaza, in Grandpa Dave's namesake high end women's clothing store. At first it's a happy dream, seeing Grandpa Dave wave at people as they come into his store. Mom said he was considered the "Mayor of the Plaza." But then I

walk to an exclusive jewelry store around the corner. As I enter I see all the rich society matrons with their idle hours browsing through the shop, talking about how lovely this sapphire necklace is; wouldn't that diamond pendant look elegant around my neck; can't you just imagine this emerald vase over my fire place. Names of stones flash through my mind: sardius, jacinth, variegated agates. I start shouting at them, "Can't you see you're worshipping false idols, false prophets of Baal; golden calves; deceiving yourselves, all of you here, hiding behind your affluence. Stop worshipping these calves. You're blinded by these stones." I feel I must show them the error of their ways, their callousness toward those who are suffering.

I want to destroy the stones, for their sake, to unblind them to what could be: God's vineyard. In my mind, I hear a verse of Isaiah: "It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people and grinding the face of the poor?" declares the Lord. I run through the store pushing over the stones, smashing the cash registers as a way to overturn the tables of the money changers, throwing gold, diamonds, and other hard rocks through the windows. "There's more to life than these stones. These rocks are pure vanity. All of you have forsaken the Lord."

I wake up in a start, and jot this dream into my dream journal. I don't disagree with any of it. I feel a righteous anger toward those seeking wealth, shielding themselves from the suffering of the world. Then I take a few breaths and imagine how Dr. Lisbet might interpret the dream. On the surface, it is clearly about rejection of the materialism of Kansas City. But if I'm all parts of the dream, then I must also worry about that aspect of me that still hides behind material possessions. And what about Grandpa Dave in the dream? I'm trying to make "those people" the other. But these people are probably the same ones who buy clothes in Grandpa Dave's store. Why wasn't his shop where I

ranted? Is it because I love Grandpa Dave and would never do anything to hurt him?

Does this mean I should try to think of those with whom I disagree not just as "other" but with some compassion, even as I disagree with them—justice and mercy?

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I put my dream journal aside, lie back, and feel the warmth of the sun on my body and I know that I am being bathed in holy light. As I walk toward the Mount of Olives, it's as if I've just emerged from a purifying body of water, a mikvah, a baptism, the Sea of Galilee. I feel that I'm seeing the world with the eyes of a baby that has just been birthed from the womb of life, and everything is fresh, new, exciting.

I lie down under my favorite tree, place my flute, my drawing pad, and my journals around me, lie back, and watch the sun's light filter through the branches. The olive tree, a tree of peace. The tree of life, a vision of our shared heritage on earth, all philosophies and theologies. A tree of life, the Torah, the mystical Kabbalah. I think of Jonah receiving shelter under a tree that he had not planted or cared for. Yet he didn't appreciate it until it was taken away. I remember Dr. Lisbet talking about those who have been given more blessings than they have received. I want to appreciate all the blessings around me. I want to be a fountain of blessings.

I start singing the Modeh Ani, the morning prayer. What a glorious time to give thanks. I feel that I am truly waking up anew. Gratefulness that I am awakening. The first light of the sun is just beginning to rise over the city.

Easter Sunday. A new birth. Rebirth.

The second day of Passover. Counting the Omer, in the wilderness. The sefirot--divine energy-- for the week is chesed: love. Chesed as context for all that happens this week. The divine energy of today is also chesed.

Chesed within chesed. Love as context, love as content.

Love love. How easy to be grateful for love.

"Who gives the cock understanding to distinguish between night and Day." Cock, rooster, in Hebrew also means heart. I want to have my heart learn to see differentiate more clearly between night and day, to see the dust that I need to clean away, so that I can develop greater understanding and wisdom.

I see and feel a dazzling shaft of sunlight coming through the trees.

Unbidden, my own shaft of light, is starting to rise. My "rooster" greeting the morning? My heart? I smile to myself. For some reason it seems natural and ok, part of a birth, a new arising. I close my eyes and feel the warmth of the arriving sun on my face, as if for the first time. The miracle of a new day.

And God said let there be light and there was light. Inner and outer.

I feel the pleasurable sensations in and on my body. Another miracle.

I remember my exercise board: "Orgasm was in this place and I did not know it." I am amazed, as I feel my shaft of light yearning skyward, that I also simultaneously feel a deep well of wisdom and love and understanding filling me--the capacity for empathy and caring that is within all of us, within me-- that I did not know.

I have no need to climax. There is no goal. I'm just happy to be re-finding my body, or to be willing to allow it to re-find me.

"Who gives the cock understanding to distinguish between night and day." I repeat each word slowly, feeling the meaning in my heart as a tingling energy radiates throughout my body.

I pick up my flute once again and begin playing. The notes emerge, sit for a moment in the wind, then pass away. I don't need to hang onto them. I let them go. Their brief burst of color in the now is enough. Dayenu.

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Prem Devi asks, "After the long note, do those additional sounds of the shofar have any particular meaning?"

I must admit to some pride when they ask me a question. I have been



ruminating on the shape of the shofar, and hold it up "First, let me invite you to note the form of the shofar." Even to my own ears, I sound stiff and formal. I still haven't found my role with this group other than note-taker and feel uncomfortable addressing them as a teacher. Nevertheless, I turn the shofar 90 degrees. "See, if you point the end where you blow the ram's horn toward the earth, it looks like a question mark ? without the dot. If you flip it upside down, like this, it looks like a J." I point to myself and smile. I seem more amused by my explanation and attempt at humor than Prem Devi, or for that matter, anyone else. I realize I'm playfully free associating again, and not directly answering her question. I'm afraid I have overstepped my bounds and role. Why can't I just be humble and speak succinctly?

"That's clever," she says, but what is 'J's' understanding of the meaning of the sound?"

"Sorry. The short answer is that 'it depends.' I've been doing a lot of reading these past few weeks in preparation for the Days of Awe, including reviewing my "Fall Preview" notes from Reb Jonathan from a year ago. It seems there are lots of explanations and different interpretations. Let me share what he taught me." Better. But is that still too much information?

Prem Devi motions for me to continue.

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Prem Devi motions for me to continue.

"The first blast—Tekiah— a long deep note which ends abruptly, can be understood as a call to 'wake up' from our sleepy, slothful ways, from our bad habits. The second call, Shevarim, is a broken sound or sound of alarm, The Kabbalists say that Shevarim—these three medium, wailing blasts--is the sobbing cry of the heart--yearning to connect, to grow, to achieve. The third call—Teruah, several (nine or ten) quick blasts in short succession —can be understood as a summoning of strength and energy for the struggle and effort that will be needed. Or, it can also be seen as a sound resembling an alarm clock, arousing us from our spiritual slumber to engage in the good fight."

"Wake up. Cry out. Battle. Is that right?" Akishige asks?

"Yes, very Zenly put. But such succinctness is not the Jewish way at all, you understand. Two Jews, three opinions. But as in Zen, the shofar is supposed to bring clarity, alertness, and focus."

"It sounds like a verbal kwat!" Akishige bows, "which the Master uses to awaken the dozing meditation student."

"Exactly. As Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher and physician born in Spain in the 12th century said, the shofar's call cries

*Awake, sleepers from your sleep! Arise, slumberers, from your slumber! Scrutinize your deeds and return to repentance and remember your creator! Look to your souls, better your ways and deeds. Let each one of you abandon your evil way and your thoughts which are not good."* Hilkhos Teshuvah, chapter 3

"Rosh Hashanah is a time to wake up and be honest and objective about our lives: Who we are, where we've been, and in what direction we'd like to head. In contrast to Shakespeare's sound and fury, it is sound and meaning. And it all begins with the simplicity of a single note."

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"Poppycock!" Jacques says repeating my words, "'And it all begins with the simplicity of a single note.' Simplicity my ass. What dream world are you all living in?" He glowers in my direction, resting his eyes on the shofar that

I've just set down. "Even allowing that it all begins with the void and a single note, by your own explanation, then what happens? One pure note becomes three wailing blasts. The sobbing of existence. The three cube into nine notes, trying to gain energy to fight off the negative and evil. It's a battle, man. At the most primitive, it's eat or be eaten. And even if you're lucky enough to be spared the ravages of true warfare, look at what happens in the best of circumstances.

You grow older and try to find out who you are. Frankly, that's a lifetime task in itself. But before you really know who you are, you marry, and try to figure out who the couple is. Plus there is still you, and your spouse has to find out who she is, so there's the three of you: two individuals and a "team." Of course, there's also your job, which requires attention, And don't forget, for better or worse, you live in a community and have to negotiate how to be part of and contribute to that, on the one hand, and on the other, not be overly confined by its laws and mores. Then you have kids, and now you have a family, and a relationship with each kid; still trying to figure out how to connect with your spouse; and trying to find some private alone time to reflect on who you have become, and who you can be; and manage your job and contribute to your community; and maybe have a friend or two along the way. Simple?!?!

Pardon my Greek, but it's mishugenah, man! Complicated, complex. . . Zorba was right: it's the full catastrophe." He smiles at us. "Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't have it any other way." He takes several rapid conscious in breaths, then thumps his chest with his right hand. "But you'd better be ready to breathe in the energy you need, and not just be a passive wimp standing on the sidelines watching. Simple. Hah. It takes every bit of those nine bursts of energy to make it through a day. And you damn well better learn to juggle. At least one ball is always in the air. Sometimes it's your own balls, man."

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We all laugh at Jacques' humorous conclusion to his earnest tirade. Al Hazruim says, "You're underestimating the difficulty. You don't have to worry about the spiritual realm. Even though we know that there is no God but God, when we live in the world, it's not so simple to live that belief. I have a close Sufi friend who is the Minister of Finance of the Netherlands. He says that during the day, while he is working diligently on the financial issues Allah chases him. At night, when he prays, he chases Allah!"

Lin Zscho, grinning, adds, "The one void becomes the yin and yang, they double to four, then eight, and eventually you have the sixty four variations of the dongjing possibilities of the I Ching, the Book of Changes. Without proper xu-jing centeredness, the amount of these possibilities can seem overwhelming. I agree with you both about the difficulty of finding the right path. For example, as Lao-tzu said, we have to be careful of too much activity, too much striving. 'Over sharpen the blade and it becomes dull.'"

Akishige bows. "But isn't that why, at the end of the in-breath, after we've let our belly rise, we consciously pay attention to the pause? So, even in the midst of action, we learn to keep our equanimity, to literally as well as symbolically take time to reflect on our actions."

"I like that," Reverend Noel says. "It's like a baby Sabbath during each breath!"

Prem Devi turns to Jacques. "Oh mighty chest thumping warrior, let us see you take another powerful in-breath." Rather begrudgingly, he complies. "Now, don't let it out, but take another one still, even more powerful. Now again. Again."

Finally, Jacques lets out a huge rush of air.

"You see, Mr. Existential/philosopher. Self-doing is not enough. At some point no more air will go in. You need to learn to release and let go." She smiles, adding, as she nods to Lin Zscho, "In the Bhagavad Gita, the person of wisdom is one who can see action in inaction, and inaction in action. When

acting, this person is centered, like the yin in the yang; when centered, this person is aware of all the actions of breathing that are occurring, the yang within the larger yin."

She hands a cup of tea to Akishige, who bows to her, then adds more water to the cup, until it starts to overflow. "That's like the story of the Western professor who visited a Zen temple to learn about the tea ceremony," Akishige adds, animatedly. "The master filled his tea cup fuller and fuller, until the tea dripped over the saucer and onto the table. 'Stop,' said the Professor. 'What are you doing?' The master bowed and replied, 'Just as no more tea will go into the cup unless it's emptied, how can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your mind of preconceptions?' We need to empty our selves of self in order to refill, empty our consumed breath to become ready for the next cycle."

"And that's where we have the advantage over you, Jacques," Prem Devi speaks in a gentle tone. "Everyone has to let go. I know that it's good for me to let go of my egoic 'I,' returning to the ocean of Oneness. Our Jewish brothers and sisters, here in our host city of Safed, surrender their souls to the Echad, the One. My Muslim brother, to no God but Allah. Lin Zscho to the void, the way, the Tao; Akishige to the isness and fullness of emptiness, Reverend to the loving arms of Christ and God. For us, the pause at the end of the out-breath is a joyful time. It's a time, as David Noel said, of gratitude, of reconnecting with the spirit of the universe. You, however, try to dismiss and slip over that pause, seeing it only as helplessness and vulnerability. You fear releasing egoic voluntary in-breath because there is only the existential nothingness facing you once when you let go. For me, letting go is once again playing in the ocean of nitya, the absolute, and, if Mother Kali's divine wisdom wills it, preparing for another round of lila, play, in the illusion-maya-- of so called reality." Akishige raises his cup, Prema Devi clinks hers to it, and they both take a sip of tea.

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What has changed in me? In the world? Part of me doesn't want to ask, but just accept. Friday night on Passover, there was a full moon. I image the moon's light reflecting the sun's light on the Dome of the Rock, where Mohammed ascended to heaven; the Western Wall of Judaism; the Via Delarosa of Christianity. All moving, exquisite monuments and symbols of their respective faiths. All basking in the reflected light of the moon. Each a particularistic finger pointing to the universal. Separate fingers, same hand.

I hold up my three middle fingers of my left hand. They remind me of the shin "ש" in Hebrew. Each line representing one of the monotheistic religions. I can either focus on the spaces between them, or their connectedness at the root level. Like a tree, with many separate branches, but all part of the same trunk.

"Who opens the eyes of the blind." I continue with the morning prayer. I feel like Jacob, who, after wrestling with the angel, said "God was in this place and I did not know it." Why at the end of last week did I see the spaces between the fingers of the Shin--the differences dividing us==and now I see the underlying unity at its base?

Am I different? Is the world different? Do I see the world seen differently because I'm different? "Who releases the bound, who straightens the bowed." I look at all the beauty around me. And in me. "Who provides for my every need Who guides my steps."

With an outbreath, I surrender to the feeling of my steps being guided. Pause. With my next in breath, I feel grateful for life. I continue to draw the air in, and know that I am a strong person, I can create and forge a place in the world.

In some ways life is like a crossword puzzle. We are all trying to find our piece of it, our letter, where and how we are to fit.

What is my piece of the cosmic puzzle that I am mean to be, the question

for which I am the answer?

The irony of being in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday, while thinking about a CROSS word (logos) puzzle does not escape me.

I remember the Rebbe saying, "There is no J in Hebrew only yud."

Yud heh vav heh.

Yud, the head of God.

"I and the Father are One."

I feel an egocentric smile occur. The first letter of my name is the first letter of God's name. My grandfather would be proud. Be the best!

I continue drawing air in, and pause.

I know that I have a reminder with each in breath pause to be careful of my egocentricity, my grasping, the puffed-up, non-matzah-like part of me.

I allow the outbreath to occur. "Who provides for our every need." Stay simple, clear, distinguishing wants from needs.

Learning from Dr. Lisbet's lessons on dongjing, when my task is to surrender, when my task is to trust my ability to be assertive and act, and how to balance and gradate the energies in each situation.

I feel the shaft of the sun's light on my shaft of light.

Both are warm, pleasurable. A congruence from the body/self to the Universal Self. I am connected, linked, levels and levels, a deepening of inner and outer worlds.

Last year at Passover, when Grandpa Dave toasted, "Next Year In Jerusalem" they were just words. Now the words have been made flesh. I am physically here. Rediscovering and owning my body. I feel as if I've made an upward revolution in my evolution, as if I've reached a higher plane on Jacob's ladder.

Next Year in J---? J---erusalem? I may or not be here physically.

But I do know now that Jerusalem is more than a physical location. It is

a symbol of the heart and soul. I commit, within the context of love—self and other-- to evolve each year, as best I can to be one or two degrees wiser and more compassionate in body, mind, heart, and soul.

"God who guides my every step" I repeat again, slowly.

I let the words sink in. I am suffused with a feeling of complete trust, as I, a newborn baby, allow God to guide my steps. Allow me to be led where You want. Allow me to trust that wherever I am, my needs—not my wants—but my needs are provided for. Either I will be guided to have the ability to take actions and make changes that will help me obtain my needs; or I will learn acceptance and calmness that will allow me to be at peace with whatever I have. Thy will, not my will. I realize what a profound equanimity and sacredness there is in letting God guide me.

I want this moment to last forever, to hold onto it so tight it can't escape me—but not so tight that I crush it.

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"What a crock!" Jacques lifts his glass and takes another swallow of wine. "With all due respect, of course. It's all a big ocean game of Oneness. On what evidence to you base your 'truths' about reality?"

"You should read M's story of the life of Ramakrishna sometime. You'd see what it's like to live a God-intoxicated life, to feel and experience God and the oneness, to realize how impermanent and insubstantial everything is. How illusory your efforts toward control really are. Really, Jacques, how successful are any of your personal self-efforts to manipulate and change the world, you of the powerful in-breath? We, the small "i", do nothing. We are all but the instruments of God, from Whom all parts of being playfully intertwine."

"Look, just because my actions may lead nowhere and accomplish nothing, doesn't mean there is not something majestic and courageous about making the effort, at least trying. Have you read the wonderful book by Maurice Friedman, "To Deny our Nothingness" based on Andre Gide's exhortation?

"Yes, I run out of energy and get tired. Yes, my in-breath comes to an end and I need to rest and restore myself. Read Camus' Plague. We all need moments of tranquil rest to fight the plague, like Dr. Rieux swimming in the placid waters. Yes I get discouraged and at times try too hard to control all the mishuginah of life too much and get angry and frustrated and hassled. That's called life. It's all there is. I don't retreat into some fantasy playground and then call that life. You can believe whatever version of reality you want, but I think you have it backwards. I think the real maya is those withdrawn states of consciousness that make you think for a few brief moments that all is One.

"Be honest, and look around you. How long do those last? Wouldn't you agree that they are an infinitesimally small percentage of the isolation, suffering, and pain you see around you. Those moments are the maya. What is here is what's the reality." He pauses for another sip of wine, turning to Al Harumi "With my apologies." Then he turns back to Prem Devi. "And no I haven't read M's huge volume. I once thought of using it as a pillow at the beach, though. I'm not unaware of your 'great swan.' But didn't that wise teacher of yours also practice sadhana—a means of accomplishing something-- and encourage others to practice discriminating and renouncing women and gold? Didn't he say that some are more filled with God than others? How could that be if it's all One?"

Before Prem Devi can respond, Akisihige, Al Hazrumi, and Lin Zscho all start speaking at the same time, then stop. Akishige and Lin Zscho defer to Al Hazrumi. "Thank you. I was just going to share the Sufi story of individuals in a dark room with an elephant, each touching different parts. One feels the trunk and says the elephant is like a long fire hose; one touches the leg and says the elephant is like a tree trunk. . "Your view, Jacques, is certainly one part of the human condition. But I believe you miss other parts. As Rumi said, we each have different wines that we drink to intoxicate us. I drink from his poems.

O you who've gone on pilgrimage –  
where are you, where, oh where?

How sad that you yourself veil  
The treasure that is yours!

Remember God so much that you are forgotten.  
Let the caller and the called disappear;  
be lost in the Call”.

He looks at Jacques with kindness.” I see the reality of which you speak—  
the content and struggle of our existence on earth. I wish there were a way I  
could help you lift your veil so you could see the context and reality of which  
I speak.”

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“Let me share how I understand the differences,” Akishige comments, “and  
do so also with a poem, a 17 syllable haiku by Basho. If you’re comfortable ,  
I’d like to invite each of you to close your eyes so you can try to feel and  
image of this poem as I recite it.”

I notice that I am the last one to close my eyes. Before I do, I  
scan the eyes of those present. Jacques is the last, other than me, to close  
his eyes, but he eventually does so. I let my eyes linger just a little longer  
on Joie. She looks like a meditating angel. Then I let my eyes close, as  
Akishige begins:

*Over the darkened sea,  
only the shrill voice of a flying duck...  
is visible.... in soft white.*

When I first hear the words ‘darkened sea’ I notice a feeling of  
loneliness and sadness. There is a part of me that doesn’t want to pay  
attention, but rather to distract myself from the painful feelings. “Shrill  
voice” only reinforces that feeling, and also adds an element of fear. Out of  
darkness something separate and threatening is present.

Flying duck. I feel sort of stupid being afraid of a duck. I don't  
think it's the duck, I think it's the unexpected, the aloneness, the

uncertainty.

"The voice of a flying duck is visible." He's lost me. How can a voice be visible? "In soft white." How can a voice be not only visible, but kinesthetic: visible in soft white?" Now I'm really confused. Why is he sharing this? I want to peek and see if anyone else has a confused expression on their face.

I hear a small mirthful chuckle, then hear Akishige's voice again. "Please keep your eyes closed. I can see from a couple of faces that the poem doesn't appear to make any sense. Don't worry. You are right! The poem doesn't make any sense."

It feels nice to be right, even though I know that's an egoic feeling, and also carries some element of judging: i.e., others are wrong; it's also resurfacing a sense of competition, as if there really can only be one winner. Ah, dust dies hard. Polishing takes time.

"This poem does not make sense from the perspective of ordinary awareness, where we see with our eyes and hear with our ears. A voice, from that perspective, cannot be visible, nor can it be tactile."

Exactly.

"But the poem, from the perspective of meditative consciousness, does make sense."

Huh?

"From an altered state of consciousness, a meditative state, some call it a mystical state, we can have an experience of synesthesia, or cross-sense awareness. Some people experience this when listening to music, and actually see different colors associated with the sounds."

I want to peek again. It's really hard for me to follow someone else's directions. I will myself to keep my eyes closed.

"Although there is no right or wrong to a poem, one way to understand it is in this way: In the first part of the poem, Basho is in ordinary



awareness: alone, separate, walking along the beach in a dark, even gloomy setting, and becomes frightened by a shrill cry. He and whatever makes the sound are separate, other."

I think of the book Elizabeth Mery gave me by Buber. Akishige's talking about an I-it experience. Interesting how ideas recycle and converge.

"Then Basho's consciousness shifts. He goes into an altered state, where the other is not separate, but part of a web of interconnection. In this new state of consciousness, the voice becomes visible 'in soft white.' I feel the words 'soft white' as an emotional experience, like an inner purr in my stomach.

"Notice how the darkness at the start of the poem has become whiteness by the end. The shrill has become soft. Ordinary consciousness has shifted into an altered state. That may be one way to help understand Jacques and Al Hazrumi's different views of what we've been calling reality. It's the same reality, only understood and experienced with a different consciousness."

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I look around our campfire and am aware of the extraordinary gift of being in these people's presence. Obviously, they aren't always agreeing with each other, but they speak and act with respect and are deferentially attentive, trying to understand each other's perspective. I remembered a statement the Rebbe made discussing a passage from the Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of our Ancestors, that there will always be arguments and disagreements. Our task was to make sure that those arguments were for the sake of and in the true spirit of "Heaven." If not, they mean nothing and lead nowhere. If so, they are always beneficial.

Just as these sages represented different viewpoints and experiences, there were and are, I know, those different feelings and perspectives within

me. I know the suffering, darkness, and loneliness at the start of Basho's poem. I also know the shifts of consciousness that can sometimes occur. I remember my experiences of awe and oneness as a teenager in Minnesota canoeing and camping out; sometimes while playing music; even a couple of times while love making with Mery; again at Sinai; and a few months ago at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Although each was unique, they all were experiences that transcended the logic and rational confines of my mind, when I saw the world in a new light. They are rare, but I know they are within me, and part of me.

It's not clear to me to what extent I can learn to train my mind, as Akishige seems to suggest, to increase those feelings so I can see the world on a more regular basis "in soft white." Nor is it clear that to do so is a fair and honest way to see the world. I want to ask Jacques if he believes that creating a shift in consciousness, even if it helps heal the individual, actually changes the pain and suffering that most people live in.

A wise person once said that when we go to someone for advice, we know ahead of time, in our heart of hearts, the advice that person will give us. Therefore, what is interesting is less what that person says, than who we pick to ask for counsel.

I wonder if the same thing applies when we ask a question. No matter what the question, I have a sense what the answer is that each person in our group will give me.

I wonder in a similar way, if I'm going to have to learn to live with the many selves within me; and to allow them to argue and dispute. And, when I have a question, I may need to go to several of them for advice, like an inner counsel of advisors, who, even when they disagree, I want to believe and trust that they are working toward those disputes being "for the sake of heaven". . . in soft white.

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I remember the Rebbe instructing us to practice a meditation on the


shin "U". I take out my notes and, on a clean piece of paper, draw the shin. Look at the form, he said, the spaces, the feelings associated with it: shin, the start of shalom, peace, shekinah, the feminine energy of God, shofar, the sound that calls us to wake up, the beginning of the Shema, Hear, listen; the sefirot, the energies of God.

I look at the shin, and let my breathing come easily, for several minutes. I feel myself relaxing. I am at peace.



After a few moments, for some reason, my eye is drawn to the right half of the form, and I see a  appear in the shin . I smile. This is the way my mind works. It looks at the whole, then starts to break things down into their component parts.




I focus on the J, trying not to think, but just to be with the shape, and see what feelings and associations arise. I feel like a little boy, looking at the J monogram on my long-sleeved Brooks Brothers' shirt when I was five.

I see the curve at the bottom of the J as the curve of an arm holding me: I am held by dad, by mom, by my family, by the safe white house of my childhood.

I see the J as a fish hook, which reminds me of the warm happy images of going fishing with Dad. When I imagine the J flipped upside down, it's like a candy cane . Again I'm filled with feelings of sweetness, happiness, Christmas time, joy.

But then comes darkness. That which is simple and joyful becomes complex and disorienting. It's as though the fish hook catches me, skewers me, and swooshes me away. Dad became Senior. My parents divorced. My grandmother died. The J turns upside down and is no longer a candy cane, but instead turns everything topsy-turvy. That which held me securely let me go, and the force of gravity causes me to tumble and be discharged into the void. I experience feelings of pain, free-fall, directionlessness.


But the upside down J  is also a cane to help me limp forward, wounded, lamed, struggling, but, with assistance, still standing. I image that upside down J in a mirror, and it becomes like a small r . I smile. It's like a part of me reflecting and looking down, trying to understand myself, learn who I am. A necessary part of the revolution? But I needed help to see myself without distortion. I didn't then have sufficient skills.

I keep rotating the upside down J until it's once again resting on the ground . It's the left side of the shin. It also looks like an L. I think of Dr.Lisbet, who helped me reflect on myself, to see myself from a larger perspective and more clearly, as in a transparent mirror. I visualize the  in a mirror, and it returns to the original . The rebirth of Easter, a full revolution. I am back at the beginning.


But it's more than a circle. It's the beginning, but I'm not the same person. I'm all the persons. I'm the many fingers and selves. Nothing is any longer hidden. Today I feel like a simple, whole person on the other side of all the complexity and fragments. Rather than feeling fragmented and scattered, the many parts of my self seem woven together, integrated. Nothing can take away the memories and feelings of being protected by my parents, held by my blue-eyed grandmother, watching the cardinal redbird with Grandpa Dave.

I now know I can come through the dark night of the soul, even when the world is topsy turvy. I have evolved as a person, made a revolution, and all because of the revelation, once again, that God was in the place and I did not know it.

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When I step back and look at the shin as a whole . I smile with a certain embarrassment at what I see. The white space, the inner shape, becomes the foreground, and I feel strangely uncomfortable as the form of two curvaceous breasts with deep cleavage appears. At first I want to dismiss

this image as the reflexive, primitive Johannes returning, coming to haunt me and draw me back from the spirit to the flesh. But I tell myself to stay with the form and feelings and see where this leads. Maybe it's saying that the shin, the Shekinah, as the feminine form of God's energy, can be nurturing, comforting.

The black curved lines at the bottom of the two J's in the shin are holding the breasts up, and I imagine myself cradled within the breasts, supported by the soft curves of the J's. I allow myself to relax further and enjoy the pleasant feelings of nurturance this image evokes. The form starts moving--foreground and background, inner space and dark lines, as if there is a swaying, fleshy, soft, three-dimensional shape to the , the breasts--and I--feel rocked in a swing.

This sensation lasts for several peaceful moments, but ends abruptly when I feel the curve at the bottom of the J's once again became hooks. Why is this? Am I self-sabotaging--afraid of just being able to remain peaceful in life? Or is that part of the nature of the cycle of life?

The hooks puncture the breasts, deflating them. They, I, am being pierced--caught trapped, once again. I experience my own suffering, like Job, like Jesus. "Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Bible. I cry out. I keep breathing and watching. Yes, dad, men do cry.

Suddenly, the Shin form  starts vibrating, and turns upside down. It now looks like an M.  I am once again turned upside down and thrust out into the unknown. M for Mery? Mary as mother, who helped awaken me to the world of the spirit? Mery as harlot? Mery as a large breasted Amazon with a  shin-like Neptune harpoon for catching fish, or a pitchfork for impaling chauvinist pigs?

M for Moses. Leading me forward from bondage. From the false, maya-

like illusory sense of security of the castle, from Johannes' bondage to the flesh. It's as if I am two ram's horns forced to face and confront myself. This self-confrontation leads to learning from Malachi, messengers, angels; from Miriam's "micha mocha" dancing after crossing the Reed Sea, celebrating after each small step of progress on the journey. I once again have the opportunity to lead myself forth, to be led forth. I see the promised land.

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Trying to enter it, I continue the revolution, as the figure makes a half turn. E. **E**

I was in an eddy. Swirling, lost, confused, directionless. Or being pulled upward toward heaven, on Jacob's ladder, and not realizing it. Perhaps this has all been part of the divine plan. Trying to hear, with my one good ear, Elija's still small voice within, re-finding myself.

The revolution continues and once more the "normal" shin appears **W**. As I continue to stare in a trance like state at the letter, I realize it is both simple and complex. I feel like a witness, outside the events, observing the permutations with some distance; yet at the same time, I have been inside and lived each cycle. I see the various spaces and emptiness between the forms; and the different parts and letters all contained with the **W**. It is open to all, receiving all. All sides of Mery. Of my family. Of Richard. Those who love us. Those who are close to us; those who are not close. The dust which we each have. It's simple, all one, all interconnected. It's complex, multifaceted, parts and wholes.

I see **J** and it's mirror. Johannes and the flesh; Job's pain; Jonah's running away and enforced hermetic meditation; John and the spirit, pointing the way; Judas who sabotages me; Jesus being reborn: Joshua entering the promised land; Jacob realizing God and climbing the ladder toward heaven. I see that all

these inner selves, these “We’s” of Me, are all connected. All these sides and parts and potentials of me. It’s who I am, and at the same time, who I can become.

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The images mix and swirl with each other, multiple Js revolving.

Reflecting, I see J as Johannes and the flesh; Job’s pain; Jonah’s running away and enforced hermetic meditation; John and the spirit, pointing the way; Judas who sabotages me; Jesus being reborn: Joshua entering the promised land; Jacob realizing God and climbing the ladder toward heaven. I see that all these inner selves, these “We’s” of Me, are connected. All these sides and parts and pieces are potentials of me. It’s who I am, and at the same time, who I can become.

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The images mix and swirl with each other” multiple J's revolving and reflecting, compassion and nurturance as well as fish hooks, falling, being drawn forth, being comforted, swirling in an eddy, hearing the still small voice. All the textures and forms are there at the same time. It isn’t either/or. Nothing is lost.

I can control the shifting images at times; at other times they move on their own. It’s like life. When it’s under my control, I can try to move forward as wisely as possible. When I am not able to exert control, I can learn to surrender and allow and trust. I can sense that everything is part of the divine energy, all part of the fabric and texture of what is, what was, what will continue to be.

I feel tears come as I close my eyes. I feel a release. They are tears of sadness and joy, both feelings occurring at the same time and intermingling with each other. The tears fall onto the shins, the J's, like water drops onto a pond. Ripples begin to form, slowly at first, gently

undulating outward. The water washes and cleanses the revolving letters like a mikvah, in a ritual of new beginnings, a baptism.

The water becomes more foamy, blurring and hiding all the whirling letters.

I take several slow breaths. Before my closed eyes the water is now still, clear, transparent. There are no longer any letters at all. Only vision remains.

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"I love the understanding of the Shofar's sound as signaling new beginnings" Reverend Noel says, as he picks up the Shofar and tries to blow a long, loud note. "This is not that easy." He tries again, then hands it to Jacques Sorenson who looks at it with curiosity, but doesn't try to blow it, and puts it in his lap as Reverend Noel says, "Here we all are, celebrating the world's creation. Imagine what it must have been like to be born as the first human. Or imagine if only we new born child had our adult consciousness, what it would be like to be aware of being born, coming out of the womb, and taking our first conscious breath." He breathes in, sighs happily and adds,

"The single note. New beginnings. Simple wisdom. In Zen," Akishige notes, "we try to practice that here and now attitude of joy with each new in breath at the start of every breath cycle. Always awakening anew."

"Yes, awakening with gratefulness," Reverend Noel responds. "That would be the one word I'd be feeling. There is nothing I can do. I am in a strange, new place. I have no skills that I am aware of. Yet, my lungs works. There is oxygen in the air. I am alive, starting the adventure of life. What gratitude and thankfulness I would have at the first in breath of life. What inspiration. Literally and symbolically. And isn't it true every single moment?"

I am inspired, and stop taking notes to share what I have just read in the Torah portions, "Your idea of birth fits perfectly with aspects of the Torah portion--parashat-- the birth of Issac to Abraham and Sarah, in many ways a



miracle birth because Abraham was such an old man, and she such an old woman. And then in the haftarah portion, there is more talk of births, as Chanah, who was infertile, becomes fertile.

"Birth and gratefulness and breath, what a beautiful combination."

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Three medium wailing blasts pierce the night, followed by nine quick blasts. Jacques puts the shofar down, and says "Hogwash. Simple wisdom. Gratefulness. It's not just one sound. It's many, and it's confusing and complex." He looks at Reverend. and Akishige. "What you call gratefulness and simple wisdom, from my perspective, is a recipe for disaster. Babies are helpless. Unless they learn how to grow up and mature, to interact with and master their environment, to develop competencies in life, they die. Period." He takes in a big breath of air. "Did you see that?" He takes another breath.

"I choose to breathe in 'I' do this. Yes, there is the Heidegger's existential thrownness--the reality that I'm born into a world with oxygen, and a body with lungs--but what's important to focus on is that I can learn to take a voluntary breath. Without developing that control, we humans are nothing but passive helpless creatures." He glares, as if daring us to challenge him. "And did you hear all those extra notes? Let me repeat what I've just said a bit ago, for it doesn't seem to be getting through--what you call simple--is really simplistic and undifferentiated. Life is complex and multifaceted. To deny that is to live in a bubble of childish fantasy. What we don't need is simple wisdom; what we need is complex wisdom, where we learn to deny our nothingness and forge authentic experience. Breathing in. Gratefulness. Harumph.

Platitudes. Where you try to imagine gratefulness, I see helplessness. Period."

There is silence as Jacques' words settle over us. Finally, I ask him "Have you had previous experience with blowing the shofar? Your sound is amazing."

"The sound means nothing," Jacques answers. "Just random noises. I learned to blow the shofar from my grandfather, who I'm sure went to his death with a prayer on his lips. Even though I think he knew what was coming. He taught me. But once he died, and once you live through what I've lived through, you realize that a sound is just a sound. There is no meaning."

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Dr. Lisbet said when she first began meditating, she realized there was a point in every action when the mind would begin to shift from that action to what was coming next. For example, while eating a meal, when she was a little more than halfway through, she would begin to think about what she was going to do after the meal. When she said that, I had one of my baby "ah-ha" experiences. At that very moment, I was thinking what I was going to do after class. I realized all the times in other activities--like tennis or golf--at some point in the set or round, my awareness would begin to shift from what I was doing in the moment, to what would come next. When we do that, she said, we are then in a nether world, neither fully on the present, nor completely focusing on the future.

Dr. Lisbet encouraged us to try to recognize when our minds shift. Then, she said, we have a choice. We can choose to return to the current activity with complete focus. Or we can choose to stop that activity and concentrate on planning with full attention what will come next. She cited a Zen statement: "When you sit, sit; when you walk, walk; above all don't wobble."

I'm aware that part of my mind wants to leap toward the future, and what comes next. But a larger part says no, just let yourself be in this glorious moment, and allow it to last as long as possible. I'm just going to lie here and feel the sun, and look at the olive tree, and think of the interconnected hand of all of us, and give thanks at being reborn to this glorious day.

I feel like I'm in the midst of a perfect vacation. The ideal midpoint. There has been enough time to shed the daily problems and routines of "normal life" and there is enough time ahead to buffer from having to return. But I'm also noticing the first signs of restlessness, as I continue to lie beneath my olive tree, doing nothing but dreaming and drifting and breathing in the glorious spring day.

I know that even after the best vacation, once you return to normal reality, it doesn't take very long, before the effects and glow of that break wear off and the normal mundaneness and quotidian tasks of everyday life takes over consciousness. I used to worry how to keep the glow of my tan from wearing off. Now I want to try to figure out how to keep the glow in my mind from fading.

I decide the best way to do that is to see what it would be like, while there is still the buffer of Easter Sunday surrounding me, if I were given the gift of a day, with nothing to do but try to create a perfect day. Even more, would there be a way to make that day, all the days of my life, a day that I could live throughout time.

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I open my Passover notebook to a session in which Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe talked about "Creating a Day: An Interconnected Weaving." Just two weeks ago, I remember feeling what an irrelevant topic that was, as it wasn't clear to me whether I would even want to have days to live in the future. I also was annoyed that the question came from Peter, Mr. Suck Butt, and that the Rebbe responded to favorably to him.

*"What a great question and perfect for Passover." The Rebbe paraphrases his question. "'If you were given a day as a gift, with nothing I have to do, how would I create the perfect day?' Do I have it right?" Peter nods, basking in the attention.*

*"Your question implies the freedom to choose. How would each of us wish*

to choose to live a day? Clearly you can't do that when you're a slave in Egypt. But, go deeper. If Egypt means "narrow places," then we also can't freely choose a day if we are still trapped by our own dust and inner bondage. The question can only be fruitfully asked on the other side of realizing all the reflex issues, dust, plagues, chametz--that keep us in bondage. Is that clear?" There are nods. No one speaks.

"First Passover--escaping from slavery and bondage. But to create a vision, we need more than to escape from what isn't good, we need to imagine what we wish to move forward toward. That is where the journey to Sinai comes in, the counting of the Omer for the next seven weeks, each week with its own spiritual energy. For example, the first week is chesed, love, which is an obvious spiritual energy. Then the week of gevurah, strength, boundaries. This may not initially seem like a spiritual energy, but think deeper. To answer your question, you have to decide how much of each day to apportion to different activities. Boundaries. And you need the 'strength' to then carry it out. Again, so far so good?

I realize now I'm glad that Peter asked that question. It's perfect for me today. What a difference the passage of time and seeing with fresh eyes can make.

The Rebbe began by saying that he would want to start the day waking up anew with thankfulness, reciting the Modeh Ani-- each morning finding something to be appreciative for as the first thought of the day.

Ok. Check.

Then Rebecca, a somewhat chunky girl chimed in "I'd want the day to have some sort of physical activity."

The Rebbe patted his rotund stomach and looked over at Dr. Lisbet with an awkward glance, "One of my narrow places I'm paying attention to this Passover is one of my widest places--I've promised Dr. Lisbet that this year

*I'm going to be a few degrees more careful about my eating, and a few degrees more diligent about getting some exercise--a daily walk."*

I feel some confusion and wonder if there is a danger for me to once again become hooked by the physical body. But I decide as part of a new beginning, I should consider my relationship with my body. At the least, it is indisputably the vessel and form temporarily holding my spirit. Why not let a portion of each day be devoted to honoring and taking care of my physical self. Maybe I'll talk a walk later on.

*"One important part of perfect day for me," Dr. Lisbet added, "is to have social time with those I care about...This is an area Reb Jonathan, who is much more social than me, has helped me evolve."*

I'm not sure I totally agree with her, but I'm not sure I disagree, either. This has been a very socially isolated time for me, like Jonah in the whale, but it hasn't been completely devoid of human contact. Not only the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, but the class, and the books that I read all have provided companionship. The authors and their characters often feel like people with whom I'm having tea in the afternoon, a pleasant chat. In terms of real living flesh and blood people, however, this is an area, where I want to proceed slowly. But I'll put social interaction down on my list of elements for a perfect day.

*"I'd also want thinking, writing, reflection, to stimulate the mind" I throw in.*

*"I agree with that," the Rebbe responds. "What I particularly like about the way you approach activities using your mind," he nods at me, "is that it's not just intellectual learning any more. You are trying to integrate and digest what your mind can reveal to you as part of your spiritual journey. For me, in that regard, now, with Dr. Lisbet's encouragement, I'm trying to learn more about other faiths and belief systems. I'm reading about Qu'aran, studying the Sufis, my Muslim brothers and sisters. I'm also continuing to deepen my Torah*

and Talmud study, which is never ending. All of these have a directly spiritual intention."

"Singing and dancing, " Joie, from New York suggests.  
When she speaks, it is like a schoolgirl who knows she's the smartest student in class

"Excellent, something creative, poetic, expressive," Dr Lisbet notes.  
"For me tai chi is a blend of dance and physical exercise, and I leave the heavy lifting of singing to the Rebbe!"

"Tikkun Olam. Giving something back. Trying to make the world a better place." Sigh, Peter the Suck Butt.

I feel my reflexive competitive annoyance start to come up. I take a breath, and realize, I should thank him. He's so right. That's a great response of his, one I should definitely add to my daily braid.

"Sometimes I'll just pick up a piece of paper, of litter, of glass, or smile at someone who seems lonely, or help an old lady across the street." Are you kidding me. He sounds like he's applying for sainthood.

Even a few weeks later, it's still not clear to me that he wasn't showing off...at least a little...and that his motivation in sharing this was a 100% pure. But it also wasn't 100% impure. Today, he gets the benefit of the scale weighted toward the positive.

"So, to summarize," the Rebbe said, "A perfect day is in some ways like a weaving of many strands. Sometimes there is more of one thread on one day, more of another a different day. We awaken in gratefulness. Then we braid together physical exercise, exercise of our mind, some creative artistic expression, social interaction--seeking to give and receive kindness and love, to hear and be heard by another soul--spiritual meditation and study-- generosity: giving back to and helping to heal the world. We end the day in forgiveness and surrender."

I put my notebook aside and take a long cleansing breath. Life is

really pretty simple, isn't it, if I just allow it to be. A perfect day is nothing dramatic. Small actions derived from different strands of being, woven together, Taken as a whole, it can create a beautiful tapestry of life.

What a glorious morning to grateful awaken. The second day of Passover, the first week of counting the Omer, toward Sinai, The week of love, chesed. The day of love. Love within love. Easter Sunday. Good morning world.

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The embers in the fire are beginning to fade, as I take an apple and cut it into slices, offering each a piece, along with some honey. "To a sweet year." I feel as though we are eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, only this time with conscious choice, and without blaming anyone else for our decision.

After everyone has finished the apple, I say, "Akishige gave a beautiful blessing before the meal, and I'd like to share the Jewish blessing after the meal, the Bhirkat Hamazon. I'll just give you the short version, but let me say that I was astounded the first time I heard the blessing. It lasts about fifteen minutes. I remember thinking to myself, 'If I'd known how long the blessing was, I'd have eaten a much bigger meal.'"

I relish their chuckles. "The HaMotzi, the blessing before the Meal, is an opportunity for thankfulness for the food in particular, but also more generally for all that was involved in its creation: from the seeds and the soil, to the farmers who grow it, and those who bring the produce to the market. The simple and deep meaning of the blessing after the meal is one of thankfulness for the feeling of 'completeness,' of 'fullness.' We give thanks for feeling our bellies full. But we also can use this blessing to feel complete and full in our lives, like a mini Shabbat; and the joy and completeness and blessing of being able to share a meal with wonderful people.

**Thank you all again for this evening. What a glorious first night of the New Year....To new beginnings and a sweet year."**

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When I wake up, I can see that the sun has drifted across the heavens, and it must be sometime in the early afternoon. I begin to recite the "happiness" afternoon prayer: Ashrei yoshveh b'teka. Yud y' hallelujah, selah. How happy we are to be in the house of the Lord, sing hallelujah, Selah. I continue my prayer, pausing after each Hebrew word, leaving room for guidance and understanding to emerge from the spaces of silence.

"That's my tree you're sitting under."

"Oh, sorry." When I look up, I can't see the person who is speaking to me, because the sun is shining directly in my eyes. I start to get up.

"Don't be silly. Sit down. It looks like we have more in common than the first letter of our names." Joie sits down next to me under the olive tree. "I come here a lot. It's my special quiet place to get away." Then she points to her guitar. "And it's where I come to sing." She looks over at me inquiringly. "So, what are you doing? It sounds like you were singing, too."

I'm surprised, no, shocked to see her, and a little self-conscious though I'm not quite sure why. Breathing in, pause, breathing out, pause. No words come out. She turns to her guitar case and begins to open it. I find myself staring at her face, as if I'm seeing it for the first time. It's a heart-shaped face, broad forehead, rounded cheeks, thin lips, a little pointed chin. I feel embarrassed at how long I've been looking at her. I've generally been avoiding eye contact with women. Am I upset with myself because I thought I had moved been an interest in the female form?

She doesn't notice my gaze as she pulls her guitar out. I am surprised at how happy I am to see her. Are these sensual stirrings in me? Are they ok? I look at her eyes, as she turns back to hear the answer to her question. They



are clear, blue, focused, with long lashes under arched eyebrows. It's an exotic face, not classical beautiful, but sensitive, intelligent, comfortable. I don't see a wedding ring. I decide to stay and see what happens, trusting this time of new beginnings.

"I was singing the 'Ashrei,' the happiness prayer."

"I know what it is. My grandmother taught it to me, and then I taught it to little kids at the Jewish Community Center. What a great thing to be doing on Easter Sunday, being thankful for happiness. Good for you. Do you want to learn some hand gestures that can go with the song?" I nod, curious to see what she is talking about.

"Ok, when you sing 'Ashrei, how happy we are,' put your hands in a 'V' around your lips, like a smile. Good. Now, when we sing 'to be in the house of the Lord,' join the tips of your fingers and make a ^ like an upside down V, the roof of a house. Yes, you've got it...you're as good as some seven year olds! Now, when we sing 'sing Hallelujah' hold your hands on either side of your mouth, forming an O or two sets of parentheses ()...like you're yodeling as you sing out. Finally, when we say 'Selah,' place your right palm on your heart, and your left palm on the back of your right hand, and give a little bow. Yes, you got it. Okay, let's try it once more."

When we finish, we both giggle like little kids. I think back to the Shakespeare garden in Golden Gate with Mery a year ago, how I was annoyed with the little kids and the birthday party invading my space. Now, a year later, I'm in Jerusalem, under an olive tree, singing the afternoon prayer of happiness like a little kid. You never know. I certainly couldn't have predicted this a year ago. And a year from now? "You're a good teacher. You're easy to learn from." I pause, then add, "This morning I was in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I had a powerful experience that I'd like to share with you some time. The upshot was that I felt I was being reborn as a little baby. Now,

this afternoon, I find that I've already grown to a seven year old. I'm clearly making great progress."

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"We missed you Friday night at Passover. My grandmother asked about you in a nice way, and she never says anything kind about anyone I might be interested in dating."

The last time I'd seen her was through the window at the hotel's kitchen doors, when I'd taken a break from cleaning pots. She'd been in an animated conversation with a good-looking young, red-bearded man, having drinks, laughing. What about him? There also was a four or five year old boy with them...her son? Could she be married and not wear a ring? A hippie type who doesn't believe in marriage? I'm feeling confused? Am I a back-up insurance policy? Does she and this fellow have an open marriage? Does she date multiple people? It's as if the barrier of glass separating the kitchen from the dining area has re-risen between us. These seem like hard questions that will interrupt the beautiful atmosphere so far today. Should I not ask them? Is there a better way to raise the subject.

"Does she also like that red-bearded fellow you were all having lunch with last Friday" I try to say it calmly, but I'm feeling tight and defensive and awkward. Does what I just said sound petty, jealous, and whiny? I feel frustrated and disappointed. Everything was going so well today. Life was perfect, beautiful, wondrous, and now the ugly face of reality starts to impinge. These are the first bad feelings I've had since the experience at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Why does it have to be like this?

"She not only likes him. She loves him." I can feel my face sink and sag as she says these words, even as I will it not to. I'm surprised and ashamed of myself. "That's my brother and his son, Benedict. My brother recently got divorced and flew over to spend Passover with me and my grandmother. He's a

mountain-climbing mathematician. You'd like him, but be careful not to let him take you climbing. He doesn't realize the rest of us are mere mortals."

I smile, but still am not sure what to say. "Did you know that Benedict is the Latin version of Baruch, Benedictus, and means blessed, blessing?"

"That's lovely. You should tell that to my grandmother." She pauses, grins at me, and says, "Why don't you tell her tonight? You missed Passover. Now, it's Easter. I'm flexible. Why don't you come by this evening? I always believe in chances."

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Pointing to the guitar, I say, "Speaking of second chances, I wasn't able to make it to hear you sing at the café. Would you play a song for me now?"

She looks at me with those beautiful blue eyes, twinkling, picks up her guitar, strums a few notes to tune it. Then she says, smiling, but with a forceful tone, "No. Absolutely not."

I feel rebuffed, and again confused, but before I can respond, she continues "I won't not sing a song for you. But I will sing a song with you."

Ah, a little feisty Kansas City sarcastic teasing. Actually, even stronger, it's the genuine New York variety. Good. I like it. "You're going to be more sorry than you realize. You don't know who you're asking to sing." I explain to her how I'm deaf in my left ear, and how the choir master told me to just "mouth the words."

She laughs. "The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet."

I'm confused again. I expected more sympathy, not a Hebrew lesson. "I don't understand what that has to do with my singing," I reply, showing a little annoyance.

"Aleph. The beginning. It's a silent letter. Your choir master was asking you to sing alephs!"

"Clever." I hold up an imaginary wine glass. "To new beginnings." I take a drink, then add, "While you sing, I'll sing with you. With alephs."

"Not a chance. My grandma says everyone should sing. According to grandma, if you have a beautiful voice, you should sing loud to praise God. And if you have a horrible voice, you should sing loud. . .to get revenge." I remember I shared this story with Mery, but I say nothing and merely laugh as I see her drink from her imaginary wine glass, too. "Grandma also says that once you have your revenge, you should come to see her because she can teach anyone to sing better. There are no excuses. Deaf in one ear simply won't fly with her, buster. Or with me. Let me teach you the words with you to HavaNa Shira-'let us all sing; shir Hallelujah-sing Hallelujah.' That's it. It's a beautiful round, but we'll sing it together at first. Ready?"

It's more a command than a question.

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We sing the song several times together. I feel myself carried along by her voice. And more. It's almost as if I'm transported to another realm. When she sings I experience a sensation of great depth and beauty. There's also joy, as if she's truly praising God with her voice. But her voice is not only joyful. There's also a touch of a minor key, a piercingly human vulnerable quality, too, in the sound.

As we continue to sing, I find myself increasingly comfortable, and my tentative efforts the first few times give way to less self-conscious and more fulsome attempts to join with her in the melody. I close my eyes and let the words come through me, as the sun warms my eyes, and our voices blend.

"You have a very rich tenor voice. Your pitch is good--for the most Part. Your tone is lovely, and you learn quickly from your mistakes. You've also got ruach--great spirit. That choir master did you a disservice."

"Thanks, but I heard my voice crack in the second verse."

"That's a tough note for anyone to reach--it's pretty high. That's the only difficulty of this song, it has a really big range.. I modulated it down

the second time we sang it. When we sing it in the key of C, you have to hit a G above C; when we sing it in G, you only have to hit the E above C, and you did that very well."

"I'm impressed. You not only were singing, but you were listening to me, and adjusting to help me. Wow, that's amazing. Are you an angel?"

She flaps her elbows as imaginary wings. "Sometimes." Then smiles mischievously, and says "But sometimes not."

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We are quiet. I think of Elizabeth telling me that when there is silence, "An angel passes." I will myself not to become embarrassed at the lack of conversation. I remember the first day being with Mery in the Shakespeare Garden at Golden Gate Park. I know in the past I--my reflexive Johannes side-- would have filled the silence by either taking a picture or leaning over and kissing her.

I'm glad I don't have a camera to hide behind. I want to just appreciate this uncapturable moment. As for leaning over to kiss her, the gap to do that is too big. It's been too long. And it's an abyss I'm not able to leap over. Today is the day of new beginnings. I feel like a little baby, and I need to go slowly, because I have no idea where I'm going.

I close my eyes. I try to think of the silence as aleph. Wordless sounds that begin everything. Soon I hear her humming the notes to Hava Na Shira. I join in, and feel we are connected in both silence and sound.

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After a few minutes I open my eyes. "Have you ever heard that when there is a silence between two people, it's because an angel is passing over?"

She laughs. I love her laugh. It's deep, throaty, unselfconscious, from way inside her. "No, that's lovely. Where'd you learn that?"

"Oh, a long time ago, from a friend." She seems to sense a slight shift in my mood as I think of Elizabeth.

"Speaking of angels," she flaps her arms again, "when I was a child, my brother, sister, and I would lie in the snow, and move our arms and legs like this." She lies on the ground, feet touching, arms at her side. Then she moves her arms from her side up over her head; and her legs away from each other and back again. She's laughing as she does it. "When we'd get up, we could see that we'd made three little angels in the snow." There is something so childish and playful in her actions, that I try to will myself not to notice how erotic the leg movements are as they go apart and her skirt rises; and how submissively girlish, vulnerable, and surrendering she looks as she raises her arms over her head. Is she at all aware of the effect those movements might have on me."

"That's cute. The next time I see my brother and sister, I'll have to teach them that." I laugh nonchalantly, trying to breathe and resettle my arousal. "Have you ever heard of Safed?"

"It's up north somewhere, why?"

"It's supposed to be a mystical, sacred place. They say sometimes it's hard to sleep at night in Safed because of the constant whirring of angels' wings."

"It sounds heavenly." She grins. "Maybe we could visit it sometime? I'm going to be here the whole summer."

Is she saying she'd like to spend more time with me? I think so and feel intrigued, even excited at the idea. I'm also feeling raw and new and fresh, unsure if I'm ready or capable of beginning a relationship. This is moving too fast for me. I'm not sure what to say, and I try to keep my face blank so she does not see either of these thoughts and feelings. I look down and start arranging my journals lying around me.

"Are they your moat?"

"What?"

"You know, a moat, something to surround yourself with, to keep you safe like a knight in the castle, to ensure that all the bad things can't get in?"

"Why would you say that?" I ask, a little more defensively than I'd like to admit.

"Oh, I don't know, just a wild guess. When I was here for those few weeks in December and January, I'd regularly see you at the café, outside, writing and reading, surrounded by papers and folders. You always seemed so intense and focused. I noticed the same thing this April. More journals, more papers, same intensity. I began to think of your papers as a barrier--like a moat. I wondered if you put them around yourself to keep others from approaching you?"

I take a stack of folders and place them end to end across the space between us. "Maybe they're a bridge. Would you ever be interested in looking at them sometime?"

"I would. I've often wondered what you were working on, and thought it would be fun one day to talk to you about it." She glances at the journals, and with her left hand makes a flourish across them. "Then, rather than having to swim across the moat, I could just walk across the drawbridge of words, n'est-ce pas?"

"Peut-être. But who is to say the gatekeeper at the castle door isn't a wild, sword-wielding gendarme?"

"Touché." She draws a pencil from her pocket and holds it out toward me.

"I never back down, and I fear nothing. En garde, monsieur."

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t's twilight, Tuesday evening, and the end of the second day of Rosh HaShannah is nearing completion. I blow the ram's horn with a loud, long, sustained Tekiah Gedolah, to end our service.

I'm glad I've had years of practice playing the flute, for I need all my breath control and training for this note. But I sound it well for over 45 seconds.

Then I realize how egoic that sounds. It would be better if I could see myself as an instrument of God playing God's note. Still dust.

"We begin in oneness, with a wake up call, and we end in harmony with a long, unifying note. Shehekianu. Thank you God, for supporting us, protecting us, and bringing us to this season, this moment." I look around the group. "A hundred shofar blasts each day, of different lengths and tones, but all ending in the unity and harmony of one note."

No sooner do I say these words than Jacques turns to the group, and says "I have a few questions I'd like to ask. I'm wondering how the group felt," and here he stares at Al Hazrumi, "when we were reading the Torah portion today where Hagar and Ishmael are summarily dismissed by Sarah?" He pauses, "And what about when Isaac was bound by Abraham, at God's behest, to be slaughtered?" Then, looking at Prem Devi, he adds, "And what does it mean about God as One when this afternoon we tossed our 'sins' into a body of water? Are we polluting the water? Isn't that part of God? And further, where do sins and evil come from if everything is all one?"

"Just a few thoughts I was having Yes, I'm asking you, from different faiths, to comment on Jewish texts and observance. But don't you each in your own traditions have similar challenges with however you would call 'sin?' I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I believe you all are not only trying to



paper over the differences among your traditions, but also the contradictions within each of your own traditions. A unifying note at the end cannot bury all the fragmented pieces that came before."

I'm feeling very uncomfortable at Jacques' questions, some of which I myself have asked before, some of which I haven't really thought of. But why must he do this now? Jacques seems to overthink everything, particularly when there is such a lovely, peaceful feeling of harmony among most of us.

His questions also resurrect concerns I've had about Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau. Now I can see it's the same situation with Isaac and Ishmael. Sibling rivalry and the desire to be the chosen one. What would I have been like if my older brother had lived?

"You raise a profound question, Jacques," replies Al Hazrumi, and one which I've thought about deeply. Abraham is our father, the first Muslim, as it says in the Qur'an. We descend from Ishmael, who was his oldest son. We also believe that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, whom God called upon Abraham to sacrifice. Even though his name is not used in passage in the Qur'an, it does say his 'only son' and since Ishmael was thirteen years older than Isaac, there can only be one 'only son.' It is Ishmael, with Abraham, whom we believe built the Ka'aba, the mosque in Mecca. He is our first prophet and Mohammed is a direct descendant of his."

He leans forward as if bowing, then continues, "As a young man, I was not happy to read how Hagar, our mother, was sent into the wilderness by Sarah. Nor how Ishmael was viewed, both by Jews in the Old Testament. In Genesis it says 'he will be a wild donkey of a man and his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him.' And Christians, in the New Testament, in Romans 9, it is written through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' And in Galatians 4, Ishmael as seen as the enslaved one, whereas Isaac is seen as the one from whom Jesus will descend." Reverend Noel starts to say something, but Al Hazrumi holds up his hand. "Please, let me continue. I am appreciative for

the opportunity to share this deeply with fellow journeyers. Again, as a young man, I felt uncomfortable that the Jews called themselves the 'Chosen People.' I also felt uncomfortable with the Christian view that Jesus Christ is the one and sole path to God, and is God. These words were spoke with such assurance. To avoid creating doubt, my reflex response was to cling more closely to the simple truth I was taught about my own tradition. There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is His last messenger and final, most true prophet, restoring the uncorrupted monotheism of Abraham. 'La ilaha illa Allah.' He pauses to take a breath, then continues.

"I also realized that not only were there external outsiders who denigrated us, but that that even within my own tradition there were divisions, which have led to bloody fights and battles. And these have been going on for over fourteen hundred years, beginning at Mohammed's death. And what was the fight about? Over who was really the most legitimate successor to Mohammed as caliph--the leader of the faithful--only his relatives and direct descendants, as the Shiites believe. Or could any worthy person lead, regardless of lineage, as the Sunnis, 'followers of the prophet' believe?" He looks over at Reverend Noel. "In some ways, Sunni Islam is much less centralized than the Shiites. In this respect, I wonder if this splintering isn't similar in some ways to the differences you Christians have between the authority and infallibility of the Roman Catholic Church and the more decentralized Protestant denominations. It's interesting to me that the same root issue can occur in traditions which developed so differently.

"In any case, with us, the fighting continues between Shiites and Sunnis, sometimes only over small differences in prayer and carrying out ritual ablutions. And worse, there are now splinters within Shiites and Sunnis themselves. Everything felt confusing. It was like the security of my childhood faith was burst apart. As Jacques' question suggests, the 'simple' can indeed become 'more complex.' There's more in my evolution, obviously, but let me stop

there as a way of addressing one part of Jacques' question, and ask what reactions you all have to what I've said so far."

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There is a rush of words when Al Hazrumi finishes speaking, like the clatter and rumbling of thunder, or the crashing of multiple waves simultaneously. Akishige picks up a small stick and holds it up. "Where there is much excitement, let us proceed orderly. Who has the stick, speaks. Let the rest of us listen with our hearts." He hands the stick to Prem Devi.

"Thank you sharing that part of your journey, Al Hazrumi. My journey, though different in content, similarly went from simple to complex, and yes, confused. That has been my experience exactly. Historically, there is agreement that Buddha was born into a Hindu family. Some believe he died a Hindu, and that others after him used his words to create a new religion that said our philosophical Vedas with their Upanishads, involved questions which tended not to edification, that there was no God, no Brahman, and that Buddha's spiritual practice, though growing from ours, was more highly evolved. Pausing and glancing at the group she adds, almost parenthetically and rhetorically "Do you see any parallels with Jews, Jesus, and Christianity? Then continues:

"Some in my country were willing to try to bridge the divide. For example, the great Mahatma Gandhi said, "By his immense sacrifice, by his great renunciation and by the immaculate purity of his life, he left an indelible impression upon Hinduism, and Hinduism owes an eternal debt of gratitude to that great teacher.

"But others thought differently. Even while praising Buddha for his tolerance, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a Hindu steeped in the tenets of the Vedas and Vedanta, insists that Buddhism is an offshoot of Hinduism, and even goes to the extent of calling the Buddha a Hindu. In one of his books he writes that the Buddha himself did not feel he was starting a new religion, but was merely restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of Hinduism.

"But the Buddha himself declares that his teaching was a revelation of truths discovered by himself, not known to his contemporaries, not inherited from past tradition. Thus, in his very first sermon, referring to the Four Noble Truths, he notes his vision of things unheard of before:

Monks, with the thought 'This is the noble truth of suffering, this is its cause, this is its cessation, this is the way leading to its cessation,' there arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, insight, and light concerning things unheard of before.' (*pubbesu ananussutesu dhammesu*).

"So there was a lot of disagreement between Hindus and Buddhists about what was new, what was old, and how they were related to each other. But personally I was less affected by these often historical debates as by the tensions between Hindus and Muslims. I also had to grow up in a land where there was constant tension, arguing, conflict, and even bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims, so much so that we were partitioned into different countries."

Wang Lin Zscho reaches for the stick, she pulls it back. "I'm not quite finished, my friend. I saw in my own religion the same splintering as did Al Hazrumi. Although Buddhism faded from India in the thirteenth century, in Hinduism, we still have battles between those who believe in a God with form (Vaishnava), and those who believe in a formless God (Vedanta) and the non-dualists (Advaita). The non-dualists one must say are Monotheists—with Brahman as All, the One without a second. And the dualists I think are also monotheists, at the deepest level, but their Gods are a trinity: Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, Shiva the destroyer. The former accuse the dualists of idol worship or creating false incarnations of God. But then what about Krishna, baby Krishna (Gopala), the Divine Mother Kali, Shiva, where do they fit?

Or consider the followers of different forms of yoga, which means 'union.' They argue which practice is the true way to attain that union! Hatha (body) jhana (intellectual) karma (service) and bhakti (emotional), each claiming the

rightness of their way. Ommmmmm. It became so confusing. From union, so much complexity."

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Prem Devi then hands the stick to Wang Lin Zscho. "The Buddha's teachings traveled to China, and we Taoists felt we could learn much from them. We could easily harmonize with the non-theistic approach, and we valued as well the clarity and simplicity when compared to the complex, highly categorized approach the Confucians. Whereas we saw problems coming from too many words and differentiation, Confucians saw the problem as not enough words and distinctions. But there were differences between us and the Buddhists as well. All was not simple. Even our concepts of emptiness are different. Buddhist sunyata is different from our emptiness, 'wu', but more similar to our other term for emptiness 'kung.'

Further, we saw the Buddhists splinter over the course of time into ten different schools in China, among them the reality school (Abhidharma), the Lotus school (which tried to absorb the Nirvana school); the intuitive school; the discipline school; the esoteric school; the pure land school.' But we did the same. Look at our Tai Chi. We have at least five different styles: the Ch'en style (and the Guang Ping variation which is the one I now practice) the Yang style; two Wu styles, and the Sun style. Now there are dozens of new styles, hybrids and offshoots, with a certain amount of disharmony among them. Often practitioners of each from are like people in different apartments of the same building, believing theirs is the best, most comfortable, 'true' apartment. So, your experiences are similar to mine."

He bows and hands the stick to Jacques, who merely sees "See, what did I tell you. It's all an existential egoic fight for existence. I have nothing more to add, except your emptiness is much less painful and angst-filled than mine. He hands the stick back to Akishige, who bows silently, then murmurs "Second Stanza" and gives it to Reverend David Noel.

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Reverend Noel stands. It's almost as if he is ready to give a sermon to a hungry flock. "I'm happy to say that there is no such confusion within Christianity," he says laughing. "For example, is the Eucharist an impanation, the embodiment in wine and bread of Christ's material body and blood with the substance of the elements without a change in their nature? This is quite similar to consubstantiation. Or is it a transubstantiation, a miraculous change of the substance of the elements." He smiles at Prim Devi "You think you have problems with your trinity! Don't even get me started. "Just look at the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches; Luther and Protestantism; and the subsequent proliferation of Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, each with their own views of faith, deeds, works, revelation, and the nature of the trinity, He chuckles. " We can posit a continuum of liberal/fundamentalists across these divisions, but sometimes even within the same 'church' there are disagreements and differences that seek to splinter them further apart. Look at the Baptists, founded in 1609. They were dissenters who believed that people must be old enough to make a conscious choice to accept Christ before they were baptized. A reasonable view, right Jacques? An emphasis on free choice. It's said of Baptists, Two Baptists, three opinions. Reb Jonathan said the same about Jews.

"How can all this occur from one God? The turf battles in Jerusalem at the Church of All Nations are a microcosm for the religious diversity--maybe chaos is a better word--that abounds." I nod in recognition.

Then his face turn serious. "I am sorry to say what all of us know only too well, that our actions toward our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters have often been something less than charitable. Just look at what is written in what we call the 'New' Testament about our Jewish kin; consider the Crusades we launched against the Muslims; and how we often attempt to demonize them as heretics. But these prejudices and hatreds aren't confined to our fellow

monotheists; even now some Christians are fighting Buddhists in Sri Lanka; and our evangelical missionary efforts--to theists and non-theists alike-- have not always been as charitable and God-focused in their means as one would hope."

He throws his hands up to the sky, as if in supplication. "Sometimes I despair. Where does this animosity come from, this arrogant certainty? I, too, like Jacob here, actually sought the advice and studied with Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan, two wise and thoughtful scholars individuals who have been probing this issue of the Universal/Particular in great depth. Dr. Lisbet said that the battles can't be reduced to psychology, but that psychology can give some insights into the issues. She asked me to imagine the three monotheistic religious as siblings. It's inevitable that each religion, each sibling, would try to establish its turf, and wants to show its specialness and uniqueness to the divine parent." Glancing at Prim Devi, he continues, "Just as Buddha was born, lived, and died a Hindu, Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew. The writings of the Gospels, which occurred decades after his death, by people who didn't even know him, were an attempt to differentiate and separate. But it took several hundred years before there was really the label Christians. The first Christians, after Constantinople, needed to show they were 'better' than the Jewish tradition from which they were born. So they took one aspect of Pharisee Judaism, with its rule-bound, legalistic bent, and cast Christians as those who love versus those who put the divine law first to show their superiority. Then they argue that those poor Jews in the Bible never really knew God---Moses was only allowed to catch a glimpse---but Jesus not only knew God, he was and is God. God really does love us best. Try to top that!"

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"Change for the better is happening, but it is slow, like a small tug boat trying to shift an ocean liner. When I grew up I was taught the Tridentine rite, the traditional Latin Mass:

Almighty and eternal God, who dost not exclude from Thy mercy even Jewish faithlessness: hear our prayers, which we offer for the blindness of that people; remove the veil from their hearts [2 Corinthians 3:13-16]; that acknowledging the light of Thy Truth, which is Christ, they may be delivered from their darkness.

In 1960, Pope John XXIII removed the word "faithless" (Latin: *perfidis*) from the prayer for the conversion of the Jews, as well as reference to their "blindness" and the need to "remove the veil from their hearts." After the Second Vatican Council the prayer was completely revised for the 1970 edition of the Roman Missal.

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of His name and in faithfulness to His covenant. Almighty and eternal God, long ago You gave Your promise to Abraham and his posterity. Listen to Your Church as we pray that the people You first made Your own may arrive at the fullness of redemption. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

"Progress. But ever so slowly."

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Even though Reverend Noel has addressed some painful and difficult topics, there is a good-natured murmuring as he finishes, placing the stick in the center. I think of picking it up. Not to talk about Judaism, but of my memory at Stanford of how all these meditation training courses were popping up, each claiming that it was the best. 'Choose Transcendental Meditation and its secret mantra over Zen Buddhism.' It seems like the same battle for superiority as between Christians and Jews. But while I am formulating this thought, and before I can pick up the stick, Al Hazrumi does.

"Well, we Muslims tried to top it, didn't we? We agreed with you that Jesus was a great prophet. We even say he was so great he hasn't yet died. Of course, we don't believe he is the Son of God because that is heresy, for all are God, and God is not divisible. Our counterpart to Jesus is not Mohammed but a book. Where the Bible records that man was made in God's image and that Jesus as Son of God had so incarnated that divine image he could say if you have seen



him you had seen the Father. But Muslims believe in *Inlibration*, the embodiment of God in a book—the Qur'an. When we are putting you down, we Muslims are united. We believe we are more religious than most of you.

"Just look at how many times we pray each day, as one of the five pillars of Islam, and how good and pure we are to fast each day during Ramadan." He pauses and pats his stomach. "We also believe Mohammed is the last and final prophet before the true Messiah, and that there will be a resurrection followed by a final judgment when the world ends. My Shiite co-religionists believe that there were 12 legitimate successors to Muhammad as caliph, and that the final imam, now called the Mahdi, disappeared when he was taken up in the arms of God, to one day return to earth and play the role of savior. This view is similar to the Jews in that we also look ahead to the coming of the Messiah, and certainly don't believe the messiah was Jesus. Further, whereas God had to write the Ten Commandments for Moses, the entire Qur'an was revealed to Mohammed, and when we say revealed, we mean that it has always and forever existed. He surpassed in revelation both Moses and Jesus. Therefore, the Qur'an supersedes both the Old Testament of the Jews and the New Testament of the Christians. We take what is true from each, and discard the rest, just as you Christians felt you took the best from the Jewish Bible and tradition and discarded the rest. The Qur'an says, Muslims are special, and our older brothers and sisters will be jealous, but we should not be bothered by that. We're better, see!"

I take the stick from him and say "I asked the Reb Jonathan be and Dr. Lisbet about the Jews as 'Chosen People.' Dr. Lisbet said to me the same thing she said to Reverend Noel about siblings wanting to think they are the most special. Then I asked how Jews could still feel that way when they are so few, and the Christians and Muslims are so many. One way, she said, is to say that although they are few, those few are select and special. The other way, the Rebbe added, drawing on Maimonides, was to maintain their elder brother

special status by saying how the Christians and Muslims--our younger brothers and sisters-- are really doing proselytizing for Jews! They are just spreading our word about One God, exposing potential converts to the principles of Judaism as the foundation for their religions. See, we win!"

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Akishige takes the stick from me and holds it up. "Time now to stop, at end of second stanza. Next gathering, on Muslim Shabbat, at noon. Topic of discussion, Third Stanza. Universal on other side of Particular. Practice with diligence. Good night."

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What am I to do facing a person who has just drawn their pencil sword, proclaimed "Touché" and that she never backs down, fears nothing and declares "En garde, monsieur?" Clearly the battle is on, as I retrieve my pen from on top of my journals.

We fence playfully, dancing around each other. I am careful not to hurt her, and also try to avoid too much body contact. At one point I "accidentally" drop my pen, and then she drops hers and reaches over to tickle me. I burst into laughter. A brief tickle fight ensues. I enjoy the giggles and also the physical contact. It's been a long time.

"That's better, Mr Ever-Serious." Then she looks down at my journals and says "What are you writing in all those pages? Better yet, what were you working on here just before I came?"

"Just playing with a crossword puzzle" which I pick up and show her "and daydreaming about my future. Trying to figure out the puzzle of my life, or at least what I'm going to do next."

"SHIT."

"What?" I say, not quite believing my ear, to hear profanity from such a sweet face, and out of nowhere--in response to my sharing about the puzzle of my life.

"SHIT, SHIT" she says more loudly, gleefully repeating the word.

"Hey, young lady," I admonish, but with a little smile. I'm from Kansas City, and was brought up to be a gentleman. In polite society, we don't talk like that. Remember what the Rebbe said about right speech? Changing leshan hara to leshan tov?"

"Oh, no, no, you "Oh, no, no, you don't understand!" She laughs. "Don't you remember what Dr. Lisbet said about not jumping to conclusions? Reduce assumptions. Withhold judgments. First, ask and paraphrase and clarify."

What else could she have meant? Maybe she's just going on the attack as her defense. I feel admonished and annoyed and defensive at the same time. Is that progress? I was just trying to be cute. At least part of me was.

"All right, ma'am. If I'm not mistaken, I'd just shared that I'm trying to figure out what I want to do with my life, and you responded with a series of expletives, spouting the word 'Sh--', repeating it several times. Oh, my delicate ear." I cup and cover my right ear. "Could you please elucidate what I'm missing. I ask you judge and jurors, is that not misplaced profanity?"

"Oh, we're in a court room, eh? Well, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, please note as evidence the sheet this young man has laid on the ground, a cross word puzzle. May I direct your attention to 55 across. As you can see, I was just trying to help him, if not figure out the puzzle of his life, at least to figure out part of his cross word puzzle....I rest my case."

She takes the pen from my hand and writes the letters

<b><i>S</i></b>	<b><i>H</i></b>	<b><i>I</i></b>	<b><i>T</i></b>
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I look at where she's pointing. There are four letters that I need to complete the word. I look sheepishly at the puzzle. "Impressive. Sorry. You're right. On all accounts. Sorry. You win this round." I'll be sure and give you credit--for helping me solve my cross-word puzzle. Now, if you can do

as well in helping my complete the puzzle of my life, or at least what I'm going to do next."

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"How about play the flute?" She points to the instrument lying on the ground. "I was drawn to the sound as I was walking over to my tree. I didn't know you played."

"Very concrete, aren't you? Right in the here and now." I smile at her, pick up the flute and play a few notes, just letting the sounds and textures and tones emerge. At first they are mournful, minor, long notes. Then there are a few playful notes. I close my eyes and feel their colors, hear their tensions and harmonies. As I play, I have a sense of trust that things are moving in the right direction, even if I'm not at all clear what that means.

After a few minutes, I put the flute down, open my eyes, and look at Joie. She is swaying in a slow gentle dance looking up at the clouds. As my music stops, she does a quick curtsy, a half spin pirouette, and sits down.

I give a courtly bow, and say "Thank you. You were right once again. Playing the flute was just what I needed to do next." She gives a light nod back, and I add "I like the way you dance. It's unselfconscious. You seem very comfortable with your body."

"That's from my grandma. She's not a very religious Jew, more of a Zionist socialist--I guess it runs in the family. But, paradoxically, and in her own way, she's very spiritual. For her, music, dance, and movement are her prayers. She imparted that to me. When I was a teenager she encouraged me to ride the subway to the Jewish Community Center to take guitar lessons. When I would play even my simple songs, she'd move around the living room joyously, letting her arms reach to the heavens. I used to be embarrassed to play the guitar, and to dance. But she told me that St Augustine said that when you sing you are praying twice. But of course she couldn't let Augustine have the last word. So she told me that when you dance and sing you are at first praying to

God; then you are feeling God; finally you are a musical note being played by God. It's like, in those moments, God is singing to and with God; God is dancing with God."

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It's Friday at noon, and we've once again regathered our group, this time on the Islamic Sabbath. I think of Joie's words. God dancing with God. Sometimes, in the presence of this group, I feel that's what we're doing. Silently. Motionlessly. With words. With movement. For the sake of God. With God.

"It feels like the child's pose when our bodies lie over our thighs," Prem Devi comments.

"When we're upright, our buttocks on our heels, toes tucked under, it feels like one of our Buddhist meditation postures," Akishige adds. "See how our traditions are coming together. Women praying with men; 'infidels' sharing with the faithful. Simple on the other side. Third stanza."

Al Hazrumi has just led us in a prayer at noon, while intoning several surahs from the Qur'an. "Islam is derived from the Arabic root 'Salema': peace, purity, submission and obedience. In the religious sense, Islam means submission to the will of God and obedience to His law. When we pray, we are reminded of this daily."

He holds out his arms, as if embracing our group. "I look forward to dancing with you this evening as our Shabbat becomes the Jewish Shabbat." He then directs his calm gaze at Akishige, "I very much want to move toward the toward the third stanza, as you instructed us." He smiles. "Seeking that third stanza has been the main thrust of my life. I also believe the task is not easy. We need to find a balance between dwelling in differences, versus not acknowledging the problematic areas. As I was preparing for our Sabbath gathering today, I was reminded that it is true Jews, Christians, and Muslims have the Sabbaths in common, though on different days. We all use the Sabbath as

a time to pray, as it says in the Qur'an, (62:9), 'O you who believe, when the Congregational Prayer is announced on Friday, you shall hasten to the commemoration of Allah, and drop all business. That is best for you if ye but knew!' So, here we see the commonalities among our monotheistic traditions regard the Sabbath. I wish I could stop there, but honesty impels me to continue--'in and (hopefully) through."

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"We do not take the whole day for the Sabbath, as do the Orthodox Jews. In your bible it says "In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested, and was refreshed" (Exodus 31:17). According to the Holy Qur'an, the Final Testament, God does not get tired 'Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him" (Qur'an 2:255). The Qur'an further states (16:124) that the Sabbath day of complete rest was only required for Jews. It also says that although Allah created the heavens and the Earth in six days, then He settled down on the Throne to administer matters (10:3).' This could be seen as a criticism of the Jewish God, who needed to rest a full day, whereas our God, the true God, requires no rest. Is God a human that gets tired and needs to rest and refresh? Of course not. Allah clarified the matter in His own words when He declared: 'And verily We created the heavens and the earth and all that is between them in six periods, and naught of weariness touched us (Qur'an 50:38 see also v. 15).

"There is no human weaknesses that should be attributed to God. The intention of the Sabbath is not to rest, but to remember the beautiful Creation God made. Even Prophet Jesus emphasizes the Jews' misinterpretation of the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-5: Jesus observed the Sabbath, but criticized the Pharisees' overly strict rules and regulations concerning the day of rest. He emphasized throughout his ministry a different purpose for the Sabbath: a day to be enjoyed by the believer, and a time when many normal activities were quite permissible.

The idea that God rests like humans and gets refreshed like humans was also criticized by Jesus. According to John, he declared that God never stops working, even on the Sabbath day (see John 5:16)."

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"As long as we are looking at differences, one might add, why the assumption that this one God is male?" Prem Devi adds. "Mother Kali would challenge you, playfully, but perhaps with her sword, also!" She turns to me. "I didn't want to say anything when you quoted that lovely line from the Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of the Fathers. I understand that among the more progressive Jews, some are now retranslating that as Wisdom of the Ancestors. That's certainly a move in the right direction." She turns to at Joie. "Joie has shared her hurtful experience of not being allowed to sing, and pray with Orthodox Jewish men. When you think of divisiveness, it's not possible to leave out the way women have often been treated. Even Ramakrishna was always warning about the dangers of 'women and gold.' I realize that at certain stages of moral and psychological development, it may be good to separate the sexes so as to more easily focus on God. But the unequal way that has been done in so many religions is problematic to say the least, if not unfair, unjust even demanding. And it is not, I believe, the final wisdom or developmental stage. I'm pleased that Al Hazrumi and the rest of you have realized that, and that we can all share worship together."

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"I applaud you for bring this topic up. Certainly we see it in Christianity, too. None of Jesus' apostles were women, and women are mostly marginalized in Christian sects in terms of power and leadership--look at the Catholic Church hierarchy and leadership. I wonder about the source of this need for claiming patriarchal male superiority. And, similarly, why, as we've discussed, each of our three monotheistic faith scriptures finds it necessary to proclaim that they are better, and more elevated than the others. Not only do

we Christians marginalize Ishmael by giving him scant attention, we consciously reject the Jews. Mark says 'Go into the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.'

"What I hear in that is not just respecting our own path, but with evangelical glee and certainty proclaiming its absolute truth, not only for those who believe in Jesus Christ, but for everyone. In fact, it turns out this troubling passage from Mark was actually added a century after the Gospel of Mark was first written. These twelve verses in Mark were written at a time when Christians were either questioning their faith in the resurrection of Jesus, or defending it against skeptics and non-believers. What you see is how individual personal dynamics--insecurity, defensiveness, fear-- and social dynamics of threat and group disunity--led to writings of certitude and absoluteness."

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As I listen to Reverend Noel, I think of my question to the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet about whether the true nature of reality and the universe is holy or indifferent. They are both profound, spiritual people, and had both reflected deeply about this very question. Yet, they were wise enough to challenge me to face my personal issues, and not try to skip my own personal struggles by focusing only on philosophical spiritual ponderings. Now, having faced my own inner issues, I feel I am ready here in Safed to return to these same spiritual concerns, but on the other side of having wrestled with the personal, not as an avoidance of facing myself. I understand now that if we don't do the "inner work" personal dynamics, ego, jealousy, on the personal level, can be written large on the ethnic, gender, and religious levels.

"I asked my teacher, Reb Jonathan, once about the 'chosen people' idea in Judaism. He said there are several passages in the Bible--in Exodus, Amos, and Deuteronomy (14.2), where it says, 'For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; of all the peoples in the earth the Lord your God chose you to be



His (God's) treasured people.' The Bible doesn't clearly explain why God chose Israel, but historically it could be that each of Israel's neighboring communities had its own ethnic or national 'gods', and like a child with many siblings, they wanted to state that somehow they were more favored in the parent's eyes, and they had the best "god." Later Talmudic passages tried to soften this phrase by interpreting the word to mean not 'chosen' but 'choosing.' Israelites were the only ones who 'chose' the "One" God. I suppose existentially, you would like that, Jacques. But it still has the feel of specialness, doesn't it?"

"We have the same problem, I'm sorry to say." Chimes in Al Hazrumi. "In one surah (5:51), it is written, 'You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies; they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them—God does not guide such wrongdoing.' Some Muslims understand from this that we should not trust our monotheistic siblings. Historically, this verse was revealed to the prophet Mohammed after the Battle of Hadh, when Muslims of Medina were overwhelmed by a larger number of nonbelievers from Mecca. Muslims were frightened and some were weak in their faith, and said we should make alliances with Jews and Christians to protect us. The idea behind the verse, I believe, is not that Muslims should shun Jews and Christians once and for all, but that they should honor and trust their own path."

"Why, I wonder, do we need to say, honor your own path, by putting it in the negative about other's paths?" Jacques speaks for the first time today. "The Jewish morning prayer includes the phrase, 'Thank you for not making me a woman.' Rabbis have tried to rationalize this blatant sexism by saying, well, that really means thank you for making me a man, or as I am."

"Maybe it's not exactly right speech, eh?" Akishige joins in.

"We're really leaving out one of the most egregious topics, aren't we?" Reverend Noel notes. "Though the gospels differ in accounts of Jesus' Passion

and Crucifixion, all cite Jews as primarily responsible for His death. One difficult passage is where Pontius Pilate the Roman procurator explains, 'I am innocent of this man's blood' and the crowd answers, 'His blood be on us and our children.' This is troubling because Imperial Rome had far more to do with the death of Jesus than the Gospels reflect. But more problematic and disturbing is the way Christians have historically used this accusation to persecute Jews, accusing them of 'deicide,' creating a fissure and rivalry with Judaism.

"Could part of the reason be, as I briefly mentioned earlier, because Christianity, small, persecuted, still unsure of its own place, needed to differentiate from and put down its rival? Absolutely. We again see how personal dynamics--a rigidity born of insecurity and the need for self-aggrandizement--can interact with social milieu, culture, historical context, and ethnic chauvinism, and be an impetus for a tradition to delegitimize others, fostering intolerance hatred, even violence under the guise of religious fervor and truth."

He turns to Akishige, with a bow. "I apologize. My 'sermon' went on longer than I planned. I also realize I pulled us back into the second stanza, rather than honoring the third stanza. I'm not sure we're yet ready to live in the third. But that is my, I believe, all of our hopes and prayers.

"What I think we here in Safed are all trying to do is to say, from the deepest wisdom of our traditions, what does God, Allah, Brahman, the Tao, Buddha, expect of us now, today? How can we learn to begin a new conversation of respect, tolerance and understanding so that, while not papering over real differences, we can learn to live together harmoniously and share with each other our deepest wisdom?"

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Reverend Noel begins to speak. "Religions are founded upon and should continue to attempt to theologize order from chaos, love from violence, a common purpose from human misunderstanding. For some, Judaism's structure and

tradition as the original monotheistic religion may appeal. Certainly we Christians want to bring people to worship the God of Israel, the God of the Jewish people. So the end point—a monotheistic God—is the same for both of traditions, as it is for my Islamic brothers and sisters. However, for us, the image, form and God essence of Jesus's mercy, forgiveness, and love is clearly of central importance to us and offers much much-needed solace.

"Perhaps think of what Prem Devi has taught us about Ramakrishna. Some people are visual and like form. Some like a lot of structure, others less so. Some are drawn to the infinity of God, the Ein sof of Judaism, the Adonai, the infinity of God., the formlessness. in the Jewish tradition, Others are drawn to the closeness and caring of a personal God, Eloheinu, our God in the Jewish Shema. I believe we need to consider, as Prem Devi has suggested, that there are many paths up the mountain."

Prem Devi picks up the stick. "Thank you, Reverend Noel. I agree. We Hindus see Jesus as a person of self realized God consciousness, who passed into peaceful Samadh." She hands the stick to Akishige who notes, "Buddhists see Jesus as a Bodhisattva, a person of compassion, a person with universal appeal. Many, though, have problems with the image of a crucified Jesus hanging on the cross. Though we understand the suffering, as recognized in Buddha's First Noble Truth, we find the crucified Jesus as a painful symbol which does not contain peace.

"Buddha's great enlightenment (in Sanskrit annuttara samyak sambodhi) is a direct and conscious realizing of the oneness of the whole universe and of his own unity with all things. The first thing he is purported to have said after his enlightenment was "Wonder of wonders. All sentient beings have this same enlightened nature." There was a sense of oneness, peacefulness, of joy and wonder.

He passes the stick to Al Hazrumi, who shares eagerly. "Islam believes that Jesus was a s great prophet, a servant of God. However, Mohammed

supersedes Jesus as the last and greatest of prophets, and that Jesus did not die on the cross but was taken directly to heaven by God. He will descend and return as a Muslim to unite all believers in total submission to the one God, in this way setting the record straight. His presence will prove the crucifixion was a myth and eventually he will die a natural death."

He lays the stick down, then picks it up again. "Mohammed was also taken directly to heaven in the Night Journey, a physical and spiritual journey on the back of a winged mule-like white beast to 'the farthest mosque'. By tradition this mosque, which came to represent the physical world, was identified as the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. So, you can see why that Mosque at the Temple Mount is so important to us."

He once more starts to put the stick down, then picks it up, and says, "Sorry, but I feel it important to also clarify the concept of jihad. It often takes on the connotation of violence. But jihad has nothing to do with aggressive preemptive violence. The lesser Jihad, according to Mohammed, is defensive only --and allows for the protection of one's family and community. The Greater Jihad is derived from "to strive" in Arabic, and is to help us elevate ourselves spiritually and morally. In some ways I see it like Jacob wrestling with the angel, the Hebrew term Israel to wrestle and struggle toward God as a way of elevating ourselves as humans."

He turns to me. "I believe you, Jacob, all of us, are on a journey, to Mecca, Medina. And like Jesus, Like Abraham, we are servants of the Lord. 'Labbaik Allah, humma labbaik': Here I am Lord, I am here to serve you."

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I love the idea of the commonality of all of us on our journeys, trying to elevate ourselves, to become better, wiser, more compassionate people. This seems a vision all traditions, even existential Jacques, could get behind, a common unifying core.

Then I think of the meaning that Jerusalem has for so many faith traditions. On the one hand, I see some underlying connections--the sacredness of the city for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. On the other hand, from the above conversation about Jesus, I see areas of particularistic disagreement that appear challenging to overcome.

Why do there have to be so many particularistic battles? The challenges posed by "my" religion versus the faith of "others"? What is intended to be a consoling, uplifting belief all too easily becomes conflated with attacking "the enemy," those who hold different beliefs that are also supposed to be consoling and uplifting.

My namesake is discussed in Deuteronomy 33:28

The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms....So Israel dwells securely; the fountain of Jacob lives untroubled in a land of grain and new wine, where even the heavens drip with dew.

The challenge with this passage is what I left out through the ellipsis:

"He drives out the enemy before you, giving the command, 'Destroy him!'"

Maybe if I thought of it as "inner enemies", as Al Hazrumi described the Greater Jihad, the dust on our mirror, it would not seem so aggressive and violent. Otherwise, it seems contradictory to me to feel the peace of God's arms while knowing it comes at the expense of annihilating others.

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"'God dancing with God.' That's beautiful." I look at her tenderly. Do you remember when you invited our class to come listen to you sing at the Shalom Coffee House?"

"I sure do, jerk. I wanted you to come, but you never showed up."

"I watched everybody file out of the class, and I was the only one there. I felt like I was observing the closing credits on a movie screen, after the movie is over. The theatre is still dark, everyone has left, and there I sat,

letting the emotions of the movie I've just watched waft over me. The class is over. And I'm alone. The Rebbe had just told us that the Talmud compares a person in last stages of life to a flickering candle.

"I sat there feeling what I was sure were the last flickers of light and life within me. I wanted to go listen to you. At the least, I wanted to go up to you and thank you for your singing. But I felt such a tightness and constriction in me that I knew I simply wasn't ready. I repeated to myself what Dr. Lisbet said, 'Let the flower bloom at its own pace. You can't tear it open.'" I fiddle with my flute thinking I might pick it up to stop this outpouring of words. "I want you to know that even though I wasn't able to thank you personally for singing then, I thanked you at the time in my heart."

"Wow, see, there are second chances. That's so sweet. I'm touched. It looks like you're letting down a bit that drawbridge around your moat, aren't you?" She laughs, and gently reaches over and pats me on my shoulder. "Now, how about if we sing Hava NaShira as a round?"

She picks up her guitar, with an inviting grin. "Let's start by singing it once more together, then do you want to take the lead and go to the second line, or have me do it?"

"You lead. I'll follow."

"Is that your being a traditional gentleman--ladies first? Or a feminist speaking?"

"It could be a little bit of both. But it's mostly someone who's not very certain of his singing abilities speaking."

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For the next ten minutes, I try. I really do. Initially, she goes first; then I try going first. But each time our voices part, I'm not able to keep my melody, and keep reverting back to singing exactly what she is singing.

It's awkward and embarrassing, but not as much as I would have expected. I remember how bad the musical experience of piano and flute was with Mery. I also

remember how upset I got when Mery tried to give me directions while I was driving. Here, however, I find myself just enjoying the experience, trying to learn a new skill, being in Joie's company, and realizing that, at least for the moment,

"I can't find my own voice. I keep following you."

"It looks like you just can't bear to leave me, huh? Well, we actually sing well together. You're a good sport. With practice, I've no doubt we'll learn to sing in harmony. Even when we're singing different lines. Do you know the poems of Kahil Gibran?"

I shake my head no. "I'll get you a copy. It's beautiful. There's one poem I particularly like that talks about how even in the closest relationship there needs to be space, yet from that space beautiful harmonies can occur. 'As the strings of a lute are apart though they quiver the same music.' When we sing, even different lines of the song, there can be a connection." She looks at me teasingly, and points to the collection of journals around me, "I'm guessing you might like the idea of having your own space. 'The oak and thy cypress they grow not in each other's shadow.'

"I do like that." I take out my notebook and write it down. "I bet you're a good teacher. When are you going to go back to New York to start the new term?"

"I'm not. I have been accepted to a master's teaching program in California this fall." She smiles. "I also made it into a Ph.D. program in history and literature." She grins wider. I aced my GREs. I'm really excited. I'm not sure which to select, or maybe I'll try both for a while. But this summer, I'm free as a bird, so I'm going to stay here in Israel, travel, read, just hang out with my grandma and family. What about you?"

"You mean besides playing the flute and singing with you?" She gives a shy smile, and takes her hand and seemingly absentmindedly runs it through the left

side of her hair, brushing it back it behind her ear. "You seem to have your future beautifully laid out. Like a song's melody.

"I'm not so sure about mine. You know that old saying 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life?' Well, that's kind of how I feel. Like I'm a little baby being born today. And I'm trying to figure out what comes next, while enjoying the newness of being born, and experiencing all that is around me. Long term I have no idea what I want to do." I realize how vulnerable that sounds, but I am okay being vulnerable. With her. With myself. I realize what a shift has occurred in me from just a year ago, when I not only wanted, but needed to have everything planned out in my life. That is where I thought security came from.

"The Rebbe told us a story in class. I don't think you were there, but stop me if you were. There was a Russian Rebbe who each day crossed the road from his home to his Synagogue. One day a Cossack stopped him, and asked where he was going. 'I don't know,' said the Rebbe.

"'What do you mean you don't know. I see you cross every day from your home to the synagogue. Now, where are you going? I demand an answer," the Cossack shouted angrily.

"'I don't know' said the Rebbe again, even-toned.

"With that the Cossack arrested him for insolence and said 'I'm taking you to jail.'

"'See,' the Rebbe said, 'You just don't know.'

"I just don't know. We'll have to see where the universe guides me."

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I watch her smile with her eyes. "A great story. You just never know what will happen or who you will meet that could change the course of your life, do you?" She wrinkles her brow, then says, "My grandma used to sing me a French song, que sera sera. . .whatever will be will be, the future's not ours to see, que sera sera.' Of course, as soon as she finished singing it, she'd



say, 'Let's play a game. Even though you can't know for sure, what are some options that you'd like to see for yourself.' Her eyes challenge me. "Want to play?"

"I'm game. Mom would sing me that song too, but there was never a game at the end. It was basically, who the heck knows! Well, the Rebbe's told me I should think of becoming a Rabbi, if I can learn to see my congregants not as obstacles, but as God's children. Dr. Lisbet said I might enjoy being a psychologist, or traveling to Asia, to study other religious traditions. She said she had some contacts in India and Japan that she could introduce me to. She also mentioned I might enjoy a book by the Russian Sufi, P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, about the writings of Gurdjieff. I love that title. The search for something more."

I pause, noticing how attentively she is listening to me, then continue, "I've also thought it might be fun to start a combined coffee house and book store. Then I'd always have words around me. Maybe you could be the resident singer there." I pick up her guitar and strum with my right hand. "There's some writing I want to do, putting together ideas that the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet suggested I continue to explore in a more systematic fashion. Little things, like death, meaning, the nature of the universe, the particular/universal, what is wisdom." I laugh. "Maybe I'll go someplace quiet, like Safed and see what happens."

"The place of air. Sounds like the perfect environment. Just make sure you don't float away." She looks at me with a touch of flirtatiousness, I think. "You'll need to have someone around who keeps you grounded to earth." She watches me strum, then adds, "And someone to sing with."

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**We talk for another hour about different ways to create this harmony. Finally, Jacques, who has been quiet, says, "I like harmony as much as anyone. At least I tell myself I do. And I like listening to each of you describe**

certain ways each tradition tries to creates harmony, within itself, and with others. I think we all agree that there is a continuum, with some ways less good than others. For example, finding an external enemy unites a group for a time. But that is obviously a primitive solution, so, as William James noted, we need to find a moral equivalent to war. Some ideas are intriguing, like the one Prem Devi told us about in India, where they are trying to find an overarching idea that umbrellas the differences: we are Indians, not Hindus or Muslims. Or as Al Hazrumi noted for Islam, we are all Muslims, regardless of our differences. It is similar to the idea that America is One Nation, e pluribus unum, from many one: the melting pot. Though I think now people are calling it a salad bowl--but that's interesting, too: keep your identity but be part of something larger."

He pauses, then smiles at me. "I of course was moved, like you, by the images almost two years ago, of our fragile little planet from the perspective of space. Aren't we all people? Shouldn't that larger view help us, if not dissolve our differences, at least find more respect for them, and appreciate our commonalities, when we see how similar we are from the distance of the moon?"

He strokes his goatee pensively, then continues. "But when you come back to earth, you realize there are really very few saints among us, and the devil is in the details. Gandhi's idea, Prem Devi, to have a Hindu family adopt and raise a Muslim child who had lost his family in India's Hindu-Muslim conflict, and raise him as Muslim, is beautiful. And have a Muslim family do the same with a Hindu child. But did that work? No. There are, as I said, very few saints among us. The real enemy is, I believe, our own human nature. There is a dark side that all of us develop--out of laziness, survival instinct---I'm not sure what, but it is there, and you just can't obscure the profound differences that have always and will always continue to divide us."

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I'm not sure I can totally disagree with Jacques, but I am also uncomfortable feeling his pessimism. I offer a possible option. "Do you think we would be better off if we could remove all nations and all religions? I was reading about Esperanto, which was developed as a constructed international auxiliary language, by a Russian Jew, L. L. Zamenhof in his 1887 book *Unua Libro. Esperanto*, 'one who hopes'. His goal was to create an easy and flexible language as a universal second language to foster peace and international understanding. Remember in the book of Genesis 11:1 when it says there was a time in human history when we when we all spoke one language 'And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.' Without the divisions of nationalism, religion, language, we could all work together without hindrances."

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Reverend Noel stands and then comes and sits next to me. He actually puts his arm around me in a caring gesture. "I like that dream," he says, "so much so that I asked that very question to a scholar of religion I deeply admire and respect, Huston Smith, who is as knowledgeable as anyone I know about the world's religions. I told him I wanted to raise my children in a universal religion. I wondered, like Esperanto, if we couldn't find the essence of each tradition, the root, the grammar and form a common ethics. He told me two things. First, he said, look at how evolution evolves from the simple to the complex, how diversity is what created higher forms of life and consciousness. After the Garden of Eden, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, we can't go backward, but must go forward: in and through. We need wisdom on the other side of knowledge. With language, we are now in a post Tower of Babel phase:

***and the Lord said, "Behold, the people is one and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, so they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth. (Genesis 11:6-8)***

"Our task, he told me, with language and religion, is to learn to understand each other, not to try to recreate the single cell organism, or to create a Waring blender, a mishmash of faith and conformity. Culture and context are not unimportant, and you don't want to eviscerate them in a search for commonality. Differentiation in the human body is not a bad thing. Lungs, heart, kidney, etc. The issue is how to have them interconnected and working for the good of the whole organism. Therefore, he said he disagrees with the idea of teaching one universal language as a goal. Rather he believes we should continue to teach one particular language, and then build connections and bridges by learning other languages. Similarly, he doesn't feel you can teach a universal essence of religion without going through a particularistic path. But you can, while teaching one path, follow the advice of the Dalai Lama, 'Practice your own tradition, but respect all traditions.'"

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I hear the clapping of hands. It's Jacques. "Beautiful sentiments. Truly. But it forgets only one thing. Human nature. I don't want to posit an innate sinister force, for I think we are all blank slates, but the real 'enemy' is our own indifferent, basically amoral natures, and it is easier to emotionally and reflexively fear the other than to do the painstaking work of trying to understand and learn about the other. Didn't Ernst Becker say, 'It's much easier to destroy a building than to build and create one.' As I look at my honored company here, I see three pure monotheists. Actually four, for Prem Devi, with all of your gods, there still is only One, as I understand your tradition. Then there are three of us who believe in no God, but rather various forms of emptiness—Tao, isness, and," here he chuckles "my angst-filled emptiness. But what none of us is talking about is how our views of the universe, and human nature, account for evil, the darker side of human nature. Where does that come from? How do you account for it in your world view?"

He taps his foot on the ground. "As we saw, each of our traditions has found a way to project darker nature onto other groups. I know we here are seeking to move beyond that. Last week we tossed our 'sins' into water as part of the Jewish Tashlich ceremony. I like that ceremony, and you didn't see me hesitate to do it. But I ask you, where do those sins come from? And if we cast them into water, as I've already asked, aren't we polluting the water. Amidst all this talk of light, are we afraid to address the darkness? Any takers?"

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I reach over and pick up the stick to signal I'm willing to start. "Since I invited you all to do the tashlich, I'll give it a try, with my limited knowledge. I guess I was so proud to even know about that ceremony, and must admit it felt good to me to cast my 'sins' away, that I didn't really think through systematically the issues you are raising. I can see it's not easy to figure out all this stuff out once and for all.

"Okay, my understanding of the Kabbalistic view is that God is pure, all wise, all knowing, and all compassionate. The question then is why are there impurities in us that keep us from knowing, being like, and emulating God. The Biblical view of the fall says we were once in paradise--made in the image of God, but through eating of the forbidden fruit, we were expelled from paradise, and toil, pain, and death entered the world (Genesis 2.3)."

I nod at Reverend Noel. "If I'm not mistaken, this is where the Christian 'original sin' comes from." He nods. I continue. "Though some Kabbalists believe that this is the way evil entered the world, most Rabbis don't teach a doctrine of original sin (het kadmon). There is a view that the serpent transmitted a 'blemish' to Eve, which she passed onto her descendants. The tradition goes on to say that we were restored to perfection at Sinai.

"But that didn't last very long either, undone by the sin of the golden calf. This is all pretty unsatisfying, I agree with you" glancing at Jacques.

"It doesn't account for why golden calves, it blames Eve and the snake, so where is human responsibility? Some say God gave Adam and Eve free will when they were created, but it was not until they ate the fruit that they became aware of the possibility of choosing to do evil or good, as they originally had no knowledge of either.

"One view, espoused by Reb Luria of Safed, is that to create a space for humans, God contracted (Tzimzum), creating a vessel for human life. But God's light was still too powerful, and the vessel cracked. The pieces of the vessel became covered by husks (kleipot) that hide the divine sparks beneath. The husks represent impurities, and our task as humans is to uncover the sparks of God that lie beneath and within each of us--to repair and cleanse ourselves, to find our pure souls. As we repair ourselves, we also repair the world, which, in a lovely cycle, continues our self-repair." I smile, pleased at how succinctly and thoughtfully I've shared this.

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"You see the soul as pure. We see it as an empty mirror, our pure Buddha nature," Akishige responds. "Empty. Pure. Same to me. 'Form is formlessness, formlessness is form.' The great void, your Ein Sof, our Sunyata. The void is everywhere. Tathata. Are these two seemingly different worldviews that are really the same, just flip sides of the full (or empty) coin?

"And your husks, our dust. Therefore, at least in the Northern School, we believe that our task is to cleanse the distortions--ego, greed, laziness--off the mirror, so that we can see clearly and without distortion. Like your repairing the self and the world."

Jacques takes the stick. "Let me speak first to our young lad's efforts to elucidate God, vessels and husks. Given my world view, that of course makes no sense to me. But even from your worldview, it also doesn't make sense. If God is everywhere, all powerful, and all knowing, can God contract into a space where God isn't? That doesn't make any sense. And if God is everything then what are

the husks covering God but God? Or what is dust but God? Plagues are God?

Pharaoh is God? Moses is God? Can you really logically believe that? And if God is all knowing, wouldn't God have known that God's light would be too strong and break the vessels?

"How can any intelligent person espouse such a belief, which involves so many illogical contortions?" Then, turning to Akishige, "And of course you have the same challenge with your pure Buddha nature, though you probably get out of it with some Koan or great Zen story?"

There is silence as Aksishige closes his eyes and bows.

I'm embarrassed and confused. I have some ideas about how to respond which go through my mind.. If the "world is a university for the soul," as the Kaballah says, then each challenge, each piece of dust, husk, is something we have the opportunity to learn from. Plagues can be feedback that there is something amiss and we have to pay attention. In that way they may be part of God's teaching. But there is also some suffering that just seems wrong, random, and even if a lesson might be learned, it casts God in a bad light. I also think of my Sunday School question about if God is everywhere, when you go pee, are you peeing on God? I realize my thoughts are too jumbled to say anything.

Finally, Akishige breaks the silence and says, "Yes, good Koans and good stories...to come. Now, let us give someone else a chance to respond.

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He places the stick down. Reverend Noel picks it up. "Jacques raises some challenging questions we in the faith community have to face. Where does the dust, kleipot, and sin come from if God is all good? Our Christian view of original sin is, as J noted, from Adam who as it says in Romans 5:12 by his misdeed with the apple, transmitted to us not only death but also sin, "For as by the disobedience of one man many [i.e., all men] were made sinners" (Romans 5:19). Most of the Christian concept of sin, both Catholic and Protestant, comes from Augustine, and was reaffirmed at the Council of Trent, which said

that original sin is a 'privation of justice that each child contracts at its conception" (Sess. VI, cap. iii). Augustine concluded that unbaptized infants go to hell because of original sin. Therefore, God's grace is essential to give hope and salvation. Augustine believed that without God's help, the human race is depraved. This view was affirmed by the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Both Luther and Calvin agreed that humans inherit Adamic guilt and are in a state of sin from the moment of conception. This inherently sinful nature is the basis for the Calvinistic doctrine of 'total depravity.' From this perspective, it is clear why hope of salvation through Jesus Christ is so important: 'For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.' (Rom. 5:18-21.) Or, as it is said in John, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5, TNIV).

Al Hazrumi reaches for the stick, but before he can take it, Jacques grasps it. "That sounds so like classic Freudian 'id.' As Freud said in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, people are basically amoral, envious, aggressive; love thy neighbor as thyself runs counter to human nature, due to an innate, depraved, amoral id, from which there is no escape. We're all sinners. It's a pretty dim view of human nature, isn't it? Especially if you don't believe in Jesus to rescue you."

Reverend Noel turns to Al Hazrumi, "Do you mind if I respond?" Al Hazrumi says, "Jacques makes an interesting point. Please let me add some thoughts first, then you can respond to both of us."

"Nice try," Jacques breaks in, "but I have one more point. As bad a personality theory as innate, original sin is, it pales in comparison to the harm done by the opposite view, that glibly cheerful, erroneously optimistic belief that we are all innately pure, good, loving, compassionate, with a



beautiful inner core. What a bunch of rubbish that is, too. Just look around you, at the world. Even within you.

"Whatever happened to honest self-reflection, seeing ourselves as neither good nor bad, but a product of the choices we make, good ol' self-determination?"

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With a flourish, he hands the stick to Al Hazrumi. "So many ideas to untangle, Jacques. Let me begin with my Christian friends. Unlike Christianity, we in Islam believe all humans are innocent at birth, all children are born without sin in the state of purity. We become sinful only when we consciously commit a sin. Islam regards the concept of 'original sin' and the need for atonement by God - via dying on the Cross - as a pure invention of those who came after Jesus Christ, declaring themselves as Christians." He looks at Reverend Noel. "I do not mean to be so blunt, but this seems a major difference between our faiths." He focuses on Akishige, "At least in the Second Stanza, right?" Both nod to each other almost imperceptibly.

"Also, in the Islamic view of sin, one person's sin cannot be transferred to another; nor can the reward due to a person be transferred either. Every individual is responsible only for his or her actions, for God is never unjust. This is made clear in the following in Surah 17, verse 25:

Who receiveth guidance, receiveth it for his own benefit: who goeth astray doth so to his own loss. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another: nor would We punish until We had sent a messenger [to give warning]. ..no soul earns (evil) but against itself, [Qur'an 6:164]

We also believe that it is not that important to determine whether it was Adam or Eve who was tempted. In the Qur'an it says

so when they tasted of the tree, their evil inclinations became manifest to them, and they both began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden; and their Lord called out to them: Did I not forbid you both from that tree and say to you that the Shaitan is your open enemy? They said: Our Lord! We have been unjust to ourselves, and if Thou forgive us not, and have (not) mercy on us, we shall certainly be of the losers. [Qur'an 7:20]

Further, we believe that man and woman were created equally, by God, of the same material and therefore have equal rights to redemption. Adam and Eve are forgiven by the Merciful God after they repent. [Qur'an 2:37]

"Thank you for giving me the chance to share. Who would like the stick now?" He lays it slowly down onto the moist ground. I watch Reverend Noel. If I were he, I'd want to rush in and defend my tradition. I expect him to do so, but instead notice that he has closed his eyes and appears to be peacefully praying, or meditating. I look off at the sun, which is nearing the tops of the hills. An entire afternoon has passed, and we are approaching the Shabbat Hagadol, the great Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the time of return and repentance.

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*When beauty is abstracted  
Then ugliness has been implied;  
When good is abstracted  
Then evil has been implied. (Tao-te Ching 2)*

"Evil is when we have too much desire, when there is a lack of balance between the two opposing forces of yin and yang.

Manifest plainness  
embrace simplicity  
Reduce selfishness  
have few desires.

That is the way of the Tao." Lin Zscho puts the stick down gently. There is a moment of silence. I think how this idea is similar to what the Rebbe said during his Passover teachings about matzah--simple, egoless, reminding us to appreciate what we have (and singing Dayenu--enough). Are there universal truths and wisdom across traditions? As I'm remembering his Passover teachings, Jacques picks up the stick.

"That passivity drives me crazy. But if I can get past that, much of what

you say makes more sense philosophically than the views of our monotheist brothers and sisters. In your belief there is positive and negative, good and evil, and we don't have to deal with how can that be when there is an all good God. Although I don't feel we need to abstract this into some cosmology—for me it's just evolution working—if I were to choose, I like the philosophy of two Persians, Manichaeus and Zoroaster.

Manichaeus focused on dualism, stating that these two natures existed from the beginning, light and darkness, and there is no omnipotent good power. The poet Zoroaster saw the universe as the cosmic struggle between 'truth' and 'lie.' His great contribution was that of free will, to choose truth through using good thoughts, words, and deeds." Jacques turns to Akishige. "It sounds like your Buddhist right speech, right action, doesn't it?"

But without waiting for an answer, he continues, "If you take away all the theological abstractions of absolute right and wrong, then what we humans are faced with is like the *dongjing* that Lin Zscho talked about—what is the best choice we can make in a given situation. I believe everything depends on the situation, and our use of human free will to make authentic existential choices, then deal with the consequences of our actions. What could be more simple than that? No need for Gods, and Satan and original sin, either actually or metaphorically. Just human choice." He ends with a flourish.

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As he starts to place the stick down, Reverend Noel takes it. As he does so, I ask him why he waited so long, when it seemed earlier he was anxious to respond to what Al Hazrumi said. "When I pray, I try to make myself a vessel, and empty myself, so that I can be filled with God. In some ways, it's like Akishige's story of the Zen master and the tea ceremony. What I saw was that, to borrow from Lin Zscho, my 'xujing' was not very good, and my desire was quite high. I felt like it was incumbent on me to defend my faith. Then I remembered

your words from the Pirke Avot, that these discussions are for the sake of God, and I decided the best thing I could do was to start praying for God's guidance. It's not my job to defend God." He smiles good naturedly and shrugs his shoulders, "I think God can do that quite well. It's my job to be guided by God, and if God wants me to respond, I'll hear that soon enough. So, I decided to sit and wait and listen. I learn more when I do that than when I talk, for generally I already know what I'm going to say."

He pauses to cast a kindly gaze at each member of the group. "It seems there are two issues that are the crux of our discussions. One is how can evil exist in a world where God is all good. The second is the issue of original sin and human free will. Let me start with the first. The Apostle John states: "God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1,5). When God finished His creation, 'all that God had made was very good.' (Genesis 1,31). And the Jewish morning prayer says *Elohai Neshama*--'the soul You've placed in me is pure.' From this perspective, when we sin, we are cut off, separated from the pure self."

He turns to Prem Devi, and Joie, "I apologize for my exclusive use of the male pronouns in referring to God. It's engrained habit, and feels confusing now to say Him/Her or She. But please know I'm aware that my word choice can be seen as patriarchal and limiting, and I do not intend it to be."

He then continues "Now, we've been focusing on Adam and Eve, but what about the snake, who tempted them. Where did the snake come from? In our theology, God created angels, who have minds (Acts 12,7-10; 1 Peter 1,12), feelings (Luke 15,10), and wills (Jude 6) and are not limited by a physical body. Evil appeared in the world of angels when Lucifer, one of God's cherubs, rebelled against God's order. This angel, who became Satan ("adversary") out of Lucifer ("angel of light"), was expelled from heaven together with all the others who joined him in his act of rebellion. The cause of his fall was pride, the desire to be independent from God. Evil is not created by God, but is a

perversion of God's creation, a result of using free will against the very purpose it was created for, against free-willed obedience to God.

"Some have said that evil is an illusion. But Jesus Christ spoke directly to Satan at the moment of his temptation (*Matthew* 4,1-11; etc.). He cast out demons (*Mark* 1,21-28). The Apostle Peter warned his fellow Christians that Satan is a real and dangerous presence: 'Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour' (*1 Peter* 5,8)." He turns in my direction. "A rabbi colleague once told me something I've always remembered. 'Whether evil is an independent force, or is 'merely' the absence of light, a shadow, an illusion, there is certainly no question that it is very powerful within each of us and in the world, and has real consequences.'

"Now, our Buddhist friends are probably too polite to say what they're thinking, which is enough 'questions which tend not to edification,' how do we work to relieve suffering? This is where the question comes in of how voluntary our actions are, whether they represent personal sin--which is freely willed, conscious and understood; or are they original sin which is not the result of free will, but something we inherit. If we consider Peter's more closely, we see that he is telling us to learn to control ourselves, and increase our awareness. This, to me, seems an essential focus, and as you may know there are now a small number of denominations that actually want to do away with the idea of original sin. They argue that for a child who has never exercised personal free will, the concept is neither theologically or philosophically palatable, and is not even a helpful metaphor. It diverts our energy from the important task of what can we do as we become more conscious and aware to address the issue of evil and make ourselves and the world a better place. I like the Hebrew phrases--" nodding to me "Healing ourselves, healing the world. Tikkun olam."

He turns to Akishige, then Zin Zscho. "It seems we all have desires, and attachments, and our task is to learn how to address these wisely. The task is not easy, as Paul said:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing...So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. -Rom. 7:15-24, ESV

"So, I ask God, as well as my colleagues, for their guidance, because I, too, like Paul, am I'm still learning how to become wiser and more self aware."

He starts to set the stick down, but pauses, and says, "I had a wonderful conversation with Rabbi Jonathan and Dr.Lisbet about this idea of sin and free will. There is an intriguing Hebrew word in the story of Cain and Abel, *timshel*, where God is talking to Cain about why Cain is angry. *Timshel* means 'you may.' The King James version translates God as saying that 'Thou shalt rule" over this anger, this sin. In John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* where the two characters Lee and Samuel discuss this Biblical phrase, Lee says, 'It was the 'thou shalt' that struck me, because it was a promise that Cain would conquer sin....that (humans) will surely triumph over sin.' In the American Standard Bible version, God doesn't say, 'Thou shalt' but rather, 'Do thou rule over' sin. Lee comments, 'Now this is very different. This is not a promise, it is an order.... to triumph over sin.'

"But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel*-'Thou mayest'- gives a choice. This translation offers humans free will. What do we choose? Are we controlled by, or do we control our inappropriate 'sinful' urges? This view is not one of mere blind obedience to God; it is not one of predestination in which nothing humans can do will interfere with the divine plan. It gives humans choice in how they act.

"You can see in that one word a microcosm of different views of God and humans. You *will* triumph, or you must triumph, or "thou mayest" triumph. Did Cain have free choice? Do we? He did kill his brother, but may we choose a different future?"

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As he sets the stick down, both Jacques and Prem Devi reach for it. Jacques says, "I'll be brief. I know I'm talking a lot. That's better, Reverend Noel, your explanation helps a lot. We're getting closer, but there are still a couple of existential abysses between our views. I certainly know the feeling of Paul that I don't seem to be in control of my own desires and actions. Score one for being human. But he seems to be saying in effect, 'I'm really good. It's not me, but it's sin that's causing this,' so he's not really taking responsibility; and he also seems to be splitting between flesh--the bad stuff--and spirit. Obviously, since I think all we are is flesh, that's not a tenable position for me.

"Look, at one level, we're all trying to lead wiser, more compassionate lives. Does religion help? Take Jesus as an example. So much of what he said is absolutely beautiful and wise. Why do you need a religious edifice around him? I see religion as causing many more problems than it solves. Even being a problem in and of itself. I think this would be a better world if everyone understood science and had confidence in human reason, a secular humanism. Of course, we would have to be cautious, there, too, and learn how reason can be subverted by the passions. As David Hume said, reason is the servant of the passions; passion rules because we search only for evidence that supports the conclusion we want, or validates our feeling. There's a lot more self-exploration that we all need to do.

"Religions fighting among each other in the service of doctrine and belief, is, I believe, often just an expression of individual psychological and

egoic issues--a need for specialness-- writ large. I've talked with Dr. Lisbet about this. It would be a fascinating topic to further explore."

He starts to put the stick down but hesitates. "You see, after meeting you all, I must admit there is a small shift in me. I still feel religion can be misused by those less psychologically developed. But I acknowledge that, if each of you, on your own religious path, can be such authentic compassionate people, maybe there's something there.

"Okay, I'm done. I yield the floor to a wise woman."

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"So you think I need someone to keep me grounded to earth" I continue strumming her guitar. "I'm not so sure. I think I do better up in the clouds. I don't handle reality very well. My mom once said that as much as she loved me, she would advise any woman to steer clear of me, because I only bring heartache. I've pretty much taken up her position, and have decided that on this earthly plane, relationship is not going to be in my cards."

"Is that a warning or a challenge? Or are you pulling in the drawbridge, and adding alligators to the water to make sure the moat is uncrossable?" She laughs. I like the way her eyes crinkle when she smiles. I wonder why I just said what I did? Is there a part of me still afraid that flesh and spirit don't mix? Or is it that I'm really afraid of getting close to anyone again, and am using the flesh/spirit dichotomy as an excuse?

"Part warning. Part fact. I don't want to hurt anyone anymore." And I think to myself, remembering the story of the raft, keeping others at a distance also protects me from others, and the pain of inevitable loss. Right now, at this moment of my life, I'm totally free and unencumbered. My raft is empty. That pain is behind me. Why would I want to fill it again, knowing that in the end, we have to once more let everyone go and endure that suffering another time? I realize how sad and withdrawn these thoughts make me, and try to suppress them. Instead of focusing on self-protection, I continue with the idea



of protecting others. I hope she hasn't noticed the shifts in my mood during the my brief ruminative silence.

"If I keep people from getting close to me and caution them early on, that will protect them." Pointing to her guitar, I add "My brother and I perfected two songs. Here's one we used to sing

Oh, you beautiful doll, you great big beautiful doll,  
if you ever leave me how my heart would ache,  
I want to hold you but I know you'd break,  
oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, you beautiful, oh you beautiful....  
doll

She laughs. "Don't worry about breaking me, Mister. I'm tough. Grandma and mom saw to that!"

I realize how much I like that strength in her. Mery was sensitive, but almost too much so. In many ways she was like mom, a weak woman, frightened, timid, unsure of herself, and insecure. So each ended up with a strong man who could take care of them. Joie is just the opposite. Though agreeable and friendly, she's also clear in her own direction, strong, and with a toughness that no one, not even my father would want to cross. If I ever had a team, she's someone I would want on that team. She could be captain. Well, maybe co-captain.

"And the second song?" She asks, interrupting my ruminations.

"We would put our arms around each other and begin walking, swaggering and swaying, almost as if we were drunk, and then sing,

We are two lost souls,  
on the highway of life.  
One turns left, and the other turns. . .  
left, too!

"Cute! I can just see the two of you. What a nice image of brotherly love. What a nice image of love."

She reaches for the guitar, then says, "Ok, I've got a Beatles song for you my sister and I would sing to lift our spirits, while we would rock out on imaginary guitars:

‘Ob la di, ob-la-da, life goes on, bra  
La-la, how the life goes on  
Ob-la di, ob-la-da, life goes on, bra  
La-la, how the life goes on

Happy ever after in the market place’”

“Your spirits sometimes needed lifting? I would have never guessed. You always seem optimistic and cheerful.”

“I should show you a picture of me when I was seven. My hair was pulled back severely in a pony tail. Well, as severely as my curls would allow. And my face was set and determined, as if I had to carry the weight of the world on my shoulders, which, of course, I felt I did. But my parents, grandmother, would not allow that face. ‘Corners up, Jo’ was their mantra. I’ve learned it well!

Ob-la di, ob-la-da, life goes on, bra  
La-la, how the life goes on

Happy ever after in the market place

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Prem Devi takes the stick from Jacques, and nods at Akishige. “It looks like we have our work cut out for us, don’t we, to move from the second stanza of complexity and confusion to a third stanza of simplicity and clarity. Flesh and/versus spirit; good and/versus evil; human free will, effort, and responsibility and/versus God’s grace; God as One and/versus an incarnated God in human form. Maybe because we have so many gods and so many beliefs in Hinduism, I have had to struggle in one religion with what all of you are wrestling with across religions. As I said, the non-dualist followers of Vedanta often wouldn’t even talk to dualist followers of Vaishnavism, accusing them of worshipping idols and humans as God incarnate.

“In Hinduism we have the concept of Ishta Deva, each person’s specially chosen God. The great illiterate and childlike sage, Ramakrishna, used to say that there are many ways to know and experience God, and that each person

chooses a way to God, and a God that fits their temperament and personality. He'd say to both those who believed in a formless God, and those who believed in God with form, practice your path with complete dedication, but not with complete certainty, for only God can have that. He himself was familiar with both paths, as well as with Christianity and Islam. He knew the formless God, as in Islam, or Vedanta, or the ein sof, the infinite nothing of the eternal God; and the God with form, as in Christianity, or Vaishnava. His preference was the latter, God with form. He didn't want to be the One, as much as he wanted to yearn after and experience the One. As he once said 'I'd rather taste sugar than be sugar.' Having known the One without a Second, he chose to return to the relative plane, and worship 'forms' of the One, sometimes yearning as a child for its mother, sometimes as a cow for its calf, in a loving Bhakti ecstasy."

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"What about spirit and flesh," I ask. "Didn't you say he urged his students to stay away from 'women and gold?'" In spite of myself, I glance surreptitiously toward Joie.

"All the time. He taught that as you seek God, you need, metaphorically, to climb higher on the stairs---like Jacob climbing the ladder to heaven--, leaving each step behind as part of the dualistic, body-focused world. But then Rama said that once you reach the rooftop, you look back and realize that the roof is made of the same material as the steps. The journey is to escape from the flesh and the world and the impediments, in order to reach the One. Then, having reached the One, if you are so inclined, you can return to the world and embrace the many as the One."

"But did that embrace mean literally or symbolically?" I wonder.

"It depends, again. For some, Rama felt they were on a spiritual path and encouraged them to leave everything behind for that path. Others, he encouraged to live a householder life, but to find a woman who was of a spiritual nature

with whom they could share their journey. He even acknowledged that for a few, the path of tantric yoga, where the flesh is seen as part of God, and a vehicle to God was a sincere and helpful path. You may wish to read of Krishna's adventures with the gopis, Radha, in particular, and the sense of yearning and love she had for him. Like all paths, I should add, the tantric path is not without its dangers."

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"So you're saying there can be a split between flesh and spirit as one part of the journey; but you can return and embrace the flesh on the other side; and there can also be a path to God through the flesh. Am I understanding you?"

"Perfectly. And I'm also saying that each of these approaches may be an effective path for some, and not for others. Just like for some bhakti yoga is a helpful chosen path, and for others jhana yoga. I've often wondered if there were a way--perhaps from a God's eye perspective-- to help match people to the most compatible path of faith, perhaps by their temperament and personality? Would it be possible to determine a 'better' or even 'best' match for each person? I wonder if this group, or maybe your psychologist mentor Dr. Lisbet, might wish to explore that at some point?"

I'm taking notes at a dizzying pace. I also make an \* to ask Dr. Lisbet her thoughts about this "choosing/matching." I add: what would "better" mean? Better for that person as in more compatible, feels more comfortable? Better as in would they become a better person, e.g., give more tzedaka; kinder to their community and loved ones? Better as in have more transcendent experiences; more likely to continue a regular faith practice? As I'm writing, Prem Devi continues:

"I've often reflected if religion is a choice. I like the idea of choosing--Jew, existential, born again Christian, or as I noted, different yoga paths. Although we may each be born with parents of a certain religious tradition, at some point we have the knowledge and experience to choose either

to recommit and go more deeply into that tradition, or to choose our own 'God' and tradition.

"As you can see, it follows from this view that religion is not like race or height, but is something that can be chosen, and that certain people are attracted to a certain path, a particular kind of God, a specific belief: form or formlessness; One or emptiness; incarnate or non-dual; spirit without flesh; spirit through flesh."

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Reverend Noel holds out his hand to receive the stick from Prem Devi.

"That was fascinating. And I guess the same question can be asked in terms of how much human effort is helpful or necessary or useful on our part; and how much is it really God's divine grace. On the one hand we say, 'Not my will but Thy will be done.' On the other hand, Paul also said, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' (Phil 4:13) Indeed, in another sense we are told to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.' (Phil 2:12)"

He starts to hand the stick back to her, then adds, "I've also wondered about the poles of justice and mercy. Reb Jonathan and I discussed in Judaism the spiritual energy of chesed, love (mercy), representing the first week of the omer; and the spiritual energy of gevurah, boundaries (justice) the second week. Dr. Lisbet remarked that some individuals are more attracted to one energy, others to the other. Why? And how does this play out in religious institutions and beliefs? For example, recently there was a discussion at Vatican II between conservatives who are portrayed by some as favoring ruler-wielding nuns and strict discipline versus progressives who lean toward a kinder gentler church. Reb Jonathan talked about Tiferet, beauty, the omer of the third week, which balances justice and mercy. But I'd be curious which individuals and why-based on their experiences, upbringing, personality - are more attracted to which of these three energies: Chesed, gevurah, tiferet." As he hands the stick back to Prem Devi, he says to me, "Keep taking notes. Maybe one day you'll convene a

gathering of psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, neuroscientists, and wise religious leaders, to explore these topics more fully."

"I second that idea," Prem Devi replies. "There are several different categories or dimensions regarding matching. One is the topic you raise regarding what 'type' of person gravitates toward justice, mercy, and in what combination. Another is what personality types are attracted to different forms of yoga. A third might be the topic of effort and acceptance. For example, in our classic text, the Bhagavad Gita, it says 'there should not be a hair's breadth between will and action.' This is an example of supreme human self-control, what you describe Paul as seeking. On the other hand, the Gita says we should not be attached to the fruits of our actions. We need to both act with great intention and self-control, and at the same time be able to accept whatever results occur."

"Sometimes Ramakrishna would urge his followers to make more efforts, and state that without human efforts, nothing could be done to achieve control over the self. At other times, he would say that nothing would happen without God's grace, and that effort itself could be a problem, creating an egoic sense of 'self as doer' rather than God as doer and self as instrument of God's will. Strict followers of non-dual Advaita would that They believe that self-agency or self-control is ultimately untrue and therefore problematic since from the perspective of the indivisibility or Oneness of the Universe/God, the notion of their being a separate self who could ever exercise agency or control is seen as illusory.

At still other times he would seek to integrate the two, commenting:

'God's wind is always blowing

But it is up to you to raise the sails.'"

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I remember this phrase from Dr. Lisbet. As I thumb through my notebook to find it, Akishige claps his hands and shares "Very clever. We have a similar

range of views in Buddhism. On one end of the continuum, is Amidah Buddhism, where all one has to do is say the name 'Amidah,' a very miniscule amount of self effort, and one becomes enlightened or 'saved.' On the other end of the continuum, followers of Zen, such as myself, place an enormous emphasis on self-discipline, and controlling the mind. Buddha said that 'a disturbed mind is forever active, jumping hither and thither and is hard to control. But a tranquil mind is peaceful. Therefore it is best to keep the mind under control.... To enjoy good health, to bring true happiness to one's family, to bring peace to all, one must first discipline and control one's own mind.'

"This is reflected in the first of our Ox herding pictures, where a person is chasing a bull (the mind and self) to gain control of it; and the middle pictures where the person is riding the bull (learning to control and rein in the mind and desires). If you see the self as a mirror, with 'dust' being unskillful habits such as sloth, greed, and anger, then the task is to cultivate positive, skillful qualities, and work to diminish negative, unskillful qualities.

"Though of course I try to be non-judgmental, and not view the Amidha way as 'lazy,' it is clear where my preference lies.

"After this discussion, I now wonder why?" He gives a bemused smile.

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Reverend Noel reaches for the stick from Akishige, but Jacques once again intercepts it. "Sorry, but I need to throw in a brief Hallelujah! for Akishige. I totally agree with what you just said. If you believe, as I do, that the universe is random and meaningless, you can see how important it is for each of us to search for meaning, to use our human efforts to 'deny our nothingness' and, as I said, to be like Prometheus, overcoming our passivity and helplessness in the face of nature's vagaries, so we can actively change and alter our lives in a positive direction. Why do we have the phrase 'God helps those who help themselves?' It's because we humans know that it is up to us to be self-

determining. Look at Aesop's fable of the 6th century B.C. 'Hercules and the Wagoner. A Wagoner was once driving a heavy load along a very muddy way. At last he came to a part of the road where the wheels sank half-way into the mire, and the more the horses pulled, the deeper sank the wheels. So the Wagoner threw down his whip, and knelt down and prayed to Hercules the Strong. 'O Hercules, help me in this my hour of distress,' quoth he. But Hercules appeared to him, and said: 'Tut, man, don't sprawl there. Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel.' The gods help them that help themselves '

"Of course, it's obvious we can't control everything, so we created those pesky gods to remind us of our limitations and punish us for our hubris. And we created morality stories of trying to reach too high. Prometheus helped humanity, but then the story says he oversteps and challenges the gods and takes fire from the throne of Zeus. He is punished for his hubris of trying to be like the gods. But what choice do we have? Done. Here." He hands the stick to Reverend Noel.

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"Just as I shared my own wrestling when I heard Al Hazumi, I also struggle a great deal in my own life with these two poles--on the one hand, self effort, raising my sails to receive God's blessings, and to do good for others; versus just allowing God to steer me and others and life completely, a view I understand now is quite similar to your way of the Tao, Lin Zscho.

"The more I read, the more I realized that these issues were not just personal, but really core in Christianity. One of the central issues that Luther posted on the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, was the doctrine of justification by faith--we are saved not by good deeds, but by our faith in God's grace through Jesus Christ. Works are an outgrowth of faith, and not crucial for 'earning' salvation.

"What I further realize, from my reading, and from listening to each of you, is that this issue is not just central in Christianity, but is also a core



dynamic in all religions. Huston Smith has said that every religious tradition has a view of what he calls 'self-power' and 'other power,' and makes a case for their relative emphasis. But he notes that "self-power" (good works, Zen discipline) is done within a context of belief (e.g. in Buddha, in God's grace)."

"Fascinating," Al Hazrumi responds. "I'm reminded of the reply of the wise fool Nasrudin when asked by a fellow Muslim whether it is best to tie his camel outside the tent, or just trust in Allah that the camel will not just wonder away. Nasrudin mused, 'Trust in Allah and tie your camel.'"

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There are smiles of joy and understanding at Al Hazrumi's comment. Prem Devi says, "Huston Smith's perspective helps me to understand what I've often perceived as contradictions in M's writings on Ramakrishna. In one place, Ramakrishna will say spiritual discipline is necessary. Even the Divine Mother had to practice and discipline herself. This seems like the raising of our sail, our effort. Then, in another place, Ramakrishna will say, it's all about God's grace. God is the doer, we are just instruments of God. Sometimes Rama describes us as the servants of God, sometimes as part of God, and sometimes, according to Rama, God says 'You are the same as I; so there is neither doer nor doing. In fact, Rama believes fundamentally that it is all One without a Second, and there is no good or evil, no knowledge or ignorance, and the world is not only not a university for the soul, but there is nothing to learn. Yet, later, Rama will caution, 'Remember, the wave is in the Ganges, but the Ganges is not in the wave.' Are these just different states of consciousness? Different developmental phases? I wish he were still alive so I could talk to him, or wring his neck, or bow down to him in awe."

Akishige grins. "He seems a master of Zen Koans, those verbal questions which the intellect cannot answer—like the sound of one hand clapping, or trying to touch your elbow with the hand of the same arm! The issues of evil, dust,

human effort versus all-is-one is a koan at the very core of Zen, too. Let me tell you a story, which Jacques knew I would.

"In China, the old 5th patriarch of Zen was dying. To find his successor he held a poetry contest, and only one poem was submitted: 'We are pure mirrors, but dust hides our pure Buddha nature. Therefore we must constantly polish the dust, and cleanse the mirror.' The author won the contest, as his was the only poem submitted.

"That night, Hui-neng, a lowly worker on the grounds, wrote his own poem, and put it on the door of the meditation hall: 'There is no dust, no mirror no self.'

The dying fifth patriarch realized Hui-neng had seen through the illusion of duality into the oneness (void, sunyata) of nature. He called Hui-neng in, and said, in essence, I have good news and bad news. The good news is you are the Sixth patriarch. The bad news is you had better flee, because otherwise you may be killed, because many will not like your view. So, Hui-neng fled south, to form the Sudden Enlightenment Southern School of Zen, based on his non-dualistic insight. The Northern School continued to take a slower, gradual, dust-clearing approach to enlightenment."

He turns to Prem Devi. "The question you raise for us seems quite profound. Clearly there are some people who follow their religion just because that's what they were taught. And really, until the last hundred years, there hasn't been that much contact among different traditions. But now, given the richness of all the traditions, and the variation within traditions, is it possible that certain people are attracted for some reasons which we might be able to understand, to one religious view and others to another view." He pauses, reflecting. "Maybe, as you suggest it might be developmental, where they are attracted to a certain view at a certain time in their life, and another view at a different time." He pauses again, closes his eyes, and is quite for about twenty seconds. I watch his peaceful breathing.

When he opens his eyes, he says, "With your indulgence, I was thinking that in our classic ox-herding pictures, that I just mentioned, in the early stages of development you might say--we seek to control the bull. But the last pictures in the series are of two kinds. One is empty. Even though at one phase of life we may need to seek to control the bull, the mind, the bad habits, this picture suggests there comes a point in wisdom when we learn that there is no self, no bull, only unity. From that perspective, as Ramakrishna says, there is nothing to learn, nothing to seek. This is the archetype of the Arhat, who has attained Nirvana, and does not return.

"There is a second ending. Let me preface our discussion of it with a story. Sometimes Buddha dresses up in different guises and appears to individuals who are on the threshold of enlightenment. Once, he did so in the mountains of the Himalayas, where he met a poor, man carrying a heavy bundle up the mountain. The person was discouraged, and felt there was no way to continue up the mountain, which symbolized the search for wisdom. At that moment, he encountered the Buddha, disguised as an old person, coming down the mountain, and told the disguised Buddha of his suffering and woe. The Buddha responded, 'Drop your bundle.' The poor person did so, and instantly, became enlightened. After several moments, he looked at the Buddha, and said, 'Now what do I do?' To which the Buddha replied 'Pick up your bundle and continue your journey.'

"There is an alternative, final picture in the ox-herding series, the archetype of the Bodhisattva, one who, like the Arhat has attained enlightenment, but then chooses to return to help others. In this other final picture, there is an old man and a young boy heading toward the village. The old man is going to be a mentor to the young boy, and help teach him how to ride the bull, control his mind, thus beginning the series all over again.'" He bows. "Simple. Complex. Simple. The third stanza."

Reverend Noel bows back, saying "Quoting now from Isaiah 40:31 But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew [their] strength; they shall mount up

with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; [and] they shall walk, and not faint." Both/and, self and Other.

I make a note to review the Rebbe's notes on Moses at the Reed Sea, praising and praying to God to part the seas, and God saying "Take a step already, Moses." The interconnection between this "self" effort and "Other/other effort" is fascinating across traditions. I wonder why there is some commonality of theme, yet variation within proportion attributed to each. Might this be a topic to further explore regarding Prem Devi's idea of "matching"?

As the evening ends, Akishige hands me a book, *A Thousand Cranes* saying "You might enjoy, young writer."

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Ob-la di, ob-la-da, life goes on, bra  
La-la, how the life goes on

Happy ever after in the market place

She repeats the verse, and I join in.

"I can see the corner's up Joie. Even the name 'joy.' Is that why they named you that? So that every time someone said your name, they and you would be reminded to be happy?"

"Maybe secretly. That's a cute idea. Actually, maybe that's why I changed it. My real name is Johanna. I think my parents wanted a boy. Or at least a great pianist, or composer. They named me after Bach, as in Johann."

"Interesting." I stroke an imaginary goatee. "It seems the meaning in your name demands deep interpretation."

"Are you psychoanalyzing me?" She smiles and with a toss of her neck, throws her hair over her right shoulder.

"Probably, but I don't know enough, yet. But I will tell you that I was jealous of you in class a couple of weeks ago."

"Why?"

"I think it was your chutzpah, an inner strength. I sometimes felt that some of the questions in the class fell into the apple-polishing variety. Others, like mine, were often coming from a place of anger or challenge, to prove I was a rebel, and didn't need the Rebbe's and Dr. Lisbet's approval. But you asked a question which showed you were willing to challenge them, but from a place of heart and concern. I admired you, and was jealous at the same time. Do you remember the question?" She shakes her head sideways, smiling.

"You asked them, 'Why are you talking so much about inner enslavement. And why just of the Jews? Just listen to the mortar fire. Jews are suffering. But so are Palestinians. People in India and Africa are starving.' Your question was tough, even fiery, for the norm of the class, but your expression was not harsh; it was kind, compassionate, concerned.

"I thought Dr. Lisbet might be upset with your question, because she in particular does not like to be interrupted. I even watched to see how the Rebbe was going to react, because it wasn't the direction in which he was taking the class, either. But instead, they both thanked you, and even commented that the question was 'Superb.' Then they added," and here I thumb through my journal until I find the earmarked page "You really raise two brilliant questions. Can the inner and outer work together, and how? And, what is the relationship of the particular, our Jewish path, history, and story, and the universal: the connection to all people, all races, all suffering, and One God?"

"I remember feeling somewhat embarrassed, and, as I said, in awe. I was glad no one could see inside my mind." I stare at the ground awkwardly. "Though I guess I'm letting you take a look in now. Your question was so much wiser and deeper and less self-absorbed than my thoughts."

"Well, shame on you. You didn't realize that not only was the class a competition for who would get the best grades; but so is life. Who can become the best person, fastest, right?"

I turn from the ground and meet her eyes directly. "I like that you don't take me too seriously, at least not as seriously as I sometimes take myself. Of course, there are no grades. Though I often miss that. It at least gave a framework. For now, I'm trying to live on the Rebbe's premise that we're each a piece of the cosmic puzzle and I'm doing my best to find out exactly what my piece is. But I've got to tell you, it feels like a slow evolution. I'm so glad you didn't know me even a year ago."

"You don't think I would have liked you? Did you like you?"

"Well, at the time, I liked me too much, I think. You remember Dr. Lisbet talking about her experiences with Zen, and the idea of dust covering the mirror? She said the reason some people are afraid to look at themselves is they fear they won't see dust, but poison. I had that fear. I know there's less dust now. I hope there's no poison. But I'm still pretty dust covered."

She takes her hand, and wipes it playfully on my arm. "I don't see so much dust. There was some drizzle last night and the ground's still a bit damp. So whatever might have been there is removed!" She has a cute, playful quality. What a great combination with inner strength and social commitment. How did she appear today, Easter Sunday, in the Mount of Olives? I glance upward to the clouds, to the heavens. No matter how, I am grateful.

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"What did you think of Reb Jonathan's answer?" she asks, interrupting my reverie.

"Overall I liked it, the idea of the particular leading to the universal. But I'm still trying to sort out the implications of that for all the different particulars. By the way, sometime, I'd like share with you what I wrote for that assignment he gave us, last December in the Chanukah class on 'More Light,' when we were supposed to write about our views of our own religion. Would you be willing to look at that?"

"Sure. Of course. Do you have it with you."

I point to my journals. "Never leave home without them. Actually, maybe that's because my home is where they are."

I start thumbing through to find the assignment. I first come across the Rebbe's notes from that class, and glance at them. "According to him, the Jewish story, from Passover to Sinai, is a story of a particular people, but also a universal message and clarion call for struggles worldwide against enslavement--intolerance, racism, dehumanization, war--the suffering of all our brothers and sisters. This outer-directed work can in turn be understood as a universal metaphor for escape from inner bondage, a movement toward and trying to find and receive the highest wisdom of which we are capable."

"I must admit, I lean more toward the outer doing. Maybe it's my Rumanian great-grandfather's revolutionary zeal, or my grandmother's, 'Less talk, more action.' 'Practice your piano.' 'Help those in need.' But I also saw the wisdom in how he how he connected the inner with the outer, pointing out that inner plagues--hardness of heart, insensitivity, selfishness, greed-- can create suffering in the external world, and so that's why they felt it important to spend some of the early sessions of the Wisdom Passover class having us work on the internal meaning of Passover. Then, that internal work can be a way toward bringing that wisdom into the external world. Not my strength--though I imagine reflecting on the inner world is one of yours." She points again to all the notebooks.

I smile sheepishly, then add, "I thought Dr. Lisbet's observations about the Arhat and Bodhisattva were helpful, too. Judaism's model would certainly not be the Arhat--the wise one--who leaves the world of suffering behind to live in a cave forever. But would be more like the compassionate Bodhisattva--the wise person who could escape the world for Nirvana, and end the wheel of samsara, but stays to help all living beings...tikkun olam. I'm not sure which one appeals to me more, although I imagine you and I have slightly different inclinations."

"True. But in fairness I think Dr. Lisbet was making the point that even the Arahats, meditating in a cave, can be giving and contributing. To know that someone, somewhere, is really doing that deep work on themselves is inspiring, even to me. Though I'm more attracted temperamentally to action and service, I'm learning that I need to be careful to not judge harshly those whose piece of the puzzle is the contemplative life. As she and the Rebbe said, each can serve in their own way, and contribute to the greater healing of us all."

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I am still leafing through my papers, looking for my essay. "Did you do this assignment? 'As you explore yourself during Passover, and the weeks in the wilderness following Passover, take time to explore where and how you are working to relieve suffering of those in bondage in the external world. Then note how you are working to relieve suffering and bondage in your internal world. Finally, note which one seems more 'true' and 'important' to you, and spend some time exploring why you might feel that way.'"

"I thought about it a bit, but didn't write anything down. I'm not a journal type person. Too much writing in place of doing. I did more actions, like working in a soup kitchen for recent immigrants. How about you?"

"I'm impressed. As you may have guessed, I made some notes in my journal. But I was working on a play that I wanted to finish, so I didn't spend too much time on it. Maybe in Safed? It feels like I'm always trying to catch up with some past assignment of my life. Ah, speaking of which, here it is."

I pull out the pages and thumb through them. "Well, this is more internal reflection, my trying to understand which parts of my particular religion appeal to me, and why. There's a lot to question in Judaism. Just look at the way women are treated, a point you've made very clearly."

"Thank you. And I'd say the same about your comment that 'too many people--Jew and non Jew--get caught in the specialness and superiority of



their own particular story.' I can still hear your voice--tough, insistent, interrupting, almost plaintiff, 'Why, do the Jews call themselves chosen? Why is Jesus THE son of God? Why can Christians read our Bible and refer to it as the foundation for the one true faith, and when we read their Bible, we're being sacrilegious? It's like a blood-brain barrier that only goes one way Secretly, I was cheering you on. Yahoo, Who is that brave guy."

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I shrug my shoulders, like, aw, shucks it was nothing, but secretly feel joyous at her admiration. I remember at the time I asked the question, I was feeling a sense of urgency, knowing that this was and is a deeply important question for me. But some of the urgency also came from feeling left out and wanting to rejoin the class dialogue. Motives are so multi-leveled.

"Remember, the Rebbe agreed with you at first, saying--and I begin to read from my journal entry: 'You're right, too many people start to believe absolutely in their particular stories. They forget the goal of religion is universal compassion and love. God is a God of all.' Then he shared that "Those who believe their way is the only true one can be quite compassionate toward their 'own'--but often are less so toward the 'other'--the outgroup. That's one way of understanding why we feel the Bible says so many times to be honoring of the stranger, because it's not an easy thing for us humans to do, so we need to be constantly reminded. That to us is religion at its best.

"Look at Exodus 22.21 'You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him for you were stranger in the land of Egypt.' Then one chapter later, it repeats this injunction almost verbatim: In Exodus 23,9 it says, 'You shall not oppress a stranger since you yourselves know the feelings of a stranger, for you also were strangers in the land of Egypt.' In the book of Leviticus, (19:33-34) it again repeats this theme, and uses it to bolster one of the central tenets of Judaism 'The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourselves: for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.'"

"Why do you think that it's so hard?" Joie asks me. "I know it sounds naïve, but wouldn't you think people would just want to be nice to each other? If you believe that the universe is a sacred, compassionate, loving place, then aren't we all God's children?"

"I love your naiveté. Don't ever lose it." I tell her of my experience this morning in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. "I feel like once again I was given the gift of having faith in humans, of believing that at least the idea of there being peace and love among us is possible. In fact this whole day has been a blessing. I wish it would never end, and everything could continue on just like this. It reminds me of a moment I experienced when I was at Sinai. Everything seemed whole and complete and made sense."

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"That's beautiful. That's the universal essence I think the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet were talking about."

We're silent for several moments. I feel a little awkward, and am not sure what to say. Joie continues, "Maybe the problem is we become like little kids, fighting over a toy. Or big kids, wanting to say our toys are best. Look at my new shiny car. Or even, look how smart my child is; or how pretty she looks. My parents do that all the time. I don't think they're being malicious, but somehow they feel that their children--my brother, sister, and I - are special, more special than others. Sometimes that's nice, and I feel appreciated and loved. But sometimes I feel burdened by the expectations; and often it seems there's a subtle or not so subtle putting down of anyone—including my friends—who aren't part of our familial tree."

"I guess ego can be good, but, as I've learned, also a problem." I write down on a piece of paper: 1) tall tree, cabin, river. 2) matzah. She looks puzzled. "Sorry, sometimes my mind starts going so fast, in too many directions at once. Someday I'd like to tell you a personal story about the tall tree, the cabin, and the river. But I don't want to lose the thread of the

conversation. I was thinking about what the Rebbe said about the inner meaning of the matzah. If we consider leavened bread--hametz-- as rising, puffy, egoic, the matzah, by contrast, is plain, simple, egoless. Every bite of matzah is an opportunity to notice where our egos, our need for specialness, our desire to be unique gets in our way."

"That's great. I didn't think of that when we had our Seder Friday night. Did you?"

I think back to Friday. It seems worlds and lifetimes away. Was it an illusion? An aberration? Something I will have to integrate into the feelings I have today? "No, I didn't have any matzah Friday. But that's also another story."

"Well, we have lots left for the rest of the week. If you come by this evening, we can try to eat matzah egolessly." Then she looks up at me with a smile. "And of course, not be proud of how wise we are while we're eating it with such selflessness."

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There is a silence, a comfortable silence, while an angel passes, I'm sure. Then she asks, "Do you remember the meditation the Rebbe used to end that discussion?"

"Of course." We both smile as I turn to a passage in my notebook and intone, "Melech Ha'Olam, may His name be blessed, Master of the Universe," trying to mimic his accent and inflection. "This is a particular Jewish meditation, and you'll note that the pronoun is male."

"Often, for me, by repeating it over and over, my mind clears, and nothing is there but the sounds of the words. Sometimes, if only for a time, I even experience the Oneness of God during this meditation.'"

Joie interrupts my recitation of the Rebbe's words, "As he was talking, I noticed myself becoming upset, as I often do, at the sexist pronouns and the assumption that God is male. Boy, did he have me suckered."

"Actually, I, too, was getting upset-- at the idea of God as 'Master'; I don't really like the idea that anyone, even God, can control me and order me about, tell me what to do. I also wondered what the meditation had to do with my question about the self-righteousness of various religious particularities.

"But then the Rebbe said, 'When I return from this meditation, I am full of awe and joy that God can allow me this experience, this wondrous God, and SHE ISN'T EVEN JEWISH.'"

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As we both laugh, I notice how happy I am being able to share so openly with her. This is the kind of conversation I longed to have with someone in class, but felt too awkward and too much an outsider to initiate with any of the other students. Yet somehow today, Easter Sunday, the second day of Passover, the day of love within love in counting the Omer, it's happening, and with the one student I most wanted to approach. Without any effort on my part, miraculously she just appears and finds me, "under her tree." How did this happen? I once again look up at the heavens, and give thanks.

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"Since this is a day of new beginnings, a day of dreams, what do you see as your dream for your life?"

"Ha, a simple question. Thanks." I look down at some dirt, and play with it. "I don't actually have an answer in terms of content. But I do know one thing. I dream of my journals telling a story of a deeper, wiser, and better person than when I began them."

She smiles. "What about happier?"

"Maybe not happier. I'm not sure."

"Happy is good."

"I agree. But I also want to explore the mystery. And I'm not sure where that's going to take me. Or will it make me happier."

"I understand exactly what you mean."

Can she really? Her eyes seem playful. Mischievous. And yes, even mysterious.

"Do you believe in magic dust?" she asks.

I'm caught off guard and respond, trying to be match her playful tone, "What are you talking about? Like tinker bell or fairies sprinkling potions?"

"Could be. It's like grace, or messages from angels. My grandma says the Hebrew word, Malachi, the last chapter in the Bible, is the same for messenger and angels. Wouldn't that be a good way to end a story, especially for a Jew, with angels and messengers of wisdom? I've always got my eyes out for their sprinkling magic dust."

I reach out for the pen to write down what she's saying. When I take it from her, it's wet, and I realize she has put it in her mouth, and has in fact been chewing on the tip, which is smashed in. She sees me inspecting the tip, and laughs, "A longstanding of mine. I love to chew pens. Sorry."

I show her the callus I have on my middle finger. "This was formed when I was a little boy, from the intensity with which I gripped a pen when I wrote. It's never gone away. I guess writing effects us all in different ways--we effect pens, pens effect us."

As she looks at my finger, she takes hold of it and runs her hand over it. There is something caring in the act, but also sensual. I haven't been touched in months. I feel uncomfortable.

At first I start to draw back, but before I can she notices and then touches all the other cuts and scars on my right hand. I'm surprised that I allow her. It's almost like someone touching my right ear, a place of high vulnerability for me. Somewhat self-consciously, I explain, jokingly, "It's where a scythe accidentally met my fingers during intercourse." She looks at me quizzically. "Are you into some sort of bizarre sexual practice I should know about?"

I explain about the date trees and the kibbutz. "The hardest thing was not being able to write for several months. But now I can, and I can write down what you just said about angels and messengers and magic dust."

I open a journal and take a few notes. She watches, then says, "Yes, definitely a writer. So intense. You know playful is good, too."

"You think!? Let me make a note of that."

"Speaking of marks on our body, I'll tell you a story that my Grandmother told me--you can write it down, too, if you like it. Before a child is born, and while still in heaven, the rabbis taught that all knowledge and wisdom is contained with that child. Just before the child leaves for earth, an angel touches the child, causing the baby to forget what s/he already knows. Our task on earth is to reconnect with the wisdom already inside us. We know the story is true, it is said, because each of us has a mark where the angel touches us, the indentation right beneath our nose." She reaches out her finger and places it on the ridge under my nose. I feel self-conscious at her forwardness, but also enjoy the softness of her touch, and don't pull back.

"I do like that story. It gives me hope. I just have to uncover what's already there."

"Me too. Are you looking for someone to join you for the next phase of your unfolding magical mystery journey?" She says it in a sing song way.

"Like an angel? You're pretty forward, aren't you?"

"Sometimes. I'm also shy." She puts her chin down, closes her eyes and blinks several times. "Like you." It looks more flirtatious than shy. Then she adds, "I also love words. Maybe sometime we can share our writing with each other."

"But now it's getting late, and grandma will be worried about me. I'm going to take off. You missed your first chance for a Passover meal last Friday night. But there are always second chances, I guess especially on Easter Sunday. I hope we'll see you this evening. Both my grandma and I are

looking forward to it."

She holds out her hand to shake mine. I take hold of it and place my other hand around her wrist. I notice that my thumb and index finger easily encircle it. A two-handed hand shake. More intimate than just a handshake. Less intimate than a hug. But a risk for me nonetheless.

We let our hands go. Like leaves falling from a tree. Does the leaf let go consciously, or is it just time for parting?

As she turns to leave, she touches my shoulder lightly, says shalom, and walks away.

As I watch her, I'm struck by how such a strong person could have such small, dainty wrists.

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reet the beloved Sabbath bride, Lecha Dodi," Joie sings. I join in. Prem Devi is moving her hands in a swaying, dance like motion; Al Hazrumi is actually whirling in joy; Lin Zscho is moving to the music in slow, flowing, peaceful tai chi motions; Akishige is meditating with eyes closed; Reverend Noel and even Jacques are humming along as Joie's voice I'm sure is lifted to God's ears. Each of us is joined to the music in our own way, yet joyfully celebrating together.

"Come my beloved." Lecha Dodi.

I imagine Rebbi Shlomo Alkabetz, the composer of the song, and Reb Luria, the "lion" and wise sage, dressed all in white, singing the song, welcoming the beloved Shekinah, the feminine energy, the divine bridge of God, who hides herself away until the coming of the Messiah, but every Shabbat gives us a glimpse. Who is the beloved? It is mysterious. It can mean God, it can mean one's friends to join together in welcoming the Sabbath. We greet the Sabbath bride" *likrat kallah*.

One legend has it that the Jewish Messiah will first appear in Safed, and many of the words and phrases of the lecha dodi are drawn from Isaiah and the vision of Israel as the bride on the great Sabbath of Messianic deliverance. Shabbat, the monastery in time when we are to act and live as if the kingdom of heaven has come; when earth is a heaven.

And this is a particularly special Shabbat, Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of turning, and returning to God, during the Days of Awe between Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur one of the holiest Sabbaths of the year, a special time for teshuvah.



How fortunate and blessed I am to have end up here, surrounded not only by the flapping of angels' wings which do, as advertised, sometimes keep me up at night, but also by a group of fellow travelers and seekers who have gathered, like angels, to this spiritual vortex.

It is said that Jerusalem is the city of fire; Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, the city of water, and Safed, the mystical land of air. I went through the crucible and dark night of the soul in the fire in Jerusalem, struggled on the kibbutz by the Sea of Galilee and bathed in its waters. All has been a quest, a journey for self-enlightenment, an effort toward self-purification, a struggle for personal and spiritual healing.

And now here I am, in Safed, a small village of stone buildings, inner courtyards, narrow cobblestone streets. Safed, for the past two decades, has been an artist colony which suggest to me creativity of thought and being. It is a safe place where I can simply be myself, give free rein to my evolving bohemian free-spirited eccentric character, letting myself blossom and unfold without any external societal constraints as best as I am able--with God's help. I think of The Rebbe sharing with the class the words of Rebbe Nachman, the great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov

Act as if everything depends on you  
Know that everything depends on God

As I look out at the highlands of Safed, angels' wings whishing, I feel the etherealness, literally, of an open sky in all directions. I understand why some feel called here. When Rabbi Luria was 35, Elijah appeared to him in a dream and informed him it was time to leave Egypt--the narrow places--for the hills of Galilee, for Safed. Literally and symbolically, Safed represents the House of God, BethEl, a temple in the Hills. What a perfect place to be on my search, seeking a House of Clarity, Clarity House, in Temple Hills.

Luria was often called The Lion. I wonder if the lion in the fields of my recurring dreams might have referred to him? In any case, I have left the

barren fields, and I, too, have been called here, to sing, dance, laugh, talk, be with this community of like-minded souls. Only partly joking, we have come to call ourselves, the Seven Sages of the Safed Sphere after those wise elders, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove in ancient China, whom Lin Zscho so poetically described to us. We are all seekers from different points of the globe, coming from different traditions, yet it seems we have been guided here to find each other, and talk and laugh and share our planetary and spiritual visions.

I imagine each person, each sage, as a particular color of the spectrum, and that white light is a universal reflection of their combined energy. Each band of light is a beautiful color in and of itself, and all emerge in their uniqueness from the same essence.

That is the vision I want externally, and what I'm hoping is also true internally for me. I'd like to believe that all the different parts of me that I've encountered, if properly polished and cleaned, can represent and one day become sages of my internal bamboo grove. True, they are not all clear, crystalline, and pure yet. Many are still, in the kindest interpretation, uncut diamonds, or diamonds in the rough. Yes, even lumps of coal, or perhaps not yet formed butterflies, larvae waiting for transformation.

But I wonder with enough time in the wilderness, enough efforts at purification, it might not be possible to begin to see myself that way. Certainly there is no better time of the year than the Days of Awe to reflect on these inner "mes". And what this would mean is that even those who have been banished (gerushim) and exiled to the wilderness, have a chance to return and be reintegrated within my internal grove.

As I listen to Joie sing, I am astonished at how quickly the world can change in positive, unexpected ways. Who would have thought, five months ago, when I left the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that I would end up in Safed listening to her sing Lech Dodi. All from a "chance" unexpected meeting in the

**Mount of Olives on Easter Sunday. "Greet the Sabbath Bride" as we all turn to face the temple hills.**

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I realize I don't want Joie to go. I ask if she can stay a bit longer. I'd like to discuss with her in more detail the Rebbe's assignment on our religious upbringing. She looks at her watch, sits back down, and says, "Sure."

I feel happy. I thumb through my journal, find my assignment, and hand her the papers. "When the Rebbe first gave us this assignment to talk about what kind of Jewish organizations and beliefs we were most comfortable with and attracted to, I was somewhat annoyed, even resentful. I didn't like being given an assignment. I didn't want to try to fit myself into established frameworks. And I felt further limited by the assignment being restricted to exclusively Jewish frameworks."

"Do you have a little bit of the rebel in you, don't like being told what to do?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Is that bad?"

"Depends I guess. It could be creative, not wanting to be arbitrarily confined. It could be a petulant teenager saying 'Don't tell me what to do.'"

She takes the papers. "Who knows. It could be both!"

"Ah, someone who knows how to think outside the box, and is not limited to black and white. I'm still working on that, I guess. Interestingly, when I finally started working on this assignment, I got kind of excited."

"Is commitment an issue for you?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Grandma Bea is a strict grammarian and pays rigid attention to words. She's taught me to do the same. You use a lot of conditional words 'somewhat' annoyed; 'kind of' excited. It's as if you're not really willing to commit to the emotion. Sorry. I don't mean to sidetrack you, just something I noticed."

"Interesting. Kind of." I shrug my shoulders in a wishy washy way and try to smile non-defensively. "I do like learning about myself, whether it's through this assignment or your observations. So bring it on! Dr. Lisbet said people are only as safe to be around as they know themselves. I believe that. So, I'm working on learning as much as I can about me. You have permission to share what you notice about me as much as you want. Truly, it's not a sidetrack. It's what I'm committed to." I shrug again. "I think, sort of."

She takes the paper and begins to read. I read over her shoulder.

*Dear Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet, I feel like I'm back in school, trying to compose a systematic paper on my views of the different branches of the tree of Judaism. But I want you to know the context in which I am undertaking this writing.*

As background, I was born Jewish. I am in Israel. I am not interested in the cultural Judaism of Kansas City. And I'm not going to discuss in this paper 'Israel' as nation, but 'Israel as 'wrestling toward and with God.'

*My goal is to evolve into a better person and to more fully understand myself, the nature of the universe, and how I fit in that universe. I'm seeking truth more than comfort, though I want comfort as well.*

*I'm also seeking self-discovery more than tribal kinship or connection, though I don't think I'm opposed to connection if that furthers my spiritual quest. But first and foremost I see myself as a searcher, a seeker, on a spiritual journey, wanting to be a holy person.*

*Obviously I'm willing to explore Judaism as a means to these goals. But I'm not really interested in maintaining a cultural, lox and bagel Judaism, like I had in Kansas City. Nor am I interested in Judaism as a nation state, or Judaism without God, which is what I sensed on the kibbutz. Judaism for me makes no sense unless it includes a spiritual component. Even then, I'd have to consider to what extent I have an actual tribal kinship with others who worship God as Jews.*

*I'm not interested in debates, religious and political, defining who is a Jew and who is not--(for the right of Return)--as discussed in the Knesset. I am also not interested in a Judaism of blood (from mother, as the Orthodox claim, or from father.)*

Joie looks up at me. "Phew. My mom's Irish Protestant. Some might say that rules me out, n'est-ce pas? Though I'm not sure they'd want to fight my grandmother over that."

"I like the way she thinks. Do you feel I'm making the point clearly enough that I'm my own person, and not willing to be limited by any tradition? Don't try to fence me in. Gee, perhaps I was just a tad defensive."

*I feel that I'm a spiritual person first, and exploring my Jewish identity is a subset of that, not the context. I want you to know that I'm not necessarily willing to limit my search to Judaism. There are a lot of trees in the forest. But I guess that will be the topic of another assignment. I've gone over this paper several times, and have attempted to be as honest as I can be for now. This is a snapshot of my views, given my limited understanding and information. But it is more honest, and deeper than I've ever looked before. I look forward to your comments and reactions. But, please, for that part of me that still cares about others' responses, be kind!*

"I sound pretty defensive and timid, don't I? It's interesting to re-read something I wrote several months ago. A lot of changes."

"Shhh, let me read it."

### **Orthodox**

*The part of me that feels the world is confusing, too materialistic, and too secular, is strongly attracted to the Orthodox view. I like their certainty, their effort to live a spiritual life 24 hours a day. Many of the halachic details they utilize to stay G-d focused seem helpful and wise to me, and could help make me a better and more positive person: blessings before and after meals, touching the mezzuzah entering and exiting a room; prayers morning, afternoon, and evening; blessings throughout the day. These all make sense to me, and provide a reassuring, though sometimes hard to attain and sustain.*

"I'd say you are putting the Orthodox approach in the best light possible. I admire you for being able to do that. You know from class, that my experiences with them make this somewhat hard to read."

"I do remember what happened when you were in Russia with your grandmother. That touched me, and actually had an effect on what I wrote. You'll see."

*Some of the Orthodox rituals seem trivial and petty, useless, less important. I can understand their perspective that all is part of God, and maybe one day all the minutiae of observance might make more sense, if done with the right attitude: e.g., tearing toilet paper before Shabbat as a way to avoid work on the Sabbath. But sometimes the strict observance of the law and the emphasis on behavioral actions seem to override the spirit that should inform the law. These "rules" can seem unnecessarily academic, rigid, even*

*obsessive so that --without equal if not more attention to the attitude, the reconnection, the teshuvah--the spirit of the principle and goal can be undermined and lost in seeking to "follow" the law.*

*I also don't believe that doing mitzvot "by the numbers" as commandments is the only essential Jewish act. At some level, the highest value here appears to be obedience. I can't imagine that God wants us to live by rote, paint by halachic numbers.*

*I'd feel too much a pawn of the law <I wonder if that was also part of the reason I decided not to go to law school>: no matter which law, man's or God's (according to **their** view of what God says): obey, study, follow the commandments. God must want us to have and utilize more freedom of choice, than to be automatons for something written thousands of years ago, which we are supposed to accept by blind faith as the once and final word of God.*

"I didn't know you were thinking about going to law school. You don't look at all how I would imagine a law student."

"There's lots you don't know."

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"Your reactions to being told what to do--commandments--is interesting, in light of your concerns about your rebellious side. Remember Dr. Lisbet talking about the 'freedom reflex' based on Pavlov's experiments, in which the dogs did not want to be put in a harness. Are you like a dog, not wanting to be bound?" She smiles coyly. "It's intriguing, isn't it, how our own personal dynamics can have an effect on what tradition we are or are not attracted to."

"Other than calling me a dog, that's a great insight. Exactly. Am I just reflexively rejecting 'being commanded' or is that a thoughtful choice? It seems sometimes we need to accept what our gut tells us. But at other times, we have to push ourselves to make sure we're not doing what feels comfortable simply out of laziness or because we aren't willing to be confronted by higher truths that we're afraid to learn, and which our own unexplored dynamics cause us to instinctually reject. I need to be careful when do I reflexively bristle at being told what to do, when it's a lesson I should allow in and learn.

"That's why this self-awareness process at times seems so complicated--there are so many layers, so much we don't yet know about ourselves, all the

while trying to integrate our feelings, our mind, what others are telling us. But for now, it's also a path I'm committed to, no matter how difficult, and trying to be non-defensive as I see more and more of my blind spots and dust." I raise my hands to shoulder height, then let my palms drop limply forward and say "Arf, arf."

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"There's another concern I have about the Orthodox tradition, maybe one you won't feel the need to mock me about." We continue reading from my paper:

*Some laws I personally find to violate the very goals they profess. Separating men and women during worship to avoid distraction, particularly given my own historically strong attraction to the fair sex, is understandable. Let the focus be on the spirit, not the flesh. But not allowing women.....*

Joie's hand reaches to cover my writing. "Not so fast, buster. Let me stop you right there. You can't just glide past this one. 'Understandable?!' What are you men-- poor, weak creatures, completely lacking in self-control? And what are we women--evil temptresses of distraction, to tear you away from spiritual pursuits?"

I take a breath. How much should I share my journey--about Johannes the seducer; John and trying to keep flesh and spirit separate? I decide now, our first real moments together, is not the time. Instead I say, as non-defensively as I can, "Point well-taken. Thinking about what you're saying, I do see how I bought into a pretty sexist perspective - helpless men only trying to devote themselves to God, wicked women sirens. Just another example of how much I still have to learn." Joie smiles what I interpret as a self-satisfied smile.

"Now, if I may continue, I think what comes next you'll find more to your liking."

She nods, again somewhat smugly I think, and removes her hand.

*But not allowing women to read from the Torah, saying that they do not count toward the ten people that make up the minyan necessary to recite certain prayers, that their saying certain prayers does not*

*count on behalf of the group, that they can't lead services, seems, no matter how many rationalizations of their special status and the voluntary nature of their contributions, demeaning.*

*Or when in the morning prayer, men say 'Thank you for not making me a woman'; is that really the best way to say thank you for making me who I am? Or when Orthodox say it's better not to hear shofar at all on Rosh Hashanah than to hear it in a synagogue that does not have a barrier between male and female worshipers seems to me to have let the letter of the law violate the spirit.*

"You sound like my grandmother. She's moved beyond her anger now. But she made me go to an Orthodox service with her once to show me what I didn't want. We could barely hear, and couldn't even see what was going on in the men's section where it was being led. Women couldn't participate in many aspects of the services, not just the community readings, but in actively leading the service.

"When I asked my grandma why, she said it was an amazing slight of hand. It actually seems a version of Pavlov's dogs. The Orthodox say it is human nature to rebel against authority. Therefore, to counter this impulse, what Orthodox Judaism does is praise obedience: a person who does something because they are commanded to is regarded with greater merit than one who does something because he chooses to. Therefore, since woman's place is primarily in the home, and they are exempt from many of the commandments, such as going to services, their participation is voluntary and therefore does not count. Only the male's participation, which is commanded, counts. Can you believe that reasoning to diminish women's role?"

"Ouch. I'd never heard an explanation. First, it's using sophistry for sexism." I pause waiting to see if she'll appreciate my alliterative turn of phrase. She doesn't change her facial expression, so I continue, "And secondly, I disagree with their premise. I find someone who does the right thing because they are free to choose, a higher value than someone who does it from fear of punishment or because they were commanded to. For example, when I'm saying the



morning prayer, I freely choose to substitute in place of thank you for not making me a woman, 'Thank you for making me according to your will.'"

"It sounds like you would fit right in with the women's liberation movement. I wonder if we'll allow men in?" She winks at me. "But I'm glad to learn that you're attracted to the fairer sex."

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"All the world is just a narrow bridge, just a narrow bridge, just a narrow bridge; and above all, is not to fear at all." Joie finishes singing another song as part of our Kaballat Shabbat.

Al Hazrumi hands me, and others, a date. "This is one way we often break our daily Ramadan fast. Enjoy the sweetness, as we enjoy each other's warmth and companionship.

I take a bite of the date and am astonished at how sweet and delicious it tastes. I thank him and say, "Did you know that 'Come my beloved', is a request of a mysterious 'beloved' who can be either God or one's friends to join together in welcoming the Sabbath, often referred to as a 'bride.' It seems to me we have all of these elements here at once: cherished friends and community, seeking to turn toward God, a Beloved God." I turn to Joie, and take her hand, "And beloveds, who, together, greet the Sabbath bride."

"When you sing that melody, Joie, 'All the world is just a narrow bridge,' I feel wabi sabi, the bitter-sweet spirit of eternal loneliness. It creates in me a haunting sense of our fragility in life, a reminder for me to keep a light step, and to continue to deepen my own practice." Akishige bows toward her.

"The Hebrew word for bridge, gesher, is quite similar in Arabic, 'jisir'" Al Hazrumi points out. Isn't that just what we're doing here, building bridges across traditions as we all seek to help each other climb our paths up the mountain."

"Sinai, Mecca. We all seek the wisdom of high places." Facing Lin

Zscho, I add "Teshuvah means to return. In everyday parlance, it can mean 'returning' a phone call. On this holy Shabbat, it means to return to God. I remember Dr. Lisbet saying there is a form in tai chi about returning."

"Exactly. Embrace tiger. Return to mountain. The mountain for us, too, is a place representing the sacred."

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Last night I had two dreams. Both of them were quite healing and about bridge-building. I wonder if they appeared because there is a healing occurring with me? Because Joie was singing about a "bridge"? Or Al Hazrumi's comments about building bridges?

I write each in my dream journal, with an interpretation.

Two children are fighting in a classroom and the teacher is upset with them. I come over and start talking to the children, getting them to play and giggle, and soon all is well. Then I'm in a religious class. It's not clear whether I am the student or the teacher. I'm looking for the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet.

INTERPRETATION: I have a positive feeling about this dream. It is me as a healer, bridge building between the fighting kids, as well as between the kids and the teacher. Could this be me healing with an older person, my parents? If I'm all parts of the dream, then this could involve the parts of me that fight within myself, the part of me that seeks to heal my inner child, be both student and teacher. And what does looking for the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet mean? Perhaps it's that I miss them, perhaps seeking their wisdom as part of me, too.

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I'm playing tennis with Richard. He's quite upset with me after a shot he thought was in that I called out. I went up to him and said, "Life is so complicated and out of control, it seems at least we should have clarity and order on a tennis shot. That we don't is frustrating isn't it? I understand how painful that must be." He started crying and we hugged.

INTERPRETATION: Very nice dream, healing, bridge building, keeping a larger perspective (though still competitive side of me surfacing). It's a willingness to heal rifts with others and, if I'm also Richard, than rifts within myself.

I'm amazed the work my subconscious is doing. And grateful. Why last night did Richard come up? Why the fighting kids? So much to uncover and learn.

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She thumbs through the remaining pages. "Are we almost there yet?"

"Are you saying you don't find my exploration of the different movements, some would call them 'sects' of Judaism fascinating."

"Heaven forbid."

#### **REFORM**

I like the existential freedom of choosing which rituals to follow, based on individual free will. It feels better to me to be proud for each act of observance I add: e.g., lighting the Shabbos candles, then prayer before a meal. That way I feel I'm making progress and can congratulate myself for each achievement. With the Orthodox, I feel there is a preset "should" and no matter how much I do, I feel inadequate, guilty, falling short, feelings which I do not like. That may goad some to excel, but for me, it creates discouragement.

I believe it's harder, but also more authentic to choose your beliefs, rather than having your beliefs dictated to you. To decide from a place of reflection what laws and rituals make sense, rather than being commanded to follow laws unquestioningly is strongly preferable from my perspective. The Torah, where all those commandments reside, was, I believe, in some parts, written from a place of "God-inspired" experience. (Other areas seem less clearly God-inspired. Other areas seem to be promoting human egocentric, political agendas. Therefore, I'm not comfortable taking it literally.

"There we have a lot in common. I find passages in it to be beautiful literature. Some of it, if taken metaphorically, makes sense. Like the Rebbe's discussion of 'narrow places'; but I agree with you. If I try to take it literally, it loses me."

"It's interesting how similar our views are, me coming from a Reform upbringing that focused primarily on Sunday brunches; and you from a socially activist, independent-thinking family." What a strange conversation and confluence for an Easter Sunday." We continue reading:

*I do see some valuable principles in the Torah, but feel it's up to us to decide how to apply those principles and in what situations. For me this is difficult, but not as difficult (or less wise) than "Do this and you're right." God grants each of us the responsibility to choose, evolve, and interpret the principles in creating our morality. When the Rebbes' were asked why the word God was repeated before each name in the prayer "The God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob rather than simply God of Abraham, Isaac, etc. the response was because even though God is universal, each person has to come to his or her own understanding of God.*

I look over at Joie, and say, "I'm sure one day, with women like you and your grandmother, there will also be the addition of 'God of Rebecca, God of Sarah, God of Leah), right?"

She smiles, pats my shoulder and says, "You're learning...slowly."

*I also like the more tolerant and inclusive aspects of Reform. Each person chooses which aspects of the teaching to follow, allowing for a big tent, an large umbrella of inclusion. From an Orthodox perspective, Reform seems to stand for nothing, a watered down, minimalist, anything goes Judaism. I understand that criticism, and I recognize a potential downside of flexibility and personal choice. But I would rather err on the side of inclusion, even though the ambiguity and uncertainty of where to draw the lines and boundaries makes cohesion more difficult. Absolute rigidity and certainty give clarity, but at the price of exclusiveness. In some ways it's easier. But it's not right for me.*

"Is that it? You just stopped?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how do you put it all together? If you could create the perfect religion, what would that look like?"

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"What, are you the teacher? Ok, sorry, that was defensive. That's actually a great question. Within the confines of Judaism, or from all religions?"

"For now, since we're reading your Jewish assignment, what would it be within what you know of Judaism?"

"Well, let's see, I would take some of the ruach and spirit and dancing from the Chassidic tradition and would add that joy and singing to the Reform services. But I don't like the Orthodox's halachic exclusivity. Though there is a part of me that is searching for an inflexible blueprint that says this is the truth and the way, do this," follow that and you will arrive, I also know there is a larger part of me that doesn't want someone telling me what is true once and for all. I don't want living by rote regurgitation.

"From that viewpoint, I need some sense of having a pioneering spirit, some sense of discovery in my life. I want to believe that personal revelation

is possible, and not that someone once long ago had all the answers, and my task is to just follow what they figured out. I guess even if it were true, that would seem boring, dull. I need to acknowledge that about myself. I want to feel participatory, that my efforts matter, that I can still find something new. That's why I like the progressive revelation of Reform. And I would also keep the social action component of Reform, which reminds us to care for the stranger, those who are marginalized and vulnerable, but would reduce any harsh, 'guilt inducing' sermonizing to 'fight injustice'. I'd like to imagine God guiding us in love toward others, rather than from a place of anger and 'fighting.' I also value Reform's inclusivity, and reaching out to build bridges with other faith traditions."

"You really don't like to be told what to do, do you?" I can tell it's more rhetorical than a real question so I wait for her to continue. I merely nod and say "Duh." "Then have you ever wondered how what Dr. Lisbet would call your 'psychological dynamics' might influence you to be attracted to and pick certain views?"

"Wow, brilliant! Of course. So obvious, but what an amazing revelation. I'm so glad you asked your question. Again, duh! I can see that it's obvious my views in some ways reflect my own personal psychology. I say the Orthodox are too rigid. That may be true, but it also may be partly a reflection of my freedom reflex. And then of course my desire to be unique, and feel important, to 'be the best' could easily make me want to believe my view is the truth and the way, the only correct path, the best. And my 'don't tell me what to do' and wanting to be self-sufficient, would make me prefer being able to discover 'truth' for myself. In fact, this desire to feel free and not controlled by others could keep me from exploring a revealed truth that was important for me to learn, but that I would resist, thus keeping me from choosing certain views that might be helpful for me." Words are now pouring out my mouth, as if she's unleashed a pent-up faucet. "And I guess, conversely,

that the part of me that feels frightened, uncertain, might gravitate toward a clear, rigid, unambiguous view just to feel some certainty, comfort, solace and solidity in a world that often seems so confusing, ambiguous, and terrifying." I stop, almost shaking with excitement. "Thank you so much." But before Joie can say anything, I continue.

"If this process is true for me, might it also be true for others?. I would assume so. Does that mean we may choose views that in some ways are a reflection of our own personality; and, even if we don't consciously realize it, we then justify our choices on some other grounds. And that would mean I need to be very careful of judging others' views. For two reasons. One, no one can really know the truth of God, and two, my own 'psychological dynamics' influence the way I perceive and create my version of the truth. All this suggests that even if something is right for me, at best it can be a provisional truth, until there is more 'progressive revelation' either within and about me, or from the outside and about the world. Further, just because a view is right for me, doesn't necessarily mean it would be right or truthful for someone else or all others.

"I hope that would lead to a tolerance in me, making me less willing to impose my views of rightness on other. At the least, this would make me want to understand what forces, inner and outer, propel others toward their views, including those who believe in the absolute rightness and truthfulness of the path they are following."

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"Yes, I can see my question touched a nerve, or unclogged a drain, as you put it. You're welcome. As you can see, I took a few notes for you, in case you want to add it to your paper. But, I'm going to return to the question I asked you."

"Sorry. Could you remind me what you asked?" I say a bit shamefaced at my enthusiasm running away with me?

"Sure. I asked you if you could create the perfect religion for you, from the strands of Judaism, what would that look like?"

"Ah yes, I started with Orthodox and Reform, then got sidetracked into reflecting on my dynamics. Ok, besides Orthodox and Reform, there's Conservative Judaism. From what I know, it seems a positive middle way-- keeping the roots of the tree, the main branches, but willing to allow for growth, new evolving revelations and insights.

"I guess I'd probably say, within Judaism, I'm 56% Reform, 35% Conservative, and 9% Orthodox."

"Could you be a little more precise?" She smiles. "You're certainly not an either-or thinker, are you?"

"Well, I have noticed some evolution in that area. I guess I'm not as much of a 'paint by the numbers' person as I used to be."

"No, that's hardly how I see you. Not only don't you not paint by the numbers, sometimes you seem so creative that you don't even have a canvas!"

"Ouch. But I think you're right. I'm trying to create the canvas and the paints. I guess that's evolution, or maybe a revolution. I'm trying to see, almost from scratch, not only who I am, but who I want to be. I'm much less concerned than I once was how others see me. I'm really more focused on learning to trust myself on this path." I pause and glance somewhat shyly at Joie. "I actually am learning that I increasingly enjoy my company, but don't want to be too much alone. It helps to have wise people who keep challenging and pushing me in my thinking. Actually like you've been doing today. I thank you for that. I really do appreciate it."

"I'm glad I can help." She gives a cute little nod. "I love to challenge, as a way to help refine other's thinking. It's the influence of my writerly parents. So, is that the end of your thoughts? Or dare I ask?"

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"Well, there is one other thought I notice keeps swirling around. I

would want a Judaism that, while not denying the suffering of Jews throughout history, is not based exclusively on victimhood and fear of anti-Semitism, a reaction to what others think about it. I'd like a pro-active Judaism with a joyous, dancing spirit, filled with song, that is proud of itself, and honors its path toward reaching out to heal both Jews and the world."

"You're preaching to the choir. Like Miriam dancing. How do you feel about dancing with other traditions?"

"Well, as you can probably guess, a vision that is too exclusively and particularistically Jewish is not big enough for me. I don't understand, and certainly can't accept the ultra Orthodox position, which, in addition to discouraging Orthodox Jews from working with other Jewish denominations, forbids theological dialogue with Christians and Muslims. I don't believe an all-wise, all-knowing God, would be so partial to one sect of one people, writing off and repudiating all other traditions. For me, that view does not represent God so much as human egoic needs."

"Whoa, Nellie. Slow down." Joie is writing notes on a scrap of paper.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm jotting down what you're saying. My parents would do that for each other. It's actually very good. Not exactly directly responsive to the question I asked of 'dancing' with other traditions, but laying the foundation. Maybe you'll want to add it to your paper?"

"Thank you. I'm touched."

"Fine, but don't stop. Just a bit slower."

"I'm winding down. I guess I feel strongly about these issues. Just one more thought. Even if the Torah is God-inspired, I believe it is human translated and argued. What gives one subset of one sect the hubris to feel they have an exclusive understanding of God's will? That they were the perfect vessel to receive with absolute clarity and assurance once and for all the complete mind and heart and soul of God? In Jew? In any tradition?"



"When righteousness becomes self-righteousness, and creates intolerance towards others, both within and outside Judaism, that violates the very principles of compassion and interfaith dialogue, harmony, and understanding that I would like to see in this world. I don't want--and I'm sure a loving, compassionate, all wise God doesn't want--only a happy loving Jewish world defined only by their definition of Jewish. I want and I believe God would want a world that includes all views, so long as they are caring, kind and don't harm others. I want to see all traditions talking, sharing, singing, and dancing together. Kumbaya, my Lord." I rub my chin, as if I've just had a startling revelation. "Actually, I guess the question is not only what is the perfect religion, and the perfect interaction between traditions, but what is the perfect God and how would God feel about that? Ah, well, a simple question for another time, right?"

"Back to religion, I'd like Judaism to be more pro-active in reaching out and building bridges with other traditions. Does that make me condemned to forever to be the wandering Jew?"

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"Why would you want to *embrace your tigers*?" Jacques queries.

"As I've shared with you, we believe that all actions should be done from a place of xujing, a centered, calm place representing the cosmic void from which we come. Within that context, we then act in a 'dongjing' way: the most skillful, best action for a given situation. One of the Tai Chi forms we do is to 'embrace' the tiger. Sometimes the wisest path is not to fight your demons, but learn to accept and befriend them."

"Sounds like a cop out to me."

"I think I understand what he means. Reb Jonathan, whom you know Reverend Noel, once told me that sometimes 'If you fight too hard to break evil, even if you succeed in breaking it in half, all you end up with is two pieces of evil.'" I smile at Jacques. "His partner, Dr. Lisbet, a Jungian analyst, told me

it was about becoming aware of our own shadow, rather than denying, running from, or attacking it."

"Exactly." Lin Zscho nods. "But, as I said, 'embrace' is only one dongjing response to 'tigers.' We have other tai chi forms where we take a more yin approach, and actually 'retreat' to ride the tiger; and a more yang approach where we 'shoot' our inner tigers with a bow. Each may be the wisest dongjing approach depending on the circumstances. When we did tashlich, it reminded me of the bowing and releasing in the beginning of 'the grand terminus' where we toss forth and release our tigers." He puts his open left palm facing his body in front of his chest, closes his right fist and places it into that palm, and gives a bow, while keeping his eyes directly on Jacques.

"It all depends, Jacques. Many types of tigers, many situations."

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"What is the meaning of that movement you just did? Prem Devi asks, trying to replicate the open palm and closed palm.

"Ah, sorry. Yes, the closed palm shows my inner strength and power. The clarity of my yang assertive response. The open palm cupping my closed palm says I am here in peace, and am in control of that response, and will not hurt you. All the while looking directly at the person to whom the gesture is intended." He makes the motion to Prem Devi, who responds back in kind, both bowing to each other.

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"The Rock. . .God's work is perfect, all God's ways are just. God found Jacob in a desert land, and in the howling waste of a wilderness. God encircled him, cared for him, guarded him as the pupil of God's eye.

"But you forgot the God who gave you birth."

I look up from reading the Torah portion from Deuteronomy. "This next part is tough. Maybe it's like shooting the bow at the tiger; or from the Psalms, Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. This is the harsh God, the

punishing parent Who has to discipline the wayward children, and Who says 'They have made provoked Me to anger with their idols, a fire is kindled in My anger and burns to the lowest part of Sheol. I will use up my arrows on them.

"'Were they wise, they would think about this, Gain insight into their future.' Then, this Torah portion of Shabbat Shuvah ends with God telling Moses to climb Mont Nebo, facing Jericho, and view the land of Canaan. God tells Moses he will die on the mountain because Moses broke faith with God at the waters in the wilderness of Zin. Thus, 'You may view the land from a distance, but you shall not enter it...'

"This is the parting 'Song of Moses' to the elders and wise people of Israel, forty years after his first song, after Israel's rescue at the Reed Sea, at the beginning of the desert wanderings. This song is seen as a song of hope, for it shows God's love of the people, warns them of the danger of rebellion against God's law, but says God won't desert them in the end. Moses then is told to ascend the mountain and prepare for death."

"I don't know about the rest of you, but for me this song does not give me so much hope, as despair. I'm sorry. But this is what is read on the Sabbath of Return? We may be here to return God's phone call, but does God return ours? Is this yelling, screaming, snorting, anger-filled jealous God really the One you want on the other end of the line?"

"We have Shiva the destroyer, who works in consort as part of our Trinity," Prem Devi says, nodding to Reverend Noel. "Our Shiva sometimes destroys just as part of lila, play. That was always hard for me to understand. What I hear in this passage, you read, though, is that there are karmic consequences for acting in wrong and impure ways, in turning from God. Though harsh, it makes sense to me. I think God at the deepest level is a God of oneness. But that oneness includes mercy and justice."

"I don't believe in that God," Lin Zscho comments, "but I do believe in the forces of yin and yang that emerge from the cosmic void, xujing. And I do believe in the balance between forces of strength and forces of compassion."

"Last Easter Joie and I found ourselves discussing not only the perfect religion, but also the perfect God. And I see our group once again turning away from our inner tigers, dust, sin and what this means about us, to questions of what it means about God."

"Ah so desuka. Yes. Perhaps talking about the cosmos and God, for now, is a 'Question which tends not to edification' regarding relieving what we can do to lessen our own suffering. Perhaps, at this moment, we should worry less about who is on the other end of the line, and more about our making the call." Akishige bows with a wry grin.

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I turn a thousand pages in the Bible, to Hosea. "This is, I believe, the focus Akishige was suggesting. It is really a call for heartfelt repentance, saying that rather than making animal sacrifices, people should use their lips, their words, to ask to return to the Lord. 'They will acknowledge their inequities,' and cease being so egocentric 'calling our handiwork our god.'"

I pause, realizing how much that egocentricity applied, and still applies to me. During my pause, Akishige asks if he can lead us in a brief breath meditation, allowing our breath to rise and fall naturally, with no effort on our part, just trusting our body's wisdom.

All close their eyes. I try to focus on my breathing but I'm hearing Grandfather Julius telling me I need to 'be the best' if I was going to succeed in life. And Grandpa Dave telling me I could be the messiah. A noble, if grandiose vision. I'm also aware of my own belief that perhaps I could be the one who could integrate the two traditions, the Jewish messiah coming, the Christian messiah returning. That certainly would have one upped Richard, and even outshone Harvard Law School. Mery would have been admiring, and

I'd probably get on Johnny Carson, so Nana would be proud. Of course, those were not very messiah-like Thoughts. And not very good focusing on the wisdom of my body's breathing.

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The lovely sound of the bell rings and reverberates through my mind, as Akishige invites us to "gently take a few more mindful breaths, then allow your eyes to open as slowly as they wish, taking in the surroundings."

I bow to Akishige. "Thank you. I noticed during the meditation that my focus was less on my breath, and more on what Hosea said we shouldn't do, that is, be filled with 'egocentric thoughts.' If I may share," I continue, glancing around the group, "once I thought that I could only be happy being the band leader, and that it was not enough just to be a member of the band. But being here with you all, I'm noticing that I'm content to be a piece of the puzzle. If the world is holy and there is cosmic unity, then my being the best piece of the puzzle I can be, no matter how small, is exactly the contribution I'm supposed to make. That is why teshuvah seems so important to me—finding and returning to the piece I'm supposed to be."

"But if you're trying to make yourself into a piece of God's cosmic puzzle, isn't it important to know what kind of God that is?" Jacques asks. I look at his face and realize the sincerity of his question. I don't feel he's being disruptive or trying to undermine what I'm saying. Rather, he seems to be genuinely asking and trying to hear me, yes push me as well, but also challenge his own thinking. "And if there is no God, and the universe is existentially meaningless, wouldn't you still congratulate yourself on being the best, most authentic person you could have chosen to be?"

"I understand what you're saying. Yes, of course. And I too still wrestle with that. If I may," I glance quickly at Akishige, "respond to your question by asking what might appear to be two simplistic Zen koans. First,

following Akishige's meditation, I might ask, 'Who breathes us?' when we just let go and allow breathing? Or," as I point to the Sabbath candles, 'who lit the candles tonight?'"

"Those do seem simplistic, not koans at all," Jacques replies.

"We breathe ourselves. It's just life. And Joie lit the candles. Beautifully, I might add, as she sang a blessing."

"I agree. But the crux of the issue, I believe, is Who inspires us to breathe?" I can't help grinning at my own cleverness. "And yes, I chose that work purposively. Similarly, Who inspired Joie to light the candles? It's like at the start of the Shamonei Esrai, the Eighteen Blessings, when we sing to God, please open my lips so that my mouth may praise You; and at the end, thank You for giving me the strength and gratefulness to thank You. Is it all the work of our hands, or is there something larger than ourselves, outside and inside, that inspires us?"

There is a silence, while we all watch the Sabbath candle flames leaping toward the night sky.

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As I watch the fire, I think of the single candle that John lit on the first night of Chanukah. Actually two, for first the shamus, the candle that lights all the other candles, was lit. Who lit it? The simple answer is that last December, John lit it. But what inspired him to do that? Who lit him, what inspired him to have the energy and life force to do it, even at such a dark time of life?

After a moment, I turn to Jacques. "I don't know the answer to that question with any certainty. Sometimes I really do feel the power of a loving universe guiding me. Infrequently, but it has happened that when I call out to God, I feel there is a clear connection. More often than not, I have to admit, it's kind of fuzzy at best. What I'd say is that if this is an existentially

indifferent universe, then all I can do is try, as you say, to take whatever gifts I have and use those to create myself into the most authentic, wise, loving person possible. And if that means nothing beyond itself, then the musical notes of my journey will have been the goal, and I disappear with their sound."

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Again there is a silence. Have I shared too much? Too personally? I wait, looking at the flames of the fire. Prem Devi speaks first. "That was a lovely statement, Jacob. You sound like a wise old soul. You are asking, in essence, the very question that Narendra asked Ramakrishna. Why is it that if God is all around, we only feel God's grace and unity infrequently, and it lasts for such a short time. Ramakrishna replied that one taste of grace is enough to trust that God exists and to devote your life to the One."

"I guess it's reassuring to learn that the connection in India a hundred years ago was no better than the one I had at Sinai last year, or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre this year!" There is a murmur of laughter, and I continue,

"What I do know is I feel I'm being lit and inspired by the wise people here. As I was meditating this morning, two images popped into my mind. The first was of each of you like a candle, sharing your light, one for each night of Chanukah. Then the Chanukah candles morphed into a braided Havdalah candle, the different spiritual traditions--theistic, non-theistic--all intertwined, linked, burning together to create a unified flame soaring to the heavens. And this flame, inspired by each individual strand, reflected back on all of us to light our way."

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Again, there is again a silence. More angels passing over? After another few minutes, Joie picks up her guitar and begins to sing "Kol hanisha ma, hallelu, hallelujah, hallelujah." Let all souls sing in praise.

Soon all are singing the words and melody.

As they sing, I am aware that having the freedom to be here in Safed is an extraordinary blessing. I remember the Rebbe saying that there are three ways to respond to the gifts we receive in life, gifts such as country of birth, wealth, opportunities, education, all gifts which I have been given, which allowed me the freedom to have lived here in Safed these last months without having any kind of conventional job.

One response is to feel entitled. I deserve these things--through self-worth, cosmic design, choosing our parents correctly-- , and others without such opportunities don't deserve them. The second is to feel guilt that I should be so happy and blessed when others, probably equally, if not more deserving, by some cosmic or random happenstance, live in squalid conditions and misery. What I spend on a cup of tea is their daily wage. Therefore, from this perspective, it's not possible to enjoy or appreciate any pleasure because others are suffering.

The third way is to enjoy your gifts and blessings, feel grateful, and make sure you share them with others. Being here now, receiving all these gifts, as well as the benefit of all the blessings I have had in my life, I'd like in turn to be someone who could light others' candles, to create that divine energy in them, a holy spark, a life force, to pass the flame on, to share fire.

Could my piece of the puzzle be as a "shamus"--a candle whose role is to use its flame to light other candles--to help bring out the light within them? Part of that image feels congruent, but I also notice a discordant aspect. The shamus is the tallest candle. Is this the old egoic me, dust to which I need to attend? I sense a danger here, but I'm also wondering if I can move beyond the egoic part.

When I first heard the tall tree story, I felt it was a morality vignette. The tall tree is chopped down. I am that tall tree, chopped down to a stump because of my hubris and pride. Bad boy gets his punishment. There may be



"a" truth in that story. All tall trees--like Moses taking leadership--are subject to criticism, and being "cut down." But isn't the important point what is the actual, and metaphoric, tree's goal? The person's goal? The Rebbe helped me understand that part of the tree was used to build the cabin for shelter. Part of the tree was used to build a fire for warmth inside the cabin. Isn't it really a question of how I want to use whatever gifts I have? All of us eventually will be chopped down. As Johannes might put it, all our erect trunks will become flaccid.

What is the gift that we will have left behind? Tallness gets hurt, but maybe that's ok if done for a noble cause, giving to others. Maybe there's a part of me that is not only afraid of my ego but also afraid of being a strong, self-sufficient human being and standing out, standing up for what I believe. The morning prayer says "Who straightens the bowed."

Yes, the tall tree can be prideful and arrogant, but also can provide shade. Then too, the shamus allows itself to burn down, giving of itself to help others.

It's funny to think maybe I've come full circle, from Sinai where my goal was wanting to share and serve water to those who are thirsty, and now wanting to offer fire to those who are cold and need energy and warmth. Maybe it's the same thing, if I can keep my mind open enough not to need either/or thinking. If I can somehow contain both fire and water within me, without having them cancel each other out. Rather, to give them as gifts to others, as they were given as gifts to me.

"Hallelujah. Hallelujah."

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Later that night I was sharing these thoughts about direction and tall trees with Joie. I love that I can tell her everything, not trying to hide my concerns, musings, or dust. I also shared with her, honestly, that there is

still a part of me that would like my efforts toward goodness and kindness and compassion to be met with accolades, and recognized.

Her response spoke to me so deeply, I wrote it down to remember it always.

"Isn't the goal really to plant seeds of goodness, wisdom, kindness in whomever we meet? If you become a teacher, then your students; if you have children, then your children, so that they can pass it on those seeds to others, and then the next generation. Eventually, several generations hence, our names will be a distant memory, perhaps not even be remembered or known. But hopefully those seeds will endure, sprout and grow, and that's our piece of the puzzle."

I hear the wisdom in her words but probe further, "What about the question we were discussing today with the group, of whether the world is existential or spiritual?"

"Does that really matter? If you, we, offer our gifts as fully and authentically as we are able, then in an existential world we do the best we can to create healing and kindness, and add positivity to the world. That is all we can ask of ourselves, and how the universe responds is really out of our control.

"If we are indeed pieces of a cosmic puzzle, we don't need to be named and receive recognition for our piece, but just play our part, as one instrument in a cosmic orchestra, all playing together to create harmony and a wiser, kinder, more loving world. The rest is up to God.

"Either way, by being true to ourselves and offering our gifts to the world, we win."

What a wise old soul....

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"Speaking of wandering Jews, my grandmother has been collecting Jewish fairy tales from all over the world. There are a couple of beautiful ones from

Greece and India that I'd like to read with you sometime. They talk about golden trees and entangled vines. I think you'd really enjoy them."

"That sounds fun. My mom used to read to me when she put me to bed at night. Then she'd sing to me about the moon. It should be beautiful this evening. Two days past full. There's still so much of the world to see. I feel a reawakening of excitement and adventure. Did you know that Aristotle said that philosophy was born in awe and wonder? But Kierkegaard said it was born in fear and trembling. I'd like to return to Aristotle's view." I realize I'm rambling, but I'm feeling almost giddy with joy at having someone to share with.

"Maybe it's both. And maybe the fear makes the realization of joy that much stronger."

"Not fair. Wise and pretty, too." I mean it sincerely, but I notice a red flag warning appear. Be careful that Johannes doesn't return too quickly and glibly. She seems to blush, and I quickly add, "When you mentioned the fairy tales of India, I think maybe that's where I might like to go next."

"Safed? India? It sounds like you have a lot of different ideas and plans."

"A lot and none. Some would say, looking from the outside, that I'm in an enviable place. I can do anything, go anywhere I want. At each moment I'm free to try to choose the best possible experience. But it's confusing, both what to do, and then not to be always thinking about where I could be, but trying to enjoy the experience of where I am."

"Well, if you go to India, I've got a present for you. My grandma has a bell that she gave me from her travels there. I'd like to give it to you. It makes a beautiful sound."

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**"Ten thousand joys, ten thousand sorrows." Akishige bows.**

**"The yin needs the yang, the yang the yin." Lin Zscho responds.**

As I walk over to where Akishige, Lin Zscho, and Jacques have gathered, I think of Joie's words: "Maybe it's both. And maybe the fear makes the realization of joy that much stronger." A wise young woman indeed.

Jacques puts his arms around them. "We three have to stick together. At least the two of you can see the sorrow and duality without having to surround it with some chimera of God and love, a creator who is somehow supposed to be in control of all this meshuginah sound and fury. Maybe we could call ourselves the three musketeers of emptiness and void."

Akishige seems a little awkward at Jacques' physical contact, but allows his hand to remain on his shoulder. "We must see all, but it is also important the calm mind with which we see."

"Yes, yes, I know. Lin Zscho here keeps drilling me on my 'tan tien.'" He points to the area a couple of inches below his navel. "Chi center generator, right?" Then, somewhat to my surprise, he flawlessly, at least to my beginner's eye, does a tai chi form, which I recognize as Grasp Bird's Tail. He reaches his right palm at shoulder height to the corner ahead of and in front of the left palm facing up. I watch as he then pulls his hands toward his body, turns the palms inward, then circles them around his belly as if he's holding a ball, before pushing them outward as he steps forward. He sees me coming, and smiles, "Did you see the way my hands reflected yin and yang in different forms and permutations." He looks over at Lin Zscho. "See, I get it, the yin needs the yang, the yang needs the yin. All embodied in my hands, right? Is there a black belt or something I get for this?"

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"Tea's ready," Reverend Noel calls to us. "Chamomile with a touch of ginger." He pulls the large kettle off the fire and pours out eight cups.

"Prem Devi, Lin Zscho and I were talking this morning about our 'mountains.' Lin Zscho discussed the 'soul mountain' of China, and how it is prominent as a spiritual destination and metaphorically in tai chi forms. The

sacred mountains of the Himalayas, Prem Devi noted, are where many of the wise people from the Vedas and Upanishads lived. Prem Devi also told me of her travels to Bali, where the people practice a kind of Hinduism mixed with island animism. High on the slopes of Bali's Mount Agung sits Pura Besakih, widely referred to as the 'Mother Temple.' And then of course, five miles west of Galilee, we have the mountain where Jesus preached the 'Sermon on the Mount.'

"Jacob has asked me to be our group leader this morning. Maybe we could call this the sermon on the Safed Mount." He pauses, smiles self-consciously, and takes a sip of tea. "I've been wrestling with how, among this wonderful group of people, I can share the love I have for the particular path of Jesus Christ as the 'truth and the way' in a manner which is universal and non-exclusive.

"I'd like to start by looking at the issue of this Jewish Sabbath, Teshuvah, a return to God, and specifically at the three haftorot portions. I see a message of love and forgiveness in Hosea, Micah and Joel. Isn't this really the message of Jesus? We humans are sinners. We need to repent. This is our way of teshuvah, returning to God. And what we hope for is a loving God who forgives our sins. As it says in Micah

Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity. . . Generously will I take them back in love.

"And Joel talks of the 'fullness of God's forgiving grace.'

"As we did in the tashlich ceremony, so too will God 'hurl all the sins into the depths of the sea.' When we act in God's ways, our beauty 'shall be like the olive tree's; they who sit in this shade shall be revived.'

"But there is also a message of human choice, and judgment and Consequences.

'He who is wise will consider these words. . .the paths of the Lord are smooth, the righteous can walk on them, while sinners stumble.'

"Isn't this exactly the message contained in the life and death of Jesus? Jesus, too, spoke from a context of love. Just like Jews want to be a light unto the nations, Jesus told his disciplines 'Ye are the light of the world.' He reminded us to 'love our enemy'. He wanted all of us to return to God's ways and maintain the discipline and effort required on this spiritual journey. As he said in Matthew 7:13

*'Enter ye in at the strait gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction. . .strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.'*

"Like Hosea, he was not afraid to challenge the status quo, in order to help teach us to be better people. In many ways He was like an Old Testament prophet urging people to righteous behavior. He criticized both liberal religious leaders (the Sadducees) and conservative Pharisees, but he did so within the well-established tradition of such criticism. As He stated, again in Matthew 5:17

*'I am not come to destroy <the law or the prophets>, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.'*

"So far so good?" He takes another sip, of tea, as he glances inquiringly at each of us. He then rubs his palms together. At first I think he's going to pray, but instead the motion looks like he's washing them, maybe even gleefully preparing to enter into a battle. He takes a deep breath, exhales slowly, then says, "Now, let me get to some of Jesus' more problematic passages, or at least what is problematic about their subsequent interpretations."

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"As we've all discussed, the Testaments can be read on many levels. Some are cultural and political. For example, Christianity was the new kid on the block and trying to establish its credentials and legitimacy and uniqueness. In order to ensure its supremacy, some of Christianity's adherents have interpreted the new 'righteousness' envisioned by Jesus as superior to the purely legal kind

taught by the Scribes " (Matthew 5:17-48) and practiced by the Pharisees (Matthew 6:1-18). In this view, Jesus' new interpretation of the Law was destined to set Christianity free from Judaism.

"But what that view misses is that Jesus was and remained a Jew, although not a fundamentalist one, certainly not in the way He attacked the laws and the establishment of the faith into which he was born. Yes, he did envision changes in religious practice. But he also spoke of the need for humility, 'blessed are the meek.' Despite his efforts at reform, He was trying to work within the existing framework, not create a new religion. He also spoke of the danger of rote allegiance to law and scripture - 'use not vain repetitions as the heathen do.' He would be horrified at the fundamentalist Christianity now practiced in His name with its own blind adherence to dogma and creed. In fact, Jesus urged just the opposite. He wanted his followers to think for themselves, to question the status quo. Whereas many Christians today believe they have and hold all the right answers that reveal an exclusive truth, Jesus answered only three questions directly or indirectly out of more than one hundred asked him. His usual response was to ask people to look within.

"Let's look at two passages in particular, and see how we can understand them in a universal sense. One is from John 14:6:

'I am the true and living way: no one comes to the Father but by Me.'

"This passage is often interpreted as meaning that the path of Jesus Christ, Christianity, is the ONLY path to God. But let's look at that statement within the context of the following in Luke 17:21:

'The kingdom of God (heaven) is within (among) you.'

"This foundational concept in Christianity, this central theme of Jesus of Nazareth's message in the synoptic Gospels, occurs more than 100 times. Interestingly, Biblical scholars speculate that the Matthean text adopted the Greek word for "heaven" instead of the Greek word for "God" because, unlike Mark and Luke, it was written by a Jew for a Jewish audience so, in keeping with

their custom, avoided using God's name as an act of piety. In Matthew, 'heaven' stands for 'God.'

"More importantly, how do we find this heaven, this God? Based on other scriptures, it seems to involve understanding, child-like acceptance, and spiritual rebirth. These can all also be signs of the mystic experience. Just as Moses and Old Testament prophets had spiritual numinous experiences, so too, did Jesus. One of the signs of mystical experience can be a feeling of union and oneness. As Akishige showed us with the haiku, sometimes separateness, on the other side of the altered state, becomes connectedness; darkness becomes light: soft white. As Prem Devi has taught us, in the context of certain traditions and belief systems, sometimes there is a feeling of being part of God, sometimes a servant of God, and sometimes 'Atman is Brahman': Oneness with God.

"What if we were to read these two statements together and understand them as Jesus trying to share in words a numinous encounter. What He realizes is that God is already within, that He is God, if he opens His consciousness to it. What if the 'I' He is referring to is the 'I' of each of us, each human? None of us needs to look outside for God, but rather to the large 'Self' within. We each can come to God through the Kingdom of God within us, through 'Me.'

"I believe we need a reawakening to Jesus' original message, a mystical understanding of God WHO is within us. Jesus is a model and a symbol of that inner mystical path. Look at John 14.10: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me'; John 14:17 'He abides with you and will be in you': and John 14.20 'in that day you shall know that I am in My father and you in Me and I in you.'

"This mystical path has long been a stream within the Christian tradition, sometimes larger, sometimes less prominent, from the Gnosis, Gnostic Gospels, and Augustine to Thomas Merton in the present. This is a contemplative path, the



heart of prayer, open to all of us, in our own unique particular ways, as we go inward to find that which is most holy and sacred."

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He breathes a long sighing exhale, takes another sip, and continues.

"I think back to the opening line of the haiku, 'Over the darkened sea.' If we look at the world today from the perspective of ordinary human awareness, it is hard not to be filled with darkness. Jesus, as a human, and maybe reflecting God, felt the emotions of frustration, hurt, vulnerability, and sadness at what He saw, just as we do at the world today." He takes another deep breath. It is clear he is emotionally moved at envisioning this darkness, perhaps even near tears. "As Akishige shared with me, the mirror discriminates clearly that which is in front of it. I believe we need to see what is right and what is wrong about our world.. What is light and what is dark. What is a path of sin, where we stumble, as Hosea said, and what is the path of righteousness.

"Is that discrimination or judgement? Or both? Jesus discriminated, even judged, pointing out what was wrong, even though He claimed it wasn't really He who was judging, only that He was acting as a spokesperson for His Father. Maybe that means Jesus discriminated wrong from right with the equanimity and clarity of the mirror, in your terms, Akishige. Jesus also realized the dangers of judging, and how we could use judgment as a defensive strategy to keeping from facing our own inner challenges: 'Judge not let you be judged.. . Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.' (Matthew 7:5)

"After His mystical experiences, Jesus returned to the world, to tell people how to live righteous lives, to proclaim that the seed of such righteousness must be sown in the hearts of humans, and that is where the kingdom of God will grow. Jesus was not interested in Christianity! He was not

interested in a particular path, he was interested in creating a world of peace and and love, a world 'in soft white.'

"As the historian Arnold Toynbee said, no one has the 'bird's eye' view of God, and those who purport to speak as if they have absolute truth, both disgrace God by their hubris, and Jesus as well by their lack of inward psychological/spiritual flexibility and rote allegiance to dogma. Each of us has a viewpoint, but that is just 'views from a point.' The mystical experience is of the 'universal'—the One, Echad, the void, transcending particular paths.

"However, as every spiritual tradition has noted, the mystical experience does not last. We return to everyday reality, a particular path, trying to remind ourselves how to live that experience, remember it, be guided by it, and teach it to others. The challenge, of course, is how to share that experience with others who may not have yet had it, and become caught by the particular—the fingers—rather than realizing the fingers, as Lin Zscho has taught us, are merely pointing to the moon. Or, as Prem Devi shared from Ramakrishna "Truth is One. Sages call it by different names.'

"I must say on a personal note that is why it's so refreshing for me to be here in this present company. I feel like we are truly working toward the kingdom of heaven on earth within and among us, exactly what Jesus sought in sharing a revelation and vision for the possibilities of creation of a more ennobling, sacred humankind." He smiles at Prem Devi "It's similar to what you shared about Ramakrishna, seeking to be a 'hothouse for the evolution of human spiritual wisdom.' Jesus said, 'Ask, seek, knock and it shall be opened.' (Matthew 7:7). I hear us all knocking, each in our own way. We have climbed the mountain to be here in Safed, know the way is narrow, and recognize the meditative focus and discipline required. As it says in Matthew 6:22

'The light of the body is the eye. If you eye be single your body will fill with light.'

"It's a blessing to have such open-hearted, open-minded, courageous fellow travelers on this journey. I am inspired by you all, as we all seek teshuvah, to return to the God within, without, and among. Let the light of all of our eyes be filled with light, and bring that light to the world.

Thank you. Now, I've talked enough. Can I pour anyone more tea."

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"Your grandmother's been to India? What was that like for her?"

"Why don't you come by tonight? I'm sure she'd love to talk with you about her travels."

"What a kind invitation, m'lady. In the meantime, what about that Jewish fairy tale about India. Want to tell me that?"

"I don't remember it that well."

"Come on. Try. I'll just close my eyes and it can be like you're reading me a story, without the book." I lie back on the ground and close my eyes without waiting for her answer.

"Once upon a time there was a king with lots of wives and the youngest was the most beautiful. The other wives, jealous, told the king she was not a good wife and he dismissed her. She traveled far, and met a wise old man who took her in. The king dreamt about her and missed her. He sent many men to search for her, but they could not find her. Finally, he realized he would have to undertake the journey himself."

"Ah, the grand journey for the woman. I understand that story well. The several wives part sounds intriguing. Go on." I catch myself falling back into old Johannes ways. Why did I say that? Why didn't I say, I'm surprised you'd tell me such a sexist, patriarchal story? While I think this she's continuing, and I don't want to interrupt. I remain silent, but remind myself to correct what I said later.

"After much searching, the king meets an old man who has given shelter to his wife. The old man tells the king that to be rejoined with his wife, he must

first go on a spiritual quest to find a golden tree. The king proceeds to the place where the old man told him he would see the tree at the end of a river of gold, which he must enter. The king is afraid, but dives in. The current is rough and pushes him away from his goal, but he perseveres and fights with all his strength.

"Nothing is ever easy. Story of my life."

"Finally, he sees the golden tree ahead. But it is not static, it is like a fountain continuously dancing, shooting off branches, regenerating itself. Then, suddenly, the current shifts and he is pulled effortlessly toward the tree. Once there, he tries to break off a branch of the liquid tree. Lo and behold, the branch solidifies in his hand, as he begins to swim back. When he returns to the old man, his lost wife is waiting for him. They create a lovely little home with a beautiful garden. The story ends as they are holding hands watching their child dance in the garden around a golden tree."

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I rub my eyes and open them. I remember the desire to correct my earlier Johannes' sexist remarks, but there's something galling to me about this fairy tale and I say, "That's it? The whole journey is just so he could find the youngest wife and have a kid? And the golden fountain flowing tree at the end becomes static in his hand. It's as if his life is over. A postcard, frozen in time. What about ruling his kingdom? Did his journey in life just stop? Every girl's fantasy story. Relationship solves everything. I know that's not true. Way too pat and simplistic." I agree with everything I just said. But why am I so upset? I think back to this morning, when pat and simplistic was moving and beautiful. I feel restless. Almost like when you return from vacation, and the effects of the vacation are beginning to wear off. It's as if a magic protective blanket that has been surrounding me today is being stripped away.

"Sounds like you see relationship, marriage, and kids as a kind of trap?" Her voice is calm, but I notice vertical furrows above her nose as her eyes narrow and her eyebrows seem to pinch toward her nose.

"Well, I don't think it's for me. Suffice it to say my parents' divorce was ugly and still is. I don't know of any happy relationships that last."

"My parents have been happily married for twenty-five years." There is a tightening of the sing-song beauty of her previously angelic voice.

"Shows it's possible. Any my grandparents were each married for fifty. Then my grandma died. Even if it does last the story ends in unhappiness." Why am I pushing her away?

Joie doesn't say anything, and notice what I thought was annoyance and tension, shift to sadness, maybe even a few tears. I ignore them.

"Your story actually reinforces my desire to keep traveling. I think I definitely want to go to Safed, and then afterwards India, and maybe even Japan. I feel my Judeo-Christian journey has come about as far as I'm able to take it. I still feel the need to search for something more. Dr. Lisbet told me I should read a book by a Sufi, P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*. He was a Russian mystic, a student of Gurdjieff. I love that title. I guess the good news is that I'm feeling a resurgence of energy to continue my search. Looking for more golden fountains."

"I'm happy for you." The tears are wiped away, and with them the anger. A lilt in her tone returns. "It looks like you have a lot of possible options. It also looks like we're going in opposite directions. I'm heading out to Stanford to study, and you're coming from there, and going to India to live in a cave. Two different journeys. Air and earth. I guess they don't mix. At least not in your world view."

She once again wipes her eyes. I see her strength return, as she gets up to leave, puts her hand on my shoulder, and says, "I still want to give you that

bell from my grandma's trip to India. There's a Haiku poem my grandmother taught me that goes with it:

The temple bell stops  
but I still hear the sound  
coming out of the flowers.

"It truly does make a beautiful sound. I hope one day you can hear it. Literally, and metaphorically in the flowers of your life. I do sincerely wish you a happy and profound journey, and that you find what you're looking for."

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continue to sit under the olive tree. As I watch Joie walking away, I feel like I'm back in Golden Gate Park and I've just made one of those little children cry, or tripped Mery. Somehow I managed to turn the beauty and angelic singing Joie brought to this place into separation and sadness, person into a sad place, so much so that she's leaving me for good. What's wrong with me?

And I've done this on Easter Sunday; on the second day of Passover, the day of love according to the Omer. Maybe she's better off without me. Maybe I'm better off. I'm just not ready for relationship. Too soon. I probably should just lie back, close my eyes, and take some healing breaths.

"Please, don't go." The words emerge from beneath my consciousness. Like a pleading wail. She continues to walk away. Perhaps they were too soft, and I try once again. This time she cautiously turns.

"Sorry." I hold out my hand, like I was taught...a pleading little child....but this time it is a true feeling of supplication and hope.

I get up and move toward her. As I approach, I repeat, "Sorry. Can we replay that last scene. I think I messed up my lines. Do I get a second chance?"

She tries to hold her face taut, but I think I notice a cautious smile, almost unbidden.

"You're right. I've still got some work to do on myself. I also want to apologize for my earlier remark. I goofed up with that

sophomoric comment about many wives sounding interesting. That was a stupid thing to say.

"And then somehow I shifted from sophomoric stupidity to a withholding fear of being trapped. That wasn't fair to you. solely my own issues. Please, tell me what you liked about that story. Why did you tell it to me?" She doesn't move. I try again.

"Would you be willing to return to our tree, just for a few minutes? I don't want to end this way."

She nods and walks back to the tree, a few feet ahead of me. I watch her back. When she sits, she turns to me and says,

'Yes, of course, I forgive you. That may have been the most non-defensive, heartfelt apology I've ever heard. We don't do much reflection in my family, don't look at our behavior, don't apologize, just move on after an 'oops'."

I'm too excited and grateful to say anything. I notice my breathing is becoming calmer, but my heart is beating more rapidly.

"Secondly, I actually thought you'd like the story. I'll admit I'm somewhat of an associational thinker...you're thinking of going to India, here is a fairy tale about India. But more, I thought you'd like the spiritual quest--the Golden Tree; and that you'd relate to the quest sometimes being full of effort--even when you're going in the right direction; and then sometimes, by grace, the current shifts and you're pulled effortlessly along. Like your feelings today in the church; or on Sinai.

"That's why I shared the story. I wasn't trying to encourage marriage and a child---though I do find the image of the family and the spiritual dance lovely at the end of the story."

I can hear from her remarks that she had indeed listen carefully to me--something I very much value--and she was trying tell a story she



thought I would appreciate. The idea of effort and effortlessness resonates with my own experience---though for me it's much more weighted toward effort. And though I still have some reflex reaction to the family scene at the end of the story, another part of me isn't wholly unattracted to it.

"Does that mean there are second chances?"

"See you tonight at grandma's."

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he Virgin birth?" Jacques asks once Reverend Noel finishes.

"Yes. Do I hear a question?"

"Though I don't agree with your view that there is a unitary experience of God that is real, I am appreciative that you are at least struggling with some of the divisive passages in your New Testament. But how can a thinking person like you, or any thinking person buy into this Virgin birth stuff."

"That's not very difficult really, is it, if you don't take it literally, but metaphorically. It's a way of saying Jesus was special, unique."

"To me, it also sounds like they just didn't like sex, which you must admit is a big message in the New Testament. Yes, I was force fed it young: "Flesh is born of flesh and spirit is born of spirit" (John 3:6) and "The acts of the flesh are obvious sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery" (Galatians 5:19). But then, if Jesus is so special, how can He be everyone, and everyone, even those conceived in the old way fashioned way, have God within? Can you have it both ways?"

"The best I can put it together in my own life is that there are different rungs on the ladder, different developmental phases, physically, emotionally, morally, and spiritually. On the lower rungs of development, individuals need rules of right and wrong, and their morality is conventional, based on fear of punishment and desire for reward. Their egoic needs are primitive, they want to be special and unique. The Biblical stories fit those needs.

"But as they mature, I believe people move up the ladder and forge their own consciousness, moving beyond conventional morality, and honoring the still small voice within. To me that voice is God incarnate through Jesus. The famous question, What would Jesus do is really me asking myself what is the highest wisdom of which I am capable; how can I allow myself to be guided by God and Christ in attaining that wisdom."

"Well, I agree with you that there are different levels of wise individuals, even in an existentially indifferent universe. And I heard you share what your friend Dr. Lisbet said, and I agree with it, that that people are only as safe to be around to the extent that they have truly reflected on and examined themselves. A version of Socrates "Know thyself." Of course, from my world view, none of it ultimately means anything in terms of a non-existent heaven or afterlife. But it does mean something now in terms of how we relate to each other.

"Those who don't have your wisdom and understanding, Reverend Noel, those who haven't worked out their egoic issues over specialness, can easily be drawn to the worst aspects of self-serving religious beliefs proselytizing their uniqueness over all other traditions. When the primitive lower level beliefs of an individual haven't been reflected on and addressed, and those individuals latch onto religious (and I might add nationalistic) claims of superiority, the results are invariably destructive. In that sense, religion, at least at the lower

rungs of development you discuss, is and has been in many ways responsible for violence, oppression, and poverty. Look at Sri Lanka, where Buddhism joined with ethnic chauvinism creates a civil war between Buddhist Singhalese and Hindu Tamils. Look at this country, where Muslims and Jews fight over land and religion. And, on that note, I'm happy to pour you some tea."

Reverend Noel accepts the tea, and the stick, from Jacques.

"I certainly cannot disagree with you about the challenges resulting from religious intolerance and divisions. I, too, certainly want to heal that. And we are looking for ways of peace and tolerance. But obviously I don't believe getting rid of religions altogether is the answer. But again, we are in agreement that one way to create more healing might be the wisdom of Socrates whom you just mentioned. Yes, of course, 'Know thyself.' But I also like the way Socrates tried to get individuals to learn about themselves by asking questions, what we now call the Socratic method.

"Jesus did the same. Jesus often asked questions in order to get those around him to reflect and explore for themselves. There are at least four recorded instances where He said to His disciples, 'What do you think?' For example, He asked a question to Simon about from whom earthly rulers should collect duties. Similarly, He solicited the thoughts of His disciples about how to search after a lost sheep. And in Matthew 22:42, He asked the Pharisees, 'What do you think of the Christ? Whose Son is He?'

"I wonder, Socratically," Reverend Noel says with a smile, "whether we might all be better off in inviting others to explore themselves and their understanding of the world, rather than demanding they do so, and self-righteously proclaiming what truth is."

Jacques raises his tea cup to the Reverend, and they clink glasses.

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As the group breaks into smaller dyads of conversation, I find myself writing furiously and excitedly in my new notebook, called Universal and Particular. The conversation between Jacques and Reverend Noel, and the earlier ones of Lin Zscaho, Al Hazrumi, and Prem Devi have started to crystalize some thoughts in me. I hope what I'm writing is for the sake of God, or returning to God at the deepest level, and I ask in advance God to forgive me for writing on the Sabbath. Though I'm pretty sure the Orthodox black hats wouldn't.

If you look even with a particular tradition, such as Judaism, there are groups individuals can join which reflect an entire continuum of beliefs. Some people who are born Orthodox leave it for Conservative or Reform. Some born Conservative or Reform, or without anything but a cultural Judaism, become ba'al teshuvah, and turn to Orthodox observance. Why? What is it about a person's upbringing and experience that leads them to a more inclusive, or more exclusive belief?

Further, why is it that each religion, sometimes separated by thousands of miles, with different views of God and the Universe, have the same issues with egotism and specialness? Which tai chi form is best in Taoism; which Chosen form of God is best in Hinduism; which style of yoga to reach the divine; which way of being Buddhist is best; Shia versus Sunni in Islam; and obviously the battles within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. Is this deeply rooted in the nature of humans--a need to be special--that is expressed in everything from the individual level-- sibling rivalry: Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob--at the societal level among nations, genders, ethnicities, religion?

Humans seem to have a need to classify and differentiate themselves along some dimension where they perceive themselves to be better, as a group, than others, whom they demean and also by whom they feel threatened. Is this a fundamental human need writ large at a group level? Whatever I am born into is best? But not everyone feels that need, as can be seen in the group here. What makes them different? Are their higher levels up the developmental ladder that Reverend Noel alluded to? It's as if the people here, following their particular traditions, have moved figuratively up the mountain, to a broader, more universal inclusiveness than those who, from the same tradition, and what might be viewed as at a more primitive developmental phase, espouse particularistic uniqueness and exclusivity at the base of the mountain?

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I remember taking my first inkblot--Rorschach test-- with the psychiatrist mom made me go to. I remember hearing him commenting to mom, in my presence, that it was quite unusual the way I saw the inkblot as a story. All the parts were connected. Rather than a form here, a shadow there, I created a story about all their interconnectedness. Recently talking about Rorschachs with Dr. Lisbet, I brought this up, and, with her guidance, she helped me notice that I am indeed able to observe lots of details, but also that I try to put the details into a holistic story. Dr. Lisbet said there is some neuroscience research indicating our brain uses both a telephoto lens to get the big picture, and a zoom lens, to focus on details. Some people are attracted more (or hard-wired more) to one style or the other. I think I have both. I switch back and forth, like inductive and deductive thinking. Looking at details to build a theory. Looking from the big picture theory to see how the details fit.

Maybe it all goes back to my putting puzzles together and trying to find the corner pieces, then the sides. What I do know is that I feel strongly motivated by these questions of Universal/particular. They are personally important to me as part of my own quest. And it seems they might have important benefits to helping heal so much feuding among so many. I an "itch" that I want to explore further. Hopefully, the itch is like a grain of sand and the result will be similar to the one in an oyster.

There must be a way to think this through more clearly.

When I'm confused, and have lots of ideas circulating around in my mind about a topic, I do what I always do, and try to write everything out, a way to start to create order from chaos. In this case, I make a chart of the different views that groups have of truth, how strongly they believe their version of truth is the one and only, how they view other traditions. I look through my notes from a few days ago when our group so openly talked about the challenges among and between traditions.

6. THE TOUGHEST. MY WAY IS THE ONLY TRUTH. YOU ARE WRONG. I WANT TO CONVERT YOU, VIOLENTLY IF NECESSARY. Groups in this classification believe they have an absolute monopoly on truth, that theirs is the only way, and that they are justified in using force to convert (or eliminate) others. Historically Hitler is the most recent egregious example of this. There are other examples of religious groups, ethnic groups, nationalistic groups which can be classified in this category. This is the most difficult group with which to have any kind of non-violent dialogue.

5. MY WAY IS TRUE. YOU ARE WRONG. I WANT TO CONVERT YOU NON VIOLENTLY. Here you have true believers, some Orthodox Jews, some fundamentalist Christians and Muslims, some groups from non dual (and dualists) Hinduism. This is any group that feels theirs is the truth, and others are wrong, and for their wrong beliefs will be condemned to a life in hell, samsara, eternal death, etc. There is no real dialogue here, only proselytizing, if there is any contact at all.

4. MY WAY IS TRUE. FOR ME. AND IT IS EVOLVING. I RESPECT YOUR VIEW. FOR YOU. PRACTICE YOUR OWN PATH. RESPECT OTHERS. THERE MAY BE MANY PATHS UP THE MOUNTAIN. The finger points to the moon. Do not confuse the finger with the moon. And within the tradition

itself, this can reflect an evolving revelation, like Conservative Judaism. There is a respect for tradition, but also a willingness to prune certain branches that no longer seem relevant, adding new ones, based on one's own faith tradition as the tree grows.

3. INCLUSION IS IMPORTANT TO OUR TRADITION. We want as large a tent as possible, with as few criteria for membership as possible. Examples might include Reform Judaism (10 Suggestions, not 10 Commandments); Bahai, Unitarians, and more liberal to moderate denominations.

2. I AM SEEKING UNIVERSAL TRUTH, THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN. THERE ARE MANY PARTICULAR PATHS UP THE MOUNTAIN. I am interested in exploring and learning from each of them. Ramakrishna believed this "Truth is one. Sages call it by many names." Could this be what John, at least for Christianity, was hinting at in "14:2 In my Father's house are many dwelling places")?

1. TRUTH IS RELATIVE. There are no absolutes. There is nothing permanent to believe in. It is up to each of us to choose our own ethics given the time and place and context. (With thanks to Jacques).

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I wonder what the group would say about this chart, and the differ. I imagine they'd be like preaching to the choir, certainly in condemning positions 6 and 5. I wonder what Dr. Lisbet would say. I'd be fascinated to see if someone has, or might do research on this. And what would my goal be? I don't think it's just descriptive. I think I do have a value judgment that is prescriptive.

Certainly dialogue and respect would be part of that. My sense is interfaith dialogue would most easily occur in groups 2,3, and 4. Those higher up --5's and 6's-- wouldn't see the need for dialogue; those at 1 and 2 don't really have "a" faith; their interfaith dialogue could be within themselves!

I'd like see those higher on the continuum soften their views, 6's to become 5's, 5's to 4's. At the very least, I'd like to remove the violent component of 6's. I have no idea how you engage there. Wouldn't any kind of appeasement and flexibility be seen as weakness? And if I'm being respectful, and they aren't, how can you dialogue?

People at 6 and 5 don't think they're being evil, they think they're being wise and godly, and that it's others who are being self-deceiving, lazy, and ignorant. What are the alternatives, then? I'm going to ask Lin Zscho what he thinks would be the right dongjing response to such folks. Both Dr. Lisbet and Prem Devi shared with me that Gandhi always said to keep the context of respect, realizing it is your brothers and sisters with whom you are disagreeing, even as you engage in non-violent resistance, Satyagraha and ahimsa. That way you struggle for your values and what you believe in, but don't engage in the same intolerance, and often anger and hatred toward them as "other" that they may espouse toward groups and beliefs different than their own. This is certainly a beautiful teaching, but feels quite hard to put into practice. It's so easy, when attacked and demeaned to want to come back in a similar tone and style.

I think Lin Zscho would say we all come from the cosmic void, and so even in the world of yin and yang, we are all still one, and one's enemy should also be seen as part of the whole, part of that from which we came. And, as for the monotheistic traditions, if God is One, can't all these different positions be part of God's wisdom? Is it fair for me to pass judgement? Is it fair for me to not?

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Where I have trouble is when someone says, not only is my path right for me, but other paths are wrong. I find the absolutist views of fundamentalists challenging, not only their content, but also their unwillingness to engage in dialogue and listen to other points of view. They have the truth and the way, even though some of their views may be jingoistic, anti-gay, hostile to ethnic minorities and other religious beliefs.



Prem Devi shared with us that Ramakrishna was aghast that those worshipping God without form sometimes wouldn't even talk to those who worshipped God with form --the diety incarnate. I see parallels to tensions between Judaism and Christianity.

And of course those who believe in different forms of God incarnate think that only their form is right.

I once saw a bumper sticker that said, *God is too big to be contained by any one religion*. If I take the spiritual track, I'd agree with that statement. I'd place God at the top of a metaphoric mountain, and say that there are many paths up that mountain. Yes, for a certain person, one path may be enough and God can be found through that path. But I would believe, as I think the monotheists in our group would, that God is larger than any particular path.

As for my views, I try to see the truth in all beliefs--theistic, non-theistic spiritual, non-theistic existential-- and therefore, try to understand multiple perspectives and keep an open mind toward each.

I'm proud that I've evolved beyond the adversarial nature of the law and argumentation just to prove my "side" right. I'm proud that I've learned to listen carefully and try to see both sides of any disagreement, many sides, even when they seem to be in contradiction to each other. For now, I can live with that ambiguity even as I seek to reconcile it. I'm comfortable trying to give a framework and borders to what may be unborderable, to stay curious in my search for "truth" of which there are may be many versions.

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Does that make me a relativist? Or do I hold that my open, inquiring, curious perspective is absolutely better than theirs? There is part of me that is saying that my view is just one more perspective,

though if I'm honest I do believe it's better, in the sense of more nuanced, more thoughtful than the positions of fundamentalists. At least I'm willing to engage in dialogue with the possibility of being willing to learn from a new perspective, even that of a fundamentalist.

Yes, I disagree with many aspects of fundamentalists--their black-and-white certainty of their beliefs, the absoluteness of their traditions, the intolerance to other's viewpoints. I value tradition, to an extent, if thoughtfully examined for its current relevance, but I also value change and adaptation. And, no, I don't like feeling I'm in a one-way conversation where I'm seeking to be tolerant and understanding, and they are not.

Although I believe it is better to have dialogue, listen, maybe even learn from others, perhaps even if they won't, I can learn from them. I do admire their courage, the strength of their convictions, that enables them to stand up for what they believe in, and I certainly understand their need for structure.

And, empathically, I can see where my approach--provisional beliefs, holding beliefs lightly, seeing all sides and perspective, developing tolerance, would be threatening to them. My psychology professor said that people vary on their ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. Do fundamentalists have a low tolerance? Do I have a higher tolerance?

And I do have to ask myself, with all this open-mindedness and tolerance of different points of view, do I really stand for anything? In trying to avoid adversarial battles, in trying to be a bridge builder, am I committed to being a peace maker at any cost?

Isn't the danger of that view mere passivity? What about people determined to impose their views by any means, including violent hurtful ones? Then appeasement, rather than tolerance and acceptance, is a

passive doing nothing naiveté that allows the stronger and more  
ruthless to crush others and win. History written by the victors.

Is there really a bridge-building middle way in dealing with Hitler,  
Stalin, slavery. There are rights and wrongs. There are rights and  
wrongs. I'm realizing that that my desire to understand all points of  
view doesn't allow me an abdication of responsibility of judging. I  
believe that some perspectives are simply intolerant and wrong. And  
though I don't want to admit it, don't I also ultimately cast judgment  
from my mountain top? How then am I different from other fundamentalists  
who do the same?

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Perhaps the difference is intent. I am willing to try to  
understand another's perspective. I am willing to engage in dialogue. I  
also want to try to come from the perspective of believing in the  
fundamental unity and sacredness in all humans. This is what Lin Zscho  
described as xujing, the cosmic void from which all form is created.  
Akishige talks about all of us having an essential core of pure Buddha  
nature. Gandhi said that even as you fight for your rights, you realize  
that the enemy is, in essence, your "brothers and sisters." Judaism  
teaches that the "soul which You have placed in us is pure."

My intention is to create understanding, to see the other person  
as a person, not as an object or belief. Then, after hearing the other  
person's perspective, my hope is to begin engagement with respectful  
dialogue. As Lin Zscho instructed us, dongjing is the best response  
possible for a given situation with no more "yang" than is needed. If  
I disagree with my "brother or sister," as Gandhi called the enemy,  
maximum yin would be to honor different viewpoints, allowing a thousand  
flowers to bloom, a thousand ideas to flourish. This is a position high  
on tolerance and mercy and low on judgment.

If there is something troubling in another's view (intolerance, prejudice), then of course it is not only my right, but also my responsibility to speak up, a more positive assertive, yang bar response. But I want to remember to do so in a respectful way, with love, tolerance, and mercy, gentle, clear discernment-judgement- and no more yang than necessary. If there is more "truth" in my view, I need to remember that eventually, the strength of water can smooth the hardest rock. Over time, tolerance can wear away a rigid stone. Martin Luther King affirmed that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I think this is what I believe, and certainly what I want to believe.

The question, of course, is to then assess in which situations and over what issues a more yang response is needed. For myself, given my fear and distrust of my father's anger, when does my level of discomfort with more yang bars present a challenge to how assertively I'm willing to engage? I remember Reb Jonathan talking about the evangelical pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer who voiced strong resistance to Hitler, and was part of a plot to assassinate him, for which he was hanged. Would I be able to speak up so courageously? To engage in a maximum yang strategy that was violent?

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The non-violent positions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King feel much more comfortable to me. Why? Why do we select certain world views for ourselves? What is it in an individual's personal dynamics, upbringing, and culture that attracts them to a particular belief and practice?

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What is it that makes some, like the Dalai Lama, willing to say practice your own, but respect others, while others reject, denigrate and criticize paths other than their own? The psychologist Abraham

Maslow said if your only tool is a hammer, then every problem begins to look like the head of a nail.

If children are taught that there is only one truth, then all others appear wrong, and should be "hammered."

I remember Reb Jonathan talking about a wise teacher and colleague he knew, Rebbe Zalman Schachter. Reb Zalman noted that some in Orthodox Judaism see other religions as avodah zara (forbidden foreign worship). He then asks, "What do you think? That God was asleep when Jesus was born, or when Buddha was around? Why do you think that God is not concerned for the other people to give them a path that fits them better than ours?"

What amazing openness. He, and Reb Jonathan would be right at home with the guests here in Safed.

And of course I'd have to ask, what is it in them--and increasingly in me-- that is willing to step back, try to see the pluses and minuses of differing approaches, that wants to create bridges among all traditions, God-focused, non-theistic spiritual, and existential?

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I think back to my political science undergraduate days. I wonder if this model could be applied to the political sphere, as well as this religious. One person says, "pull yourself up by your boot straps, government welfare is demeaning to those who are able, and makes people infantile. Tough love is needed." Another says "society is judged by how it treats those who are in difficulty, and government, out of mercy in a just society, should provide a safety net." Both views can be true. But some people so adamantly believe their position that they denigrate others who believe differently. One group calls the other selfish; the other group says the name callers are weak, coddling, and wishy washy.

In religious circles, one group can also call others wishy-washy, stand for nothings; those with more flexible beliefs call Orthodox followers self-righteous, inflexible, and intolerant. Yet no one looks at why they chose their own beliefs, and what their psychological dynamics might be that cause them to espouse those beliefs: including their need for certainty, their capacity to tolerate ambiguity, the experiences they have had in their life. What are the motivations, what do we get out of taking a certain position? Why do some people believe a certain way, others a different way, some with provisional conviction, others with unwavering (to inflexible) conviction, depending upon your perspective?

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And what about me? Overall, I like the feeling of being in control. I don't like feeling passive and helpless. But I also recognize a need sometimes to relax, let go, drop the bundle. At other times, I may be too passive when an action is called for. Even with faith, like Moses at the Reed Sea, I feel there needs to be self-initiation: Come on Moses, take a step already.

I also don't like to be told what to do. Although part of me is attracted to the truth and certainty of the Orthodox-- who prescribe almost every aspect of living --, more of me is attracted to the freedom, choice and self-determination of the Reform movement, the Ten Suggestions rather than the Ten Commandments. I have a freedom reflex, like the dogs in Pavlov's experiments. I like coming from the inside out, what feels true to me, rather than the outside in.

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When I look back at my chart, and the pages I've written about it, I realize that the chart was primarily about religions and philosophical traditions. My political science background made me wonder how it might

be expanded into the political sphere. What about how there might be an exploration between religion and science? Is there any possibility of a bridge-building common ground?

Religious fundamentalists believe that humans were formed by God six thousand years ago just as we are. They believe in a literal interpretation of their texts. For example, Jewish and Christian fundamentalists believe that, as it says in the Bible, plants began to sprout on the third day, before the sun, moon, and stars were created on the fourth. Birds and fish emerged on the fifth day, preceding land animals that appeared on the sixth day. They attack evolution as an assault on their identity and dignity and a moral universe,, which believes we're descended from apes, and not created by God, and live in a survival of the fittest struggle for life, thereby undermining humans' specialness, dignity, and centrality in a moral universe. They point to scientific materialists who are atheists and leave no room for spiritual mystery as evidence of science's inherent godlessness.

Scientists, on the other hand, assert that these Biblical statements cannot be taken literally because they contradict evidence concerning the history of the universe, which shows that the sun preceded plant life, and animals preceded birds. Scientists who try to dialogue with religious fundamentalists are often viewed by their colleagues as pursuing a kind of Neville-Chamberlain-like accommodation and appeasement with wrong-headed, dangerous people.

Between these two extremes, where is bridge building and dialogue possible? For those who believe their position absolutely, (point five in the chart), there doesn't seem much hope. However, there are individuals in both camps who are curious about and interested in the other - scientists like Einstein who hold open the possibility of

mystery and awe in the universe; religious people who understand the Bible as metaphor, and aren't "anti-science".

For example, some people of faith believe the Bible should be understood metaphorically, not literally. From this perspective, the six days of creation represent a timeless spiritual hierarchy, not a series of chronological events. Thus, they are not threatened when science is taught in the schools because to them, it does not violate or invalidate spiritual teachings.

Similarly, some scientists are not atheistic, but agnostic, and some are persons of faith. Although Einstein did not believe in a "Divine Being" who can hear prayer, read thoughts and forgive sins, he did feel a reverence for the wonder of the universe, the mystery of the cosmos.

...we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper.

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It seems there may be room for dialogue among some. Scientists who feel awe at the universe, and also want to adhere to scientific principles. Those of faith who feel awe at the universe and yet also want that awe to be consistent with scientific understanding.

Can there also be a common ground in an area dear to my heart, the issue of what control, if any, humans have over their lives? Some people in both the religion and science camps believe we have no control, that all is predetermined, either by God, or by the Universe's laws.

Einstein wrote,

Everything is determined, the beginning as well as the end, by forces over which we have no control.

From a religious perspective, predestination states that all events have been willed by God, a theological determinism. Therefore the



problem is humans believing they have free will, and acting in violation of God's will: "Not thy will but God's will."

My psychology professor presented many theories arguing that humans don't have free will, for example, the work of psychologists such as John Watson and B.F. Skinner, as well as the biological determinists. But he also pointed out that other views assert that human agency is important, and in fact is one of our defining characteristics and moral attributes as humans. Jacques would certainly agree with that. So would Dr. Lisbet. So would Prem Devi, as I understand her explanation of personal karma. We can and should have an influence on how we act and think, and these have real consequences.

Even though understanding Einstein is way beyond my pay grade, he did believe in the metaphorical bending of space and time. In space/time, all is relative.. Does this mean that everything effects everything, and we might as well try to exert our influence as best we can? Like gravity, we too may have a force that can gradually bend others in the direction we desire. Maybe we are like a chaotic musical ensemble, competing, combining, colliding. Why not use our force for good?

For those who are willing, including those parts with me, I say let the dialogue continue.

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There is laughter. I can't tell whether it comes from in front, behind, right or left, because of my ability to hear in only one ear. I wonder if in this case, that's a good thing. I can imagine that the world on this Sabbath of Turning to God is surrounding me with laughter. A great cosmic chuckle.

When I look around, I see that it's Jacques, Prem Devi, and Lin Zscho who are laughing.

"Can we join in?" Al Hazrumi and I ask at the same time.

"Absolutely." Jacques answers. "In fact, Lin Zscho was just going to offer a tai chi class."

Our little group gathers around. Jacques continues, "I had just complimented Lin Zscho on being a closet existentialist, since dongjing always involves a conscious, authentic effort at choice. But I was asking him how you decide, from a centered place of xujing--the existential fearful void in my cosmology, the peaceful, harmonious void of his-- what is the correct dongjing response: how assertive or how yielding to be. How do you know, and don't you ever make mistakes. Before he could answer, Prem Devi told a great story." He nods to her.

"Once a young searching soul went to India to ask the wise master the secret of happiness and wisdom. The Great Indian Guru closed his eyes in prayer, then hold up two fingers in a peace sign, saying, two words, 'Good choices.'

"'Ah,' the young soul nodded, 'very wise,' and turned to leave. Then, at the exit of the cave, the seeker paused, turned back quizzically and said 'But how do you learn to make good choices?'

"The guru again meditated, and after a few moments held up one finger, saying one word 'Experience.' Again the young soul was amazed at his wisdom, bowed, and turned to leave. But before he reached the exit of the cave, he again turned questioned once again, asked, with a quizzical expression, 'But how to you gain experience.'

"The guru again meditated a few moments, then held up two fingers, 'Bad choices.'"

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There is another round of laughter. Then Prem Devi says, "Now, from the Vedas and Upanishads to the Tao" as she puts her palms together toward Lin Zscho "Namaste."

"Very wise teaching. Thank you. It takes much learning and practice." Lin Zscho places his left palm toward his chest and puts his right hand in a fist into it. I wonder why he does that. Is it to protect the blow to another by his own effort, to show he is powerful, yet also restrained, non-threatening?

"The Mandarin term 'tai chi chuan' literally translates as 'supreme ultimate boxing' or 'boundless fist,'" Ah. I think, ask and you shall receive. "As I've previously shared with you, it involves a living form of our philosophy of balancing the Taoist principles of yin and yang duality. Remember, though, as you can see from this symbol, each black and white 'embryo' has embedded within it a small circle of it's opposite energy, too.



"Today I'd like to show you two forms that we can practice. The first is 'Raise hands to salute Buddha'; the second, 'Grasp bird's tail.' These are only two of the sixty-four forms of the sixty four in the Guang Ping Yang style of Tai Chi. I like to teach Guang Ping because it is shorter than other styles, and also because it is said that these sixty four forms are based on the I Ching's sixty four possible combinations of yin and yang...from maximum yang to maximum yin. These combinations form the totality of dongjing possibilities."

I question, "How do they get from yin and yang, that's only two to 64. And I've heard that some schools of tai chi have 108 forms. Wouldn't more be better? Or is that just too difficult for us?"

"Good, precise questions. Let me answer them one at a time. Yin and yang are two, and both are equal. Imagine that they mate, and, as in genetics, you have four offspring, and like in genetics two are pure forms: maximum yang (all yang); maximum yin (all yin); and a strong yang (one yang, one yin); and a strong yin (one yin, one yang). Double it a third time, you have eight; a fourth time, sixteen; a fifth time, 32, and a 6th double, you now have 64, in which maximum yang is six yangs, maximum yin is 6 yins, and all the combinations in between. Clear?"

"Kind of. You're saying, in general, there are sixty four combinations of yin and yang, and each of these can translate into a dongjing response to match any given situation." I'm writing notes as I talk.

"Good. That was your easy question! As for your harder one, no, more is not better. One form is enough, if you do it the right way. There are simply several different styles, some longer, some shorter: Yang, Chen, Wu, Sun. Each of these are only 'fingers pointing to the moon.'

"This phrase has many meanings. It can mean, don't mistake the finger for the moon. I think this is important when we apply it to our recent discussion of the universal and particular. Some people mistake their tradition--their rituals and creed, the fingers--for that toward which they point: the ultimate understanding and wisdom.

"They saying also suggests that there are many ways to find the moon. Different fingers might be helpful for different people."

As he starts to place the stick down, Prem Devi excitedly holds out her hand to receive it. "Ishta deva!" she exclaims. "Do you remember how I discussed with you a few days ago the concept of Ishta Deva, each person's specially chosen God. I referred to the sage, Ramakrishna, who said there are many ways to know and experience God, and that each person chooses a way to God, and a God that fits their temperament and personality."

Somewhat embarrassedly, just to remind myself of exactly what she said, I turn to my note book and started to read to myself. When she sees me, she asks what I'm doing, and she asks if I would read out loud, as she hands me the stick.

Ramakrishna would say to both those who believed in a formless God, and those who believed in God with form, practice your path with complete dedication, but not with complete certainty, for only God can have that. He himself was familiar with both paths, as well as with Christianity and Islam. He knew the formless God, as in Islam, or Vedanta, or the ein sof, the infinite nothing of the eternal God; and the God with form, as in Christianity, or Vaishnava. His preference was the latter, God with form. He didn't want to be the One, as much as he wanted to yearn after and experience the One. As he once said 'I'd rather taste sugar than be sugar.' Having known the One without a Second, he chose to return to the relative plane, and worship 'forms' of the One, sometimes yearning as a child for its mother, sometimes as a cow for its calf, in a loving Bhakti ecstasy.

"Exactly," she says, taking the stick I offer to her. "Each person has their own personal chosen God form. I understand exactly what you are saying. Lin Zscho. What you discuss regarding Tai Chi, may also apply to yoga. The moon is to 'yoke' ourselves to the divine. For the more emotional type of person, bhakti yoga, the path of loving devotion, might be the appropriate finger; for the more physically inclined, hatha yoga, with its physical postures and working with breath and mind, may be the way they 'yoke' themselves to the divine. For the cognitive and

intellectually inclined, jhana yoga, the path of knowledge, which is more philosophical; and for those more oriented to acting in the world, karma yoga, the path of giving service to others.

"Rather than saying bhakti is right for me, and assume that that path is universal for all and therefore if you don't practice it, or it doesn't work for you , you're wrong and bad, this model could suggest that each person has their own Ishta Devi. All different fingers. That is beautiful. And you can see that if you don't take the big view, each 'finger' could tell the other ones 'You're wrong' ; my path is better.' But it may only be better for them."

"Exactly. Many paths up the mountain."

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What Prem Devi and Lin Zscho are saying is that there is no one size fits all. Some people are attracted to different fingers: approaches, styles, beliefs. But if they are only taught one style-by their parents, their community, what is there are mismatches. If we could step back far enough, I wonder if we could create a larger framework within which to understand people's differing beliefs, personalities, the sense modes they use (visual, kinesthetic, cognitive) to understand the world, and create a matching that would be best tailored for the person. We wouldn't need a one size fits all approach. If all beliefs could be presented to each person, could there be a way of matching, or a self-selection process in which certain people would be drawn to certain perspectives that best matched who they were, their goals, their personality?

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I think back to our group's discussion of self-control and other/Other control in different religious and philosophical systems.

Why do some people select an existential worldview, of a vast indifferent, meaningless universe—in which it is all up to humans to exercise self-determination and "deny their nothingness"; and others a universe in which they trust in a benevolent God—"carried on the wings of angels?"

Zen Buddhism promotes a rigorous self-discipline. Amidha Buddhism, by contrast, preaches that simply saying the name of Buddha brings safety and security, a perfect example of high other control, seeking refuge in the Buddha. Some emphasize the fighting spirit and self-discipline, others, say "Into Your arms, your loving arms I commend my soul."

I remember my psychology professor talking about internal and external control in different individuals. Some feel they are self-determining, others feel they have less personal control, and therefore would like others to be in charge. An interesting illustration I remember is hypnosis. For people with a more external locus of control, hypnosis works best if the therapist is directive regarding motivation, suggestions, relaxation. Phrases such as "Now, close your eyes," "You are feeling yourself beginning to relax," "Your mind is becoming calm and peaceful," "You can do this" are all effective in inducing a hypnotic state. For those who are more inner directed, the most effective phrases would be more cooperative, and emphasize working together: "When you are ready and feel comfortable, allow your eyes to gently close." "If you want to, let your mind begin to feel a greater peacefulness."

Neither path is a prior right or wrong. It depends on the person, and matching the strategy to that person. Could that be applied not just to psychological experiments but to religious and philosophical belief systems?

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How does this issue of matching self and other control apply to my personality dynamics? I'm now aware that there is a part of me that doesn't like to be told what to do. I want to feel "I" am in control. And overall I have pretty good self-discipline. But I also know there are times when my self-discipline reaches its limit. I feel I do need to "drop the bundle." I increasingly appreciate the Shabbat as such a time. And am so grateful for those noetic moments when I have felt protected and carried by a large force. Is that force God? Can it be as Akishige said, taking refuge in the Buddha, the sangha, the dharma...a wiser group of elders? Could it be in the arms of a beloved? .

What is the right "match" for me? Would it be better for me to choose to seek to surrender active control and feel carried by the arms of an other/Other: (God, sangha, lover)? Or it is better for me to continue to enhance my personal self-control and discipline? I know in psychology it's framed as an either/or question: do you have an internal locus of control or an external locus of control. But I wonder if it is that simple, and doesn't need to be an either/or.

But that would make the question of matching personality and belief systems of self control and other/Other control even more complex. There would not be a one size fits all for every situation. Therefore I could choose poorly. I might choose the "wrong" strategy" but think it's right. For example, I might surrender as a way of abnegating responsibility put too much trust externally instead of relying more on myself. . Would this be what Dr. Lisbet called negative yielding? I think of the passage in the Bible where God says to Moses, take a step already! You need to act. Is too looking to the other/Other to solve my concerns really just laziness, an inability to take responsibility for my own life?



On the other hand, I could push forward on my own, feeling I have to do it all myself, trying to actively control everything myself, refusing help from lack of trust of others.

This is what Dr. Lisbet called overcontrol. When it is time to set the bundle down, "turn your cares to God for God's already carrying them anyway?" To trust the divine Other; or to trust others? To trust myself?

Can I really be trusted to choose the right belief system and style for me?

Can others? I look again at my six point chart. Is choosing a fundamentalist viewpoint (#6) where a person turns themselves over to God, and then says my God is the only true God, my views are right and all other viewpoints are wrong--is that really best for that person? And even if it were, is it best for the world? Who is wise enough--what group, what gathering of elders--is wise enough to decide "what is best" for each person? I make a note of this question. It is one which feels beyond my pay grade at this point, but one which I would like to ask the group to get their input and thoughts.

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And returning to me, what might be some positive models of integrating self and other/Other control? I like Prem Devi's view in yoga, that we stretch a little bit each day, within the context of seeking union with the divine. Self-control and Other-control. This way I keep motivated to self-improve, but within a careful framework, knowing my limits, even as I try to grow, all the while coupling this with a sense of acceptance that I am ok just as I am. Both/and. Not either/or.

I know it can be helpful to not limit my belief in my ability, but I also believe that I, and each of us, only have so much stretch in us,

more than we think, but not unlimited. What is the best way to get there? For me, a harsh wake up call may sometimes be necessary. But if that is the only strategy, the result is I beat myself up, always focused on what I'm lacking, feeling guilty and bad about myself. It's like trying to run faster and faster. No matter how much I train, there are limits, and to push too hard too often only causes injury. As Prem Devi said about hatha yoga, if we stretch a muscle too far too soon, it will recoil, and we may even injure it.

Overall what seems to work best for me is the double movement of acceptance and stretch. This provides a helpful antidote to the part of me that feels I must be the best, and that more is never enough. If I proceed to improve myself with slow steady change, then if there is a God and I'm a piece of the cosmic puzzle, God will take care of the rest; and if it's an existentially indifferent universe, then I will have done the best I am capable of leading in authentic, full life.

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But doesn't this all come back, at some root level, to how a person views the nature of the universe, and human nature. If you look at the universe, it contains unbelievable awe and majesty, as well as unbelievable horror and tragedy. Fear and awe are the same word in Hebrew. How do we each arrive at our beliefs about the nature of the universe?

Similarly, what forms our beliefs about human nature? I have seen amazing examples of love, comfort, kindness in humankind, and also examples of cruelty and inhumanity. How do we arrive at our personality theory about human nature? Some people are attracted to a classical Freudian view of human nature; that we are amoral, at the mercy of an unbridled id; or they favor a Hobbesian perspective, life is nasty and

brutish. Could this also be what is meant by "original sin?" On the other hand, there are those who believe we are all innately self-actualizing, like psychologists Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, and some spiritual traditions (e.g. the Jewish belief that "the soul you have placed in me is pure;" or the Buddhist belief in an innocent, wholesome "Buddha nature." Still others believe we are neither originally good nor bad, but rather that our "nature" depends on our experience, such as existentialists, or the philosopher John Locke.

Again, how do we arrive at these beliefs about human nature, and the universe, given that there is so much evidence to support each position? What does it say about us and our choices?

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I look back at the pages I've just written. I like this idea of building a meta model. I wonder if it could apply across many levels of life. I've focused primarily on philosophical and religious beliefs and how certain personality dynamics might best match with certain views.

How might we account for a similar phenomenon in the political arena? Is this my political science pre law major coming back into play? I remember the Rebbe talking about a trip he and Dr. Lisbet took to Fortaleza, Brazil. They visited palatial houses, and also saw garbage dump in the favela where people were scrounging for food. This experience made him understand why people could support socialism. The wealth discrepancy was just too shocking.

In America, there are some who say that it is merit and self-determination that cause individuals to succeed, and that those who don't are lazy, wanting only a handout and welfare. Others argue that we have a very unlevel playing field and that we have a social responsibility to enable each person to develop their full potential to

survive and thrive. Why are people of good will drawn to each perspective? Again, I wonder if a bridge building is possible.

Perhaps this would involve some combination of mercy and justice, rather than either/or thinking. I remember the Rebbe saying that sometimes his role is to comfort the afflicted, and sometimes to afflict the comfortable. This derives from the belief that it is important to be compassionate in the face of suffering and the belief that it is important to be confrontational in the face of complacent injustice.

Further, I wonder if this matching might not be once and for all, but could change over the course of a person's lifetime. Different proportions of assertiveness and yielding, yin and yang, self and other control, different paths up the mountain, depending upon which mountain is being climbed and at what phase of life. Different approaches and beliefs might be more helpful at certain developmental phases: e.g. during adolescence and young adult, a self-determining courage and confidence in facing the future might be most needed. I wonder if in middle age, the capacity to juggle and roles and balance love and work, using different modes of assertive and yielding, self and other control. And elders? Hard to even imagine, but I wonder if that wouldn't involve balancing not going gently with a larger portion of acceptance and wisdom to face aging, illness, and death?

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Why do some people feel the need to believe their version of the elephant is the truth, the absolute truth, and all others are wrong? Is it fear they themselves may be wrong; is it fear of committing so much time and energy to a path, you must believe it; is it just that we want to feel unique as individuals, we want to feel our culture, religion is unique and special, better than all others?

Is it fear of seeing some truth in the other's viewpoint; is it political, power drives, or creating a legal, adversarial model? Some say the truth is deeds; others that the truth is the law; or the truth is not law but love; or that justice is more important than mercy; or that mercy is more important than justice; or that we need law and order; or that compassion and love is what is needed. Why can't they each be touching some part of the elephant? Why do they so often insist that their truth is the only truth?

These are creating false dichotomies to promote a particular version of the truth. But what seems more accurate to me is something a pioneering philosopher and mathematician Ben Freedman, who taught my Intro to Philosophy course, called the value braid. These are woven truths, all part of the 10 sefirot (energies) of God--such as love, power, harmony--that need to be blended, harmonized, and integrated in different situations, as Lin Zscho talks about with dongjing.

What allows some wise teachers, to be deeply committed to their own particular spiritual path, while also honoring other paths? They claim no complete universal hegemony of wisdom. Why not join hands while ascending the mountain? The task is hard enough, there is so much necessary suffering in life. Why add unnecessary suffering?

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What would it be like to convene a global gathering like the one we have here in Safed--our existentialist philosopher, our liberal, contemplative theistic and non-theistic theologians, with the addition of developmental psychologists, anthropologists, political scientists, brain scientists, to address this topic of belief systems, personality styles, on a large meta level? Might this help us deepen our

understanding in ways that could help promote inner and outer peace in the world?

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I think back to the swimming pool with Elizabeth, and my subsequent conversations with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet about that incident, and the exercise they had me do with the tree trunk, the creek, and the cabin. It's interesting how I keep coming back to the same lessons, though hopefully, each time understanding them a bit deeper. Always trying to "grasp the bird's tail." I see how looking back, I have a different understanding of the value of assertiveness and yielding in that situation than I did at the time.

I hear the Rebbe's laughter again, "So, you were a tall, erect, powerful tree, and were cut off at the base, eh. Sounds pretty bloody messy to me. You must have really been a bad boy."

I'm annoyed. Here I'd been vulnerable with him, telling him and Dr. Lisbet how I felt like I was being cut down to size, and his response is laughter. I feel put down, then I feel guilty that the old anger—Dad's—is still within me and starting to resurface.

"I think Mery was a lot more sensitive to others than I was at the pool. I want to be more like her. Yes, I think I was wrong. Callous, insensitive. When you call me a bad boy, you don't seem to be taking my feelings very seriously."

"Actually, I'm taking you very seriously. Your example is a microcosm of one of the great dilemmas all of us face. But it's not really so simple as you're trying to make it out to be. You're painting Mery's position as saintly, the last shall be first, the meek shall inherit the earth, and yourself as callous barbarian caveman brute."

*"You're right, that's exactly the way I see it now. Then, I thought she was just an unassertive weakling, and I was only standing up for what was fair."*

*"So in the first story you tell, you were good and she wasn't! Now she's good and you're not. Have you ever heard of black and white thinking?" Dr. Lisbet comments.*

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We are now all gathered to learn additional lessons in Tai Chi from Lin Zscho. "Let's begin by placing your feet shoulder-width apart, feeling the weight on your soles, the main pressure on the front third of your foot. Your knees are slightly bent, arms at your sides. Taking a cleansing breath through your nose, and imagine your belly expanding gently, calmly. Feel the 'chi' energy there in your tan tien, a space two inches below your navel, and imagine it two inches under your skin. From that centered place, let your hands come out to the sides and move them slowly toward shoulder height, palms up, as if you are lifting 10,000 pounds of care and struggle and worldly suffering."

We're on the same page there.

"Now, I'd like you to watch me continue to do the first two forms, and just notice how it looks as a whole. Try to get a feeling, visually, and kinesthetically, in your body." I observe the fluid graceful motions of his hands and feet as he coils, slowly and effortlessly switching his weight, first to this left foot while turning his hands to the right, then to the right foot, while returning his hands and torso to center. "Now notice my hands, palms down, in front of my body, as if pushing through water. This is the yang balance to the yin supplication at the start." I watch as his weight now shifts once more to his right foot, as his left heel comes up and then goes outward, along with his hands, ending with his left palm facing him

chest high, and his open right hand almost like a hatchet hacking, albeit with the greatest gentleness and grace into that left palm.

"That ends the first form. Now let me show you the transition to the second form, 'grasp bird's tail.' Though there are different forms, they should eventually be connected smoothly, like a flowing river." Then, without a pause but yet with stillness, he once again turns to the right, this time stretching out his palms, right hand on top, facing left palm, toward an imaginary corner, while his left leg goes back. His hands then come toward his body, making a circular as if holding a ball, while he comes up on his right toe. His knees bend, and he pushes with some force with his legs toward the right corner again, with both palms now, wrists bent, fingers pointing outward.

He gives a bow toward us. Right hand clenched, left hand covering it. 'Grasp bird's tail' is a ward off attack. You grasp the person coming toward you, and take his energy and place it in front of you so it doesn't harm you. Then you bend and push back, warding the attacker off. All with perfect tan tien stillness, of course."

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"Ok, now, once more, first form. You've seen how it looks as a whole. Now, we need to focus more precisely on the parts that make up that whole. As before, raise your arms, palms upward, as if lifting ten thousand pounds of the world's cares. Your weight is evenly distributed 50-50 on each foot. You are breathing in through your nose, eyes softly forward, feeling your center in your tan tien.

"As your hands reach shoulder height, very gently and slowly you turn them toward each other and then move the palms so they are facing downward. Try that." Clumsily we try to follow the instructions. Too many moving parts.



"Good. Now, at the same time as that is happening, your weight shifts from your right foot to your left. Feel it like grains of sand pouring from the right leg into the left. It starts at 50-50, then 60-40, then a 70-30 weight shift, until there's almost 100% of your weight balanced on your left foot. Your soft, weightless right foot then turns 45 degrees to what we call the 'north east corner.' Good. Now, putting it together, your palms are turning over as the grains of sand are shifting, so that in one interconnected whole, your arms are parallel to your right foot, as your body, neck, and head are now facing the NE corner. All while you are gently exhaling. Very good. Now, that's the first half of the first form!" He smiles with amusement at the different shapes and contortions we have placed ourselves in. Gracelessly. Now way too many moving parts.

"Let's try it again. What I've found helpful is to try to remember the whole form that you first saw me do. Then we break it into parts: we learn each hand motion, and then how the hands fit together; and each foot, and where balance occurs; then how the shoulders, torso, body turn. Hands, feet, breathing, weight shifts, chest, arms, head. I realize that may get a bit confusing. But remember all the parts are pieces of the whole. All are interconnected. We learn each piece independently, break them apart, so to speak, but when we put them all back together, we become a dancer of beauty and grace."

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With a bow, he gives us a ten minute break. Some continue to practice. I rush to my journal. Partly to write about the two forms, but also I've had an insight. I love what he's saying about parts and whole. It seems to fill in some of the process by which I was able to automatically "see" a Rorschach ink blot. That happened naturally. But

he's giving me a road map for when it take time for that process to occur.

When combined with Akishige's three stanza poem, it gives me a road map for what's been happening to me, as well as a model of learning about how I learn. In the first stanza the "whole" seems normal. To me, life was good. But there were lots parts of that "whole" that needed to be explored When I tried to bring attention to all the pieces that I was doing, non-consciously, and explore each one separately, everything was clumsy, awkward and confusing. That is the second stanza. It is just part of the process. No matter what the area: golf, tennis, flute, tai chi--it all boils down to parts and whole. Each activity involves a different skill set that needs to be learned. And in the learning things get worse, more confusing, feel more out of control. And that is true even in relationship to myself, the different parts of me we addressed in therapy, Johannes, Job, Jonah, John are both details of parts of myself, emerging, evolving, being discovered, and pieces needing to be integrated into a whole self.

The challenge for me is that I can get caught in the parts, the details, which are endless, so that I lose or forget the original structure and vision of the whole. And in some areas--with myself, and also relationally with others-- I needed a new vision. I need to step back and to re-remind myself why I'm learning all the parts. In observing and learning about tai chi, I see the importance of parts and whole, I see the graceful flow that is possible of integrating parts back into an overall form--the grace of the third stanza on the other side of the confusion.

I wonder if this is also true about my relationships with women. I saw parts. I had certain skills, but not others. Can I learn enough

to have a loving committed relationship, a whole relationship, not only with myself, but also with someone else?

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"So, the model is simple. See the form in its entirety. Study and practice the various parts; then we once again put everything together as a whole." Lin Zscho demonstrates again. "When I was learning tai chi, what fascinated me is that each time I was able to put the pieces back into a whole for a complete form, I would feel confident and pleased. But when I began to learn the next form, although there was more 'centeredness,' there was still confusion and disorientation as I once again had to break the form into pieces to learn it. So, don't be discouraged when, once you achieve a fluid 'whole' in one form, you feel like a child learning to walk all over again once you start to learn the next form. This will happen for all 64 forms. Then, once you feel confident with these, we do the 'mirror forms; the same 64 forms, but going in the opposite direction. And then of course there are depths and depths to achieve, because the movement of tai chi is really embodying a philosophy, so you can notice and feel your hands as they shift from yin to yang, both within a form, and across different forms, as different forms have relatively greater emphasis on yin and yang."

He smiles as he hears some moans from his students. Perhaps the loudest of all. "Remember, now, this first form is a way of asking Buddha for guidance. And that we are doing this only as a way of finding the moon. Outside and within."

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*"It's just like the gestalt exercise, you're either a tall tree or a stump. Rather than black and white thinking, about the way you see you and Mery, and yourself, what about evolving some nuance in how you view different people and events?" Dr. Lisbet continues to query me.*

"Such as? I only see what I see."

"Well, that's a good place to start. But let's brainstorm, and see what alternatives we can come up with. You haven't come to my tai chi classes, but if you had, you would have heard us discussing xujing and dongjing. Xujing is learning to calm yourself and see the great undifferentiated void from which all comes. Once you are centered, dongjing is finding the best way to act in a given situation, balancing different aspects of assertive yang and yielding yin energies."

"Sounds like you have to believe in their worldview to accept that view--is that what you're saying, that the world is ultimately existentially void? That's what I asked you when I first came in. If you'd told me that then, we could have saved a lot of time. I don't have any desire to learn funny sounding Chinese words, either."

"Let me answer, if I may," the Rebbe breaks in. "I can understand what you're saying, because the Chinese philosophy initially confused me, too. I personally believe that we're made in God's image, and that, as it says in the morning prayer, Elohai neshama ti hora li. The soul that You have placed in me is pure. And, as in the Shema, Eloheinu, Adonai, Echad: the personal God and the infinite God are One."

"But how can you reconcile that theistic belief in a pure soul within you with One God, to a non-theistic belief in an undifferentiated void?"

"Exactly. A profound question, and one which Dr. Lisbet and I have discussed, argued and meditated about for many years. What I've come to believe is that there may be more connection than I initially thought. Do you realize that we're one of the first generations to have all the spiritual traditions relatively accessible. The possibilities for cross fertilization and mutual understanding has never been more promising."

"As well as the possibilities for mutual resentment, hostility misunderstanding, turf battles, and intolerance."

"I guess it's going to be what we make of it, isn't it? Would you like to hear my thinking."

"Sure. That's why I'm paying you."

"Ok, let's take a breath before we begin."

Is he responding to the sarcasm that may have been in my tone?

"You're sounding like my father, now, telling me when I was a kid at my baseball game, to breathe before the pitcher threw, before the ball came to me at short. After I made a bad throw."

"Your father's coaching advice, Chinese philosophy," the Rebbe smiles, "and even Talmudic study...all the same? Before we study the Talmud, we look at a blank piece of paper to empty our minds, to connect ourselves to the Source, HaShem, the Name. All, everything, the One. That source is also called Ein Sof, the infinite void. The song Adon Olam, which we sing on Sabbath, on the eve of Atonement, at Yom Kippur, says that God was there before the earth began and will be there when our world shall be no more, and forms shall disappear, even our earth. So Jewish thinking also alludes to the void. And, as you know, the Torah states 'Bereshit'...In the beginning... there was darkness and void Perhaps the fullness of God's oneness is really the same as the emptiness of Taoist belief, just seen from different perspective?"

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I make a few notes in my journal and when I look up, notice he's stroking his beard thoughtfully and methodically, as if waiting for me to finish writing. "So, what are you saying? That Chinese and Jewish philosophy and world views may ultimately, at their deepest core, be the same and I should learn this Chinese stuff? Or that there's no

reason to learn any of it, because it's all just form, coming from emptiness and ending in emptiness? That seems too big a stretch for me, but I'll meditate on it." I jot down a few more notes as he continues.

"If you take the view of either Taoism or Judaism, you're asking a very sophisticated question, which is what is our relationship to the forms that emerge? As I mentioned, Talmudic study begins with seeing the oneness and emptiness of a white sheet of paper. But then, reading the Talmud, it gets very complex, with ideas and layers and nuances."

"Actually quite similar to what happens in Taosim, where the void becomes form, first the yin and yang, then continuing to multiply with greater complexity and variations of yin and yang, different dongjing responses," Dr. Lisbet adds.

"Exactly. Then, on the other side of the complexity of Talmudic reading, we again take out a single sheet of paper, to remember the context on both sides of Oneness. The holy emptiness and void."

The Rebbe looks at me directly. I see through his glasses that his hazel eyes are motionless. Is he looking at me, or through me? "The choice of how we want to feel and be toward the forms and actions in the middle, between the two white pages, young man, that's a choice each of us have to make."

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I'm look down, glad to take notes so I don't have to be looking at him right now. I feel intimidated by what he's just said and need a moment to recover. Writing in my journal gives me that time.

"So, is that a warning?"

"It's really just a statement of fact. But it is also a caution. You have two tasks ahead of you. One is your choice of world view. But simply choosing a worldview doesn't solve everything. You also have to decide how you want to act within the context of that worldview. Do you

want to 'play the game?' If you do, and only you can make that choice, then what Dr. Lisbet is trying to give you are some wise ways to play it.

"What Dr. Lisbet is urging is that you look more carefully at how you can see the world with more nuance, see more options. I'm saying I believe that is a helpful lesson, within the context of either a non-theistic or theistic universe."

"Fine. So what are, or rather were, my options? It seems pretty clear. Either you act like a jerk, like I did; or you act pure and innocent like Mery did? How can you see any wrong in how she acted? The first shall be last. The meek shall inherit the earth." I look over at Dr. Lisbet. "Isn't that what you believe? Either from Jesus and the Gospels, or even from your Lao-tzu's way of water and harmony?"

"That's a good connection between Lao-tzu and Jesus. Both of your examples represent maximum yin responses, the most yielding possible. And that can be one very beautiful and wise dongjing strategy in a given situation. But I try to emphasize this very clearly when I teach--especially to meditators, sensitive souls, sometimes women who have been socialized to 'please'--xujing and maximum yin are not the same. One can still be quite centered and quite assertive, with a strong yang dongjing."

The Rebbe adds, in a focused, though calm tone, "The highly spiritual, compassionate Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt it necessary to try to assassinate Hitler. Moses (and God) had to continue to increase the pressure on Pharaoh in order to free the Israelites. Gradations of assertive action, even from a centered place, are sometimes necessary."

"Excellent examples," Dr. Lisbet responds. "But how do we know what is the correct response? We must first take a step back, pause,

breathe. Before we act, or don't act, we want to be centered. Remember that clear calm lake we discussed. When the waters of our mind are in turmoil, it's difficult to see clearly how best to address a situation. During that swimming episode, before you acted, could you have paused, instructed yourself to meditate, take a breath, and calm the waters of your mind? Then, depending upon your philosophy or world view, might you have reconnected yourself to your Source, or the cosmic void? My guess is you probably didn't do any of that when you felt your swimming lane encroached on!"

Calm the waters of my mind while I'm churning through the water?

"No, I didn't do that. Obviously. I didn't even know these terms or concepts. I acted assertively, even aggressively, with anger, and self-righteousness that someone was taking what was mine--my lane. That was wrong. How can you not see that?"

"I understand and agree with you. You did overreact. But what I'm trying to say is that once you had centered yourself, found what we're calling xujing, that doesn't mean that the proper action--dongjing--is necessarily the same as maximum yin--doing nothing, which was Mery's response. This is an important misconception that if we are calm and centered, we won't act. The idea is that once you are centered, you look at all possible actions or non-actions to see which one fits the situation best. As evidenced by the examples the Rebbe just gave."

"Let me elaborate for you an example of action involving water," the Rebbe chuckles. "Think of Moses before the Reed Sea and how he got there. First, when God calls him forth to lead the people from slavery and bondage, Moses declines, saying in effect, 'Hey, God, I'm not really the right person, I'm slow of speech. Hardly the quality You want in a leader.' But God basically replies, 'Yea, Moses, I know that, I made you that way, and I'm still calling you.' Then, Moses acts



assertively to seek his people's liberation, battling wills with Pharaoh. Sometimes strong assertive action is needed to secure our freedom from bondage. But what happens when Pharaoh finally lets the Israelites go? Pharaoh has a change of heart and Moses is confronted with the Reed Sea in front of him, and Pharaoh's army behind. What is the right action then?"

"Take a breath? Pull out a white sheet of paper?" Am I being sarcastic or attempting to be humorous. Or both?

The Rebbe smiles. "Not bad. Actually what Moses did was pray. Water in front, enemies behind. Oh, God, You are great, You are wonderful. Help me. Now what do I do? And God basically says, and here I'm again paraphrasing, 'Enough prayer already, take a step!' There is a time for assertive action, taking a leap of faith forward, trusting, jumping into the pool. There is nothing wrong with correct assertive action. It's essential, for evolution, and for the spiritual path. Being a wise, spiritual person does not mean passivity and surrender in all situations. Ok, that's the end of my Moses spiel. Do you get what I'm saying?"

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I scribble some more notes in my journal. I feel like what they're saying is important, but that I'm not fully grasping it. "So, are you saying I acted assertively and Mery acted yieldingly. And that either of those could have been appropriate actions, but the problem was that it's possible neither one of us was very centered."

"Exactly. You've acknowledged that in yourself. And, as you have shared with us, Mery began crying afterwards, saying she didn't feel like she had the right to take her turn. As a brainstorming exercise, let's look at what options there might have been, depending upon the circumstances. For example, you have been trained as a life guard, you

told us, and even a WSI, Water Safety Instructor. If you heard someone drowning in the pool, what would you do?"

"Just what I did in Eilat. I dove into the water to save a drowning child."

Good for you. So, a maximum yang action. And how did that feel?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"I was proud I did it. But the mom wasn't very nice afterwards. She somehow made it seem like I was at fault."

"How others react to our actions cannot be the determining criterion. We can only do the best we can. Look at Moses," the Rebbe adds. "At first he, like Jonah, resisted the call to serve God. But what happened when he took on a leadership role, and acted assertively? He was criticized by those whom he'd led from bondage: 'Who are you to exalt yourself' above us? And he had to listen to their complaints that at least in Egypt it was safe and secure. Each of us may be called on at times to lead, and others may criticize our assertiveness. But that doesn't mean we're wrong."

"And our actions may not always have the outcome we expect or want. But as the Bhagavad Gita, one of the Indian holy books says, 'We need to learn to be non-attached to the fruits of our actions.'" Dr. Lisbet comments.

In my notes I placed a star by the Bhagavad Gita, to get a copy one day and read it. Also Lao-tzu's Tao Te Ching. Maybe there's more I can learn from other traditions.

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"Let's see if I understand what you're saying. In the pool situation, my xujing centeredness was not very good. I acted with and out of anger. I felt the person in my lane was an 'intruder.' Not the nicest way to characterize someone just trying to get exercise."

"Right. But if you look at the situation as a whole, you'll notice that the way you acted wasn't maximum yang. First, you were yielding and accepting at the start, you did wait your turn until a lane cleared. So, you did have a concept of fairness and order, and didn't just jump into someone's lane to take it over. Further, once the 'intruder' stepped in, although you did feel rage, when he moved out of your way, you were willing to share the lane with him. You didn't stop swimming and get into a fight with him and try to beat his brains out."

"True, my dad might have done that. I can see what you're doing, trying to show me some nuance." I chuckle.

"What do you find funny, Dr. Lisbet talking about beat his brains out?" the Rebbe asks.

"No, actually, as you and Dr. Lisbet were talking, I was experiencing a dimensionality, a gradation, light and shadow, nuance that I hadn't seen before. And it reminded me of that awkward adolescent moment Johannes--I mean 'I' wrote about when I realized that women have breasts and their upper body took on dimensionality and nuance and shading. I guess it's embarrassing that there is still a part of me that even thinks about the life of the flesh--even if only historically. It's really a part of me I want to leave behind once and for all."

"Actually, it's a wonderful analogy." Dr. Lisbet says, as she places a few strands of her hair behind her ear. "Each part of you and your past has a wisdom that can be drawn on to deepen your present growth. There is nothing wrong with that part of you that was a sexual being. And maybe still is. Your dichotomous thinking between flesh and spirit is a whole different, though rich and fertile, vein of nuance that it will be important for you to delve deeper into when you are

ready. But for now, let's leap back to the pool. What then is your view of Mery from this new perspective of nuanced dimensionality?"

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"Well, clearly, she's a lot more yin than me. In fact, I felt she often accused me, at least implicitly, of being maximum yang in a very negative way. She seemed maximum yin---at first I saw that as a passive wimp, at least in the pool, and then later, a wise spiritual being."

"Ah, and now."

"Well, she did go to the pool to swim. She did wait in line. On the one hand she was sensitive to others' desire to swim. On the other, she didn't allow her own rights and needs to be honored and her fears kept her from acting. And she seemed unhappy about the situation."

"Good. So her xujing wasn't very good either, and she may have acted more from fear and unassertiveness and from wisdom. Can you imagine a situation in which, from a centered place she might have decided to let discretion be the better part of valor, and chose to sit on the grass and just enjoy the day while waiting for and trusting that a lane would eventually open up?"

"Of course."

"Perfect. If you could have each had xujing, there's nothing wrong with your continuing to swim, nothing wrong with her choosing to let others go first. And, if she wanted, she could have added a few more yang components to her dongjing. For example, 'Excuse me, I believe it's my turn'. Or she could have chosen to wait a little longer til another lane opened, rather than just withdrawing completely after it didn't work the first time."

I nod, still taking notes, trying to create a grid from maximum yang to maximum yin

"For your part," Dr Lisbet continues, "you could have calmed yourself one or two degrees to gain more xujing, then gently tapped the person who 'intruded' and said, "It's feeling a little crowded in here, I'm wondering if you could wait til I'm finished...it won't be more than fifteen minutes'; or 'I'm happy to share the lane, could you stay on the right side, and I'll stay over here.' Again, the important point is to come from a centered place, and then see what emerges as the wise dongjing response."

I add her additional ideas into the grid, placing little yang and yin marks by them. "I like this idea that each situation has a 'best' response, and our task is to brainstorm options, adding dollops of yin or yang to achieve it. It's like in the shower, a little hot, a little cold, to find the perfect temperature. But I know when the shower is just right; how do you know what is the wise way to act, the best way?"

The Rebbe asks to look at the chart I'm making. He gives a chuckle as he hands it to Dr. Lisbet. "Definitely jhana yoga, certainly not bhakti!" He hands it back to me. "You, of course, need to be careful of those boxes and dichotomies that you love to create, that the lines between them don't become too rigid, and reinforce your tendency toward black and white thinking. But if it helps you learn to refine, nuance, and increase your alternatives so that you have more gradations of choice available to you, then of course it makes a lot of sense. Also, I admire how you are looking to your past to see when you made good choices, and when there were less skillful choices of thought, word, or deed, learning to create additional options."

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Dr. Lisbet further explores my question, "You're asking how do we know the right way to act, or not act? Xujing centeredness and dongjing right action combining assertiveness and yielding come with

practice, from experience. As the Rebbe is saying, stay open and non-defensive, acknowledging your wounds and shortcomings. which you are doing wonderfully, and you will learn when you fall off the path--which we all do 1000 times--, and as the Indian tradition says, our task is learn to get back on the path 1001 times."

"Another day, when we have more time there is a humorous Indian story that Dr. Lisbet once told me addressing this very question and good choices. Please remind us to share it with you. But as you can see from what we're saying, the short answer to your question of how do we 'know' the right way to act, is from experience. It's really trial and error, learning from our mistakes. That's why it's so important to try to come from a centered, self-reflective place. Then you're making a conscious choice. After, you can see the results, and learn how effective the choice was. Again, it is not uncomplicated because the results are both internal and external."

He nods at Dr. Lisbet, who continues. "As we've said the external results may not be what you want, but even so the dongjing response still may have been the best choice possible under the circumstances. You can also see how able you are to stay internally centered regardless of what happens externally. As the Buddha said, we want to develop internal control of the mind, regardless of the external results, events, and situations. If your internal process wasn't as good as you wanted, or you realize that your dongjing choice wasn't as calibrated--a bar too yang, or too yin-- then you can learn for next time.

"And in your nightly prayer, you can forgive all those involved, including yourself." He thumbs through some pages, and hands me a sheet. "I think we're ready to give this out, don't you?" Dr. Lisbet nods in agreement.

Dr. Lisbet holds up a one page flier. I wonder if this is a promotion for another workshop or program they're going to be offering. But I can see at the top, even though it's still in her hand, in big letters: "Four Noble Principles."

"Principles?" I ask.

"Yes, this is a summary of the model we've been developing. That name actually reflects the tai chi dance that occurred between us in terms of how to refer to these ideas. We decided Four Commandments was too strong. They are only provisional thoughts. We are still evolving our thinking and don't want anyone to feel bound by them."

"We share them with you in the spirit of the Chinese saying I've mentioned before," Dr. Lisbet adds, "finger(s) pointing to the moon: fingers are paths, and the moon is our goal. As we've discussed, one interpretation of this proverb is that we need to be careful not to confuse the finger with the moon. They represent only a way, not the way."

"But we also thought that even though they are not commandments, they are really more than mere 'suggestions' as Reform Judaism might say. We believe that if you, or really anyone, would go through these four processes before they take an action, they would not only make wiser decisions, but also have a better internal process because the two are so interconnected."

Dr. Lisbet gives the Rebbe a little pat on the arm. "One of us wanted to call them Four Noble Truths, but that was already taken. But we give a bow to Buddha in their name, too. It's our combination of Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism and psychology, all mixed together. It's the best wisdom we have developed for ourselves, and we've found it helpful in our lives when we face difficult situations. This may be a way for

*you, once our therapy sessions come to an end, to access your own inner advisor for guidance, the best we have to offer you."*

*Dr. Lisbet starts to hand me the light blue piece of paper. But before she can do so, the Rabbi holds up his hand to stop her. He takes a white sheet of paper, places it between the three of us, and begins to hum a niggun. After about thirty seconds, he stops, takes a sighing breath, and says, "From the context of simplicity of the One, we offer you this." I take the blue piece of paper from Dr. Lisbet. It is heavy and stiff. They're printed it on index stock.*

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### **FOUR NOBLE PRINCIPLES FOR ADDRESSING LIFE CONCERNS**

**1. TAKE A BREATH. XUJING.** No matter what the area physical health, interpersonal relationships, work and professional issues, try to come from a place of centeredness. Take a breath. Try to calm your own mind; there are few situations that are so critical that a calm mind and a few breaths don't help us make better decisions. If your own mind is not calm, then, like turbulent waters, you will not be able to reflect clearly what is around you, and your turbulence will add additional roiling to whatever is causing distress. Calming your mind to make it still like a mirror can only help you to see more clearly.

**2) GRATITUDE..** Xujing implies that in the beginning all was void, so that every form that emerges is interconnected. No matter what the issue, we believe it is important to try to find something in the situation, the other person involved, or generally, that is positive. Often, when there is a problem, we make that the only star in the night sky, forgetting that which is going well. Gratitude reminds us that there are many stars in the big mind, and not to get too caught in a particular story in which negative star is burning especially brightly. It also helps, as Gandhi said, to come from a place of respect, even toward those with whom we have profound disagreements. Gratitude does not mean you ignore the problem. But it does help humanize the other person, and/or give some perspective and context for the issue being faced.

**3. CONTEXT, GOAL, AND INTENTION:** What is your goal in this situation? In thinking through this question, remember steps one and two--to keep breathing; also to try to practice gratitude. Then remember that goals are both internal (your process addressing the situation), and external (the desired outcome). As noted above, a critical task is that you try to step back from your story to see beyond your limited perspective to what other people might be feeling. This does not mean that you necessarily agree with them, but it does allow you to imagine and hear



the other person's framework. At the very least, doing so can help you craft a better dongjing response.

**4) CHOOSING THE BEST MEANS. DONGJING. RIGHT SPEECH, RIGHT ACTION, RIGHT ATTITUDE.** This is the best action and attitude for a given situation, composed of a nuanced gradation of yin (soft, yielding) and yang (assertive). How do you think the problem should best be handled: what are your two or three best options and alternatives? What are the pros and cons of each? Which one do you feel is best in terms of mind, body, and spirit, given the ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty of the situation? We suggest that in some circumstances, making a list of alternatives and their pros and cons can help.

After you have gone through this process, again take a few breaths, and see what your 'gut' tells you is the best choice from an emotional, spiritual place. If you are unsure or don't know, THAT IS A GOOD PLACE TO START!!☺ Then go deeper. Our sense is that each of us, with some careful reflection and meditation, has some excellent ideas about how to handle even really tough, painful situations.

After you have gone through the process: breath, gratitude, goal, and then made your decision, reverse the steps. Remember the context and intention as you carry it out; remember gratitude; and remember xujing: to stay centered and to keep breathing!

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*After quickly reading through the sheet, I am impressed with it. I have a few questions, and make a couple notes along the side. I do wonder after the Rebbe chided me for my boxes and charts, if he shouldn't have at least given me credit for their suggestion under #4 of listing two or three best options with pros and cons.*

*I take a breath, feel grateful for what they've given me over these last months, and decide my intention in this last session is just to say thank you. "This seems like a great Cliff's Notes version of what we've been talking about. I guess since you two leaving soon to go back to Switzerland, I can stick this in my back pocket and know that you are always right behind me, guiding me." I realize this sounds a bit sarcastic--maybe my*

annoyance at their abandoning me. It also sounds even a bit demeaning if not lewd--carry them next to my butt--which is not at all how I consciously meant it. I take a breath and try again.

"Seriously, I will look forward to studying this, and I will carry it around in my back pocket as a reminder. I am grateful for all the help you've given me." Then, holding up the sheet, I add, "And will continue to give me. I was thinking when you were talking about the fingers and moon, my mom used to sing me a song." I decide to try to sing it rather than just say the words:

*I see the moon and the moon sees me....  
the moon sees somebody I want to see....  
God bless the moon, and God bless me, and  
God bless the somebody I want to see...*

"Whenever I see the soon, I think of my mom, and now I will think of both of you as well. Thank you." I fold the blue index paper into fourths, and place it in my back pocket, the same place I used to keep my golf notes.

"I like the song," Dr. Lisbet says. "Thank you."

I nod almost embarrassedly at the joy I feel at her approval. And at thoughts of my mom, I feel some tears. I rub my eyes, and reply, "One of the hardest things for me is to have known the feelings of oneness, only to see it vanish. What are ways to recapture that feeling and experience?" "That's how rituals develop," the Rebbe responds, "as we all, no matter what our tradition, seek ways to remind ourselves on a regular basis to stay on the path. But we must always remember that rituals are just a means to the universal, Echad. Words, rituals, particularism, they are all just signposts along the way. As the Chinese expression Dr. Lisbet is so fond of sharing with me expresses it, 'They are like fingers pointing to the moon. Don't mistake the

*finger for the moon.' Traditions and rituals are particular paths,  
fingers helping us along our journey to the Universal."*

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*The Rebbe once again points to the sheet of blank white paper.  
"Even the Four Noble Principles involves some complexity. We've had  
quite a Talmudic discussion today--and indeed over the past several  
months. Let's end today's session by returning to the simplicity and  
sacredness of the One, symbolized by the wholeness of the empty white  
piece of paper." He once again begins to hum. I stare at the paper as I  
listen to his musical deep-cadenced voice singing a nigun melody,  
feeling it flow over and through me. When he stops, he opens his eyes.  
"Yes, thank you. We can all see the moon, together. We can feel the  
light of the moon's wisdom shining on us, as we work to reflect light  
into the darkness."*

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**After practicing "strike hands to ask Buddha" several times,  
Jacques asks, "Doesn't this get boring? I understand that there are many  
forms, and you can go deeper and deeper with each, but the same forms  
every day. Ugh."**

**Although he directs the question at Lin Zscho, it is Akishige who  
responds. "Many Westerners ask that question of the tea ceremony. It is  
prescribed to the smallest detail, and done in invariant fashion day  
after day. 'Why,' they ask, 'don't you vary it?' I think they are  
really asking the same question as you, Jacques, isn't that boring? The  
answer is that although the tea ceremony may be the same, we who do it  
change. Each day we are new, growing, evolving. This fixedness of the  
ceremony allows us to see the changes within us."**

"Although I've never thought of it that way before," I add to Akishige, "I wonder if that's why in Judaism next week, at Simchat Torah, we begin to re-read the Bible again? To see what we as new persons, might learn by reading the same material we've just completed over the past year. On Simchat Torah, we read the final passage of Deuteronomy, and then re-beginning at Genesis. Bereshit. In the beginning. That's really fascinating, isn't it? You could read a book over and over, and each time you get to the end, when you begin it again, it's really a different book, because you who are reading it are a different person, hopefully changed by the book."

I think of Dr. Lisbet saying that although she doesn't use the Rorschach test in the traditional analytical way, what she likes about it is that it always stays the same, but what we place upon it in terms of our projections and interpretations may change. In some ways, events in life are like that, like me and Mery at the pool. The event is the same, but each time I revisit it, I view it somewhat differently because of my own evolution. What we see is often a reflection of who we are.

"When I do tai chi, I notice that even from day to day there are differences. Some days my physical balance, with almost no effort in my part, is really superb," Lin Zxcho responds.

"Your physical balance to me always seems superb," Al Hazrumi responds. "And that is from one dancer to another."

"Thank you, but as you know, some days are better than others. Sometimes when my physical balance is good, my mind wanders and is not as clear. Other days, when my physical balance is not so good, my mind is clear and focused and stays in balance, in spite of, or maybe because I'm having trouble physically. It's like I can say, body is off balance, but that is no reason for mind not to stay steady and in balance, even watching with equanimity as I start to fall.

" But some days both my physical balance and my mental balance is off. Then I have a part of my mind that can retain a detached observation: ah, physical balance off, mental balance off. And I am able to obtain a xujing centeredness as I watch my body flail, and my mind whirl in displeasure?

"So, I've learned several lines of defense! Of course, sometimes all is wobbly, even my detached self. Then I just allow the Tao to carry me in its flowing stream."

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As I listen to Lin Zscho speak, I realize that in many ways it was because of Mery that I came to Israel, and pursued not only an effort to understand my own Jewish tradition, but also a more in-depth exploration of the life of Jesus, and my tradition's relationship to Christianity. Yet at the time, I only resisted her probing and discussions. Similarly, it is thanks to Dr. Lisbet that I've become more open and curious about Eastern traditions. Yet, during our sessions, I wasn't willing to go to her tai chi class, and resented how she kept trying to bring in 'strange, foreign' ways of thinking into our therapy sessions. Yet that really planted a seed which is being allowed to further grow and deepen here.

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Afternoon flows into evening, and soon the first star appears. We all join hands as we sing the Havdalah service, lighting the braided candle, feeling the evening descend, huddling around the flame. I think how we here are really like the braided havdalah candle. On Friday, Al Hazrumi's Muslim Shabbat, Prem Devi spoke, too. Today, on our Jewish Sabbath, Reverend Noel talked to us about different levels of faith development; and Lin Zscho taught us two forms of tai chi. Tomorrow, on the Christian Sabbath, Akishige is going to teach us

meditation, and Prem Devi will show us some hatha yoga 'yokes' to the divine, There is a lovely intertwining of our paths, like the strands of a multicolored Safed Havdalah candle. Even though--in fact, because there is the unique particularity of each strand, yet all working together, and allowing themselves to be braided and intertwined, the end result is the flame of the Havdalah candle burning more brightly, giving additional warmth and light.

I once more think back to those dark nights nearly nine months ago, when I took the Shammash to light the Chanukah candles. Once again that image of the Chanukah menorah somehow metamorphoses and gives birth to the braided Havdalah candle. Different spiritual traditions--theistic, non-theistic--all concerned with our highest human welfare--are connecting, intertwined, linked, burning together to create a potent, unified flame. From the darkness, I watch the different strands of the multicolored candle leap skyward in a red-yellow burst. And its light, emanating from each braid melding into a single flame, reflects light back on all of us to light our way.

I take an in breath, feeling the blessings I'm receiving. If I could be a Shammash, I would gladly let myself be put to use helping light the other candles, the other traditions of the world. If I were a strand in the Havdalah candle, I would gladly let myself be consumed by joining together with those traditions to help fill the world with light. I breathe out, "Into your arms, your loving arms, I commend my soul."

We sing together, "A good week, a week of peace, may gladness reign and joy increase."

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ircles? At six years old?"

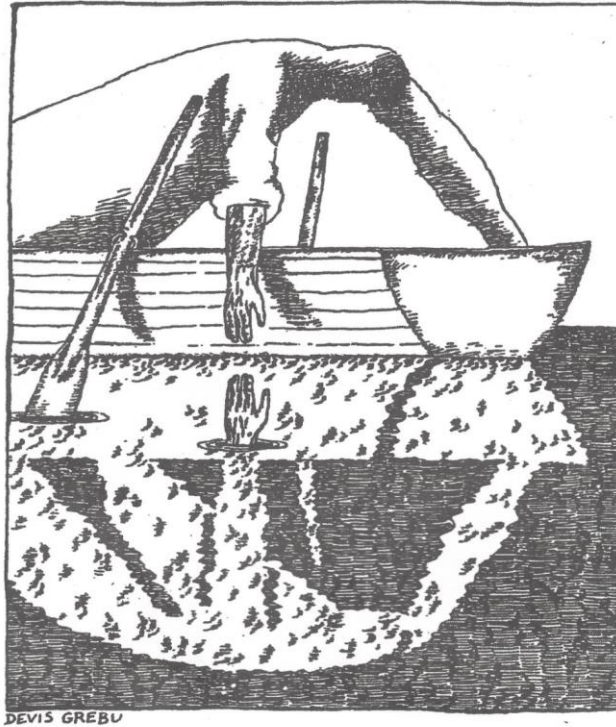
"Yes. I didn't know how to stop, so I'd keep riding my bike around the block, in circles. Each time I'd get near the house, I'd call 'Mom, Dad.' If they didn't come running out to stop me, I'd ride around the block again in another circle and shout until someone ran out of the house and stopped me."

Joie is resting her head on my arm and shoulder, as we cuddle by the flickering light of the three small candles I've placed in my room. "I can just see your determined little face. Could anyone be cuter?" I hold her right hand in mine, and with my left hand, I am gently stroking her forearm, down to her wrist in a light up and down motion. I place my index and thumb of my left hand around her wrist. "You have the smallest wrists. How could anyone so strong be so cute and have such small wrists?"

"I'm a complicated person. Good thing you are moving from a black and white world to one of many colors, like Joseph's coat."

I continue to stroke her arm as I look at the black and white ink drawing of Grebu, one of two wall hangings that I brought from my little room in Jerusalem. The hand reaching up from the waters, drowning. The hand alongside the rowboat reaching down. The candle flame lights it clearly, as I notice the white form of the mountain above.

"See that picture?" I point to it.



"When I first looked at it in the Rebbe's class, I thought of it as very straightforward. A drowning person reaching up, and a hand by the rowboat reaching down to help rescue him. I knew I was the person in the water drowning, and thought that the hand reaching down, was really God, from the mountain."

"And is its meaning less clear now?"

"Yes, I can see more possibilities in it. For example, the person in the water, rather than drowning, could be floating. I've learned to metaphorically swim a little bit better. I don't feel like I'm drowning so often. I trust that I can float a bit, too, and the water will hold me up. And now I see that in the picture, too"

"Ah, like the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet said, 'We see who we are.' Do you see the Shin?"

"Where?"

"Look closely at the white form in the water from which the hand emerges."



She outlines it for me.

Once I see it, it's obvious. "Isn't it amazing how you can't see what's right before your eyes, and once it's pointed out, it's so clear. At least sometimes. You're a good teacher."

"Thank you. Now, think of the 'shin meditation': God, Shaddai, Shalom, shekinah. Maybe God is not only reaching down from the mountain, but is in the depths of the water, too."

"Wow, I like that. So even though I can swim, and float a bit, it's even better to think that God is also in the water, holding me up, too"

"And the hand reaching down?"

"Well, I saw that only as God, maybe on Mt. Sinai reaching down to help. I was striving to reach God on a spiritual level and thought I could only do that by leaving the flesh behind."

And now?" She sits up a bit and looks intently at me.

"Now I'm less sure. When I see those two hands reaching toward each other, I think of Martin Buber's I-Thou. God is not only all around but also in the space of connection between two people. I'm beginning to think, with your help, that the God I seek can manifest in many ways." I stroke her hand some more. "Sometimes maybe God sends an angel, a woman of valor, to help rescue you. The caress of a human hand, the soft touch of skin, someone holding you, that may be God's hand reaching out, too."

"You're a tender little boy, aren't you?"

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I place my head on her chest, and let her hold me. I feel unsure of myself physically. I'm like a newborn, trying to learn how to touch and love and be intimate, and I am looking to her for guidance. I am aware of how little initiative I take. She's been very

patient with me. Almost a complete role-reversal from Johannes. There are no bases I'm trying to get to. This feels like a new playing field, where I don't know the rules. But I do know that the goal is to keep a loving sacred context and feeling, to be tender and open and vulnerable, and allow the dance between spirit and flesh to unfold as a flower opens, at whatever speed and pace it's supposed to.

"Yes, in many ways, I am. Thank you for your patience and understanding. I lie still, feeling her breathing, listening to her heart. I am not sure what to do next. Partly I don't want to do anything, just remain still and be held and protected, safe in her arms. I also feel tender, sad. It's not self pity; it's more like what Akishige called wabi sabi, the spirit of eternal loneliness. I realize what a wounded person I still am. I know I'm healing, but it's really a slow process. Miles to go before I sleep.

I feel myself beginning to cry.

Joie strokes my hair. "Remember, even in the dark waters, there are hands there holding you up, and hands reaching down for you." Then she starts to softly sing,

**When you're weary  
Feeling small  
When tears are in your eyes  
I will dry them all  
  
I'm on your side  
  
I'll take your part  
When darkness comes  
And pain is all around  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will lay me down**

I feel the magic of her voice, the comfort of her touch. I remember hearing those words at the bottom of the mountain, in San Francisco, on Sixth Street. Will that Job-like pain ever completely

depart? Maybe it shouldn't. Maybe that's part of the thousand sorrows. And her singing and touch are part of the thousand joys.

When she finishes, she bends over and kisses me on the lips. I'm afraid of my desires. I don't trust them. I know this wouldn't be happening unless she took the initiative. Unbidden, the words of the Song of Songs arise, "For your kisses are sweeter than wine."

I kiss her back. I feel like I'm leaping an abyss separating me and others. I've never felt such soft, tender, lovely lips before.

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The first light of Sunday morning dawn peeks through the window. Joie is resting her head in the crook of my arm and sleeping peacefully. Her left elbow is on the bed, but her forearm is sticking skyward, and her hand is bent limply at the wrist. At first it looks like a question mark; then an r, an upside down J, and then I see it as a flower reaching to the heavens.

I trace my fingers over her arched eyebrows, listening to her breath, as the images of my dream filter through my mind. I am biking along a road lined with wispy trees like California peppers. They are flickering in the sun, and looked beautiful to me, a shimmering canopy of emerald green. I feel as if I can see into the leaves, discriminating the yellow and blue from which their color is formed. I feel like I've been on this road before, but the trees have never looked so radiant, bejeweled, majestic.

The road winds upward, with large curves, and it's hard to know what's ahead. I continue to follow it, biking harder, but still enjoying the ride. Then, I realize I've missed my turn-off, because the road comes to end and the wide asphalt pavement shifts to a narrow dirt path going one way, and a wider, but also rough road going another.

I get off my bike, stop, and look at the fork—a dirt path to the right; and a wider, but still dirt road left. I look back on the road I've ridden up. I look off into the distance and I realize I'm actually standing on a boulder. Below me are ocean waves pounding the shore. I'm unclear which fork to follow, and where each might lead. Do they both head back to the ocean? As I'm trying to decide, I'm also attempting, with some difficulty, to keep my balance on the boulder and not fall. My arms and legs feel strong, but the boulder itself is wobbly. Suddenly, it gives way and crashes into the water, as I leap off it and land with some grace back on the dirt at the start of the fork. I'm able to retain my balance, and don't fall.

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I continue to stroke Joie's eyebrows, her forehead, her hair. As I watch her, I say the morning prayer silently. I realize that I no longer physically put on the tefillin, though mentally I imagine myself focusing my heart and mind on each phrase. Each phrase that I've chosen to say is meaningful. To me, this has become a deeply spiritual, contemplative, meditative prayer.

When I finish, I realize how I'm creating my own rituals. Lying in bed, no minyan, holding a lovely woman in my arms, and saying the morning prayer. It's kosher to me. God? I would think so if She has a good sense of humor. My heart is certainly in the right place.

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Joie's eyelids flip up and two deep wells of blue stare at me. She sleepily murmur, "What time is it?"

"Good morning, sunshine. Do you want Kairos or Chronos time?" I then sing

μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος

Menin aeide thea Peleidaeo Achilleos.

She closes her eyes. "Really? You get Bridge over Troubled Water in the evening, and then awaken me each morning with the first line of the Iliad, one of the bloodiest, most violent accounts of war in the classic canon? And thanks for translating that opening line for me. For goodness sakes, the first word is rage, wrath. And it goes on to ask the goddess to *sing* of it. I sure am glad you took that Greek course. Ok, Homer, tell me a story."

As I start to tell her my dream, she closes her eyes and I can't tell whether or not she's fallen back to sleep.

When I finish, she says, "I love your descriptions of the trees. Very poetic. But it sounds like you're coming to the end of the road and have some decisions to make, n'est-ce pas? You're realizing you can't just stay where you are---the ground is slipping out from under you. But you're strong and balanced, and can trust yourself. I wonder what choices you're facing?"

"Nothing big. Maybe with Yom Kippur tomorrow evening, little things like life and death. Whether my fate is sealed and I will even be allowed to go forth. If I am, in which direction? A large part of me is very happy right here with things as they are. Do I really need to choose?"

Joie never complains, or lets herself show negative emotions, but I can see a trace of displeasure as she says, "You know I'm going to need to head back to California to begin my classes in the next two weeks--after Simchat Torah."

"I'm not happy about that. Maybe that was what part of the dream meant. Things can't stay like they are now. I wonder what the California peppers meant--maybe where I've come from. Maybe I'm not supposed to choose either of the dirt roads, but turn back along the main paved one? Head back to California?"

"You know I'd like that." She playfully tickles me, then retreats under the sheets.

"The Rebbe told us that a spiritual way to treat Yom Kippur is to act as if we are really going to die. How would that change how we live right now, in the moment? For one thing, we wouldn't be thinking about the future, or about these choices, because we would no longer be alive. Let's just live in the moment for the next couple of days, and see what happens. Let's see if I'm allowed to live, and find out whether or how my fate is sealed."

She pulls the sheet off her face, and looks at me directly, with no smile. "There is really something lovely and charming about you. You are both a little baby embryonic cell, filled with lots of potential; and an old man facing your death within a few days."

I'm surprised and pleased at her kindness and sensitivity to my uncertainty and choicelessness. Is there another show to drop. "Thank you. What I....."

"But there is a life in the middle, you know. Eventually embryonic cells need to choose a direction, commit and specialize and differentiate. It's all well and good to find out who you are at the top of the hour glass--to find your biggest possible meaning and purpose."

Ah, here it comes.

"I believe, at some point, for it to be a full, engaged life, you have to come down from the mountain and down the hour glass, to choose. In choosing, of course, you want to stay congruent with your vision, but you also have to face the fact that life does involve choices. And choices mean giving up some potentials to deepen others. And that applies to relationship, too."

"We've had this conversation before."

"Right. And each time you say let's take it a day at a time. Live in the moment. Now you're saying, how can we not live in the moment if we don't know our fate at the end of Yom Kippur."

"So that's what this is about. Again? The commitment word. The M word."

"Yes. So? What's wrong with looking for a deeper level of commitment? What's wrong with wanting to talk about marriage?"

"But why not just enjoy each day? Commit to each other afresh each day? Like Akishige talked about 'Seeing the flower the 500<sup>th</sup> time as you saw it the first time.' Why do you need some legal, formal document?"

I think to myself that going back down the paved road back to California feels uncomfortably repetitive.

I've been there, and it's not one I want to retrace.

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"Why now? What happened to the free spirited girl who gave me the bell to go to India?"

She turns her head to the left, as if looking over my right shoulder: then, keeping her head still, moves her eyes go to the right, and stares at me. I can tell she's annoyed with me, but she says nothing.

"When I was a little boy, about five, I was eating breakfast while mom was sweeping the floor, which was both unusual and surprising. Maybe the maid was off that day. Anyway, I spilled some food on the floor, near where she was cleaning. She looked up, slapped my hand, and said, 'Junior, dumb bunny, bad boy.'" I stick my lower lip in a pout, and cast my eyes downward in a hang dog look. "You've got mom's same look in your eyes now. Like I'm a bad boy. I might be a little bit bad," I hold up my thumb and index finger about a half

inch apart. "But I'm really trying to be mainly a good boy." I stretch my arms wide, as if I've just caught a huge fish, or am ready for a hug.

"It's hard to stay upset with you when you act like a cute little boy. Why now? Because I'm leaving soon. Why now? Because I've fallen in love with you over the past five months, and I want to move to a deeper level of commitment. Because I can see us having a wonderful, adventurous life together."

She wraps the sheet more tightly around her self, and looks at the pleated folds. I see the outline of her breasts under the sheet. I distrust my reflexive sexual reaction. I try to imagine her breasts as a source of sustenance, giving milk to a baby. I think of the first time I met Mery, asking her for water, and she serving me milk. All I could see was the size of Mery's breasts, and all I experienced was a reflexive, aching want. I really want to come from a purer place this time with Joie. I don't want to hurt her in any way. I want to be a good person, pure in spirit. I'm not sure I'm ready for a deeper commitment of relationship. Not from selfishness, but because I'm not sure I'm worthy. I don't think I'd be as good a partner to her as she believes. While I'm having these thoughts, and trying to think what to say, she continues.

"My grandmother told me that a student of Hillel's is buried here in Safed, and that the unmarried visit his grave in order to be granted blessings to find a marriage partner. She wants me to go, and I told her I would. But I don't want to keep having this conversation with you. It's starting to feel like what Akishige said about samsara, just a repetition, leading nowhere but to suffering. I won't mention it again. She lies down, and pulls the covers over her head.

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Part of me feels relief and wants to let her fall back to sleep. But part of me knows that I need to say something. I pull the covers down a bit, exposing her hair and face. "Let's practice Lin Zscho's tai chi dance. He says, and I believe, that reasonable people acting in good faith, committed to listening and caring about each other, can come up with a compromise that is the best possible under the circumstances. I love that idea: that there is always a best possible solution for any issue. So, let's imagine that we are one and connected as part of the cosmic void. We are calm, centered, peaceful, loving, caring about each other's welfare. And you know I do. What are our options?"

"I like when you make it sound as if everything is going to work out. You start."

"Ok. Remember, this is just brainstorming. We could stay here for another year or so. Do as Akishige says, live in the here and now, enjoying the magic of Safed."

"Married?"

"Deepening our commitment each day."

"And what would you do?"

"I've got so many pages of notes and ideas from all these wise individuals, but they feel scattered to me. Like I've been a scribe who has chronologically written down what they've said. But I'd like to create a more systematic analysis of each topic. Here, let me show you." I jump out of bed, and grab a paper on which I've listed each of our wise elder friends' names along the side, and the topics that have been covered in piecemeal fashion during our conversations: nature of the universe, evil, amount of assertive action versus acceptance, why individuals choose certain views, universal/particular etc. Look, there

are seven individuals and seven topics, so forty nine boxes." She takes the paper, and starts laughing.

"And these colors?"

"Well, I thought I could go through my notes of the past five months, and underline any time someone mentioned it. See universal/particular is purple I could do that for each topic: yellow is evil, its nature and origin, etc. Then I could put it all together, maybe in a book form, discussing each topic in a chapter."

"Please hear that I love your idea, and it fits perfectly with you. But what am I supposed to do here? You know all this philosophizing is a little abstract for me."

"Right, but you're also tutoring Israeli and Arab children in English. I admire that. You're sort of the earthy, socially engaged part of us. I'm the off the clouds part. We're a good team."

"I agree we're a good team. And I love the children. But we've been living here in the 'air' of Safed long enough for my tastes. I'm ready to move on. And aren't a lot of these individuals going to be leaving after Succoth? And even if they don't, you can write anywhere, can't you? Maybe correspond with them? Why don't you come back to California and write, so I can return to school, which is what I really want to do."

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I feel a tightness in me. Is it the idea of going back to Stanford without any societally approved role? Is it the idea of getting married, making a lifetime commitment? I feel free here in Safed, writing, thinking. But if I were back there, I'd feel I need to meet someone else's standards. I'd feel to free-floating, without a framework. Maybe I'd try to be accepted as a graduate student in a

religious studies department. Otherwise I'd be in society, but not part of it. Here I'm an outsider and nothing is really expected of me.

"Well, what about the part of me that wants to go to India to further my studies. Prem Devi has invited all of us. Akishige has said he wants to go there for the excellent 'rice curry.' Lin Zscho mentioned he too might join them on his way back to China. That seems like a great opportunity for me. To go to India, then maybe China, Japan."

"Why all this focus on geography, but not relationship? Are you running from Stanford? From me?"

"That's not fair. That doesn't feel like a tai chi dance."

"You're right. Sorry."

"Actually, you're right, too. If I'm honest there is part of me that's afraid. Of America. Of Stanford. Of my family. Of falling back into old ways. And maybe, yes, afraid of commitment to you. After what happened with Mery, and my parents, I feel pretty vulnerable about my ability to sustain a relationship. This conversation is causing a lot of stuff I felt I'd addressed, but which seems maybe is not yet healed completely, to resurface. I guess I'm still a very slow work in progress. I'm sorry. There's more inside still unfinished than I realized. Which, after all this self-reflection, is really discouraging."

I can see her wrestling with several different emotions... hurt, annoyance, anger at my reluctance and resistance to returning with her to America? Sympathy at my disappointment and vulnerability? She reaches over and puts her hand on my hair, and rubs through my curls.

"Come here, baby. I understand." She once again pulls me down to her chest. I feel the softness of her breasts. I also feel tears welling up again. I wish I could will them to stop. I feel like a big

baby in an adult body. How much control over them do I have? Are they like a sneeze? Sometimes a sneeze just happens. Sometimes I can feel it coming on, and will it to subside, and it might. The tears I feel coming, unbidden, and say to myself, this is who I am, let it happen.

"I once saw my grandmother crying," Joie says softly, "which was really unusual for her. She's always been my stoic, solid rock. I was scared, but told me that tears come when the heart breaks open, a safety valve like steam from a tea kettle, a tear in the heart that is put there to release our pain."

"A tear is a tear in the heart." I snuggle in closer, as she continues rubbing my hair and my neck. "That's lovely. I'm glad I can cry with you. My dad told me never to cry. It was unmanly. But crying sometimes clears the air for me; things seem fresher after. It's like some fiery pain has been discharged. But did you know you were getting such a big baby?"

"Yes, I knew right away that you were a vulnerable little boy. You are also a very sensitive man. And a very strong one. There are lots of sides to you. I love them all. And I'm not afraid of any of them."

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With Mery I tried to hide my negative side-plagues, dust, poison, my shadow, all the different names I've learned for it. I tried to hide it not only from Mery, but through therapy I learned I was hiding from myself. With Joie, I'm beginning the relationship open and vulnerable. There is nothing to hide. Her seeing me naked like this and still accepting me is a reassuring, comforting, even joyous feeling. I am loved as I am, problems, insecurities, fears and all. Something mom didn't think possible. Maybe I didn't either. Yet it's happening. I don't want to lose her.

"You know I love your earthiness and your groundedness 'in reality' your social commitment. I do like that you're pushing me to be more grounded myself. There's probably a danger that I could just float away out into space like a hot air balloon. But even as I think of coming back out of the air of Safed, a large part of me recoils in fear and distrust. When I first saw Israel from the plane, it was so beautiful. But once I landed, not only did my shoes get stuck on the ground by bubblegum. . ." I pause to see if she'll laugh. She gives a small compassionate grin with those thin lips... "but also the fire of Jerusalem, which can heat and warm, burned me; the waters of Galilee which can sustain and nurture, nearly drowned me. I like my place up above, watching, distant. I fear returning to earth."

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"I have an idea. But before I say it, I'm going to ask once more. Is it coming back to earth that you fear? Or commitment to our relationship? If it's about materialistic society, I think we can work that out. If it's about our relationship, then all this talk of geography and where we might be together is, as said Akishige quoting Buddha just 'questions that tend not to edification' "

I hug her closer. "I'm in. What's your idea?"

"Look, I sense your fear of returning Stanford, to the 'real' world. And I don't want you to do something that won't be good for you. But one of the professors from Stanford told me about a wonderful spiritual, mystical community of Blake scholars there I'm excited about that...for me, and perhaps for you. I can see you finding kindred spirits, there too. It's not like you'd be going back as the same person, down the same road. You're different. Not only would you see things from a different perspective, but you'd have different goals,

find resources there that you didn't even know existed. Maybe there's even a spiritual interfaith community. Or you could start one."

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I can feel my ambivalence. I appreciate her trying to hear my spiritual need, my fears. I also value her confidence that I'm a changed person, and could forge a new path in the same environment. I wish I had the same confidence in myself as he does in me.

"Thank you for that excellent tai chi dance. I feel heard by you, and see how you're trying to help me see more possibilities at Stanford...to 'open the eyes of the blind.'" She pulls me closer in a cuddle.

"Now let me try a tai chi dance back. I think we'd agree that in some areas we're very similar, and in some ways quite different. To me, that can be a positive. For example, our sleep patterns. I know that after you sing to me and put me to bed at night, you are up for several hours reading, studying, preparing for your upcoming classes. Then I awake at dawn, and spend several hours writing, reading, and yes praying while you sleep. We just have different schedules. That's who we are, naturally. But we've found a place to meet when we are both awake--and we also get comfort during those hours when we are asleep together. Just knowing you are there is so reassuring to me."

"I think I like where this is going. Please continue."

"Ok, I have two different ideas. The first is being together in both places. What if you come to India first, for a while. Then I go to Stanford for a while. Or vice versa. Though I know what my preference is."

"What do you mean for a while? Would you want me to take a three month, six month, one year postponement on beginning my program so we could go to India? I'd consider that. You realize how much that means

I trust you. How I'd be putting everything I've worked professionally on hold to be with you. But that could work for me, out of love. And your second idea?"

"That is so kind and flexible and loving of you. Wow. Well, I'm not sure I even need to suggest my second idea"

"I'd like to hear it."

"Well, I thought if you didn't like my first idea, then, based on what I said above about our sleep and waking patterns," I notice myself tentative and hesitant to continue, but so do haltingly, watching her facial expressions, "we could honor our difference ...and I could go to India for a while, while you begin classes at Stanford. We could write, call, meet during summer vacations, or over holidays. It would just be a temporary phase. I know this isn't about geography, but about making a commitment to share a life together. And we could do that, just like being asleep, but connected."

"Look, Jacob, I'm an independent person. I don't need constant attention. But I am also an earthy person. I can't live only in an abstract spiritual world, or a world in which there is 'commitment' but not any physical connection except intermittent over some sort of 'temporary phase'."

She maintains the cuddle, but I sense slightly less so. "Are you saying I'm selfish to want to go to India?"

"No, nor am I selfish for wanting to get my doctorate. We're just different."

I look at my watch. "Prem Devi is going to be giving a yoga lesson in thirty minutes. I appreciate everything you're saying. How about if we give a hug, and say 'to be continued.' After all, all this is academic if we don't make it through Yom Kippur alive."

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I bend to give her a hug. She holds me lightly. I start to pull back, also, and then I see a few tears running down her cheek. She turns her head away and wipes it. I pull her toward me and place her head on my shoulder, stroking her hair. She begins to shake, and I continue to run my hands through her hair as she cries. I ache for her ache.

After a couple of minutes, she is breathing more calmly. She pulls back and looks at me, her hands still on my shoulders. "Look, I love you. I want to spend my life with you. Whether that life is two days until Yom Kippur or years and years. This is not about geography or where we live, India or Stanford. It's not about air versus earth. As Lin Zscho said, the yin and yang are complementary, not opposite. Together they form a unity. That's what I feel with you."

I pull her toward me. It's my turn to cry. I feel her warmth, see her tears. I take my hand and touch her tears. She takes her hand and touches my tears, and we rub our fingers together, our tears mingling and merging.

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"No one has ever said such beautiful words to me. I love you, too. I really want this to work. Help me."

We continue to hold each other, clinging yet awkward. She starts to get up, saying, "I don't want us to be late for Prem Devi." Then sits back down.

"I love your enthusiasm, with all your different colored pens and your love of ideas and charts, to find a systematic philosophy of life. I see that as an essential part of you. You work hard, reflecting on yourself, to learn about your self and to keep your 'self' together, and grow into a better person. I admire that, too. I don't want to take that from you, because that is you. Right now, I can't tell—and



I don't think you know, either--whether you are just doing this so you can find a fulcrum that allows you to reenter life in a more engaged way. Or if you really would be content to have this be your life's work--studying philosophy, religion, meaning, exploring human nature and the nature of the universe.

"But for me life is not lived at the top of the hourglass. It is lived in the center, engaged. For me, a life entirely of the mind be too self-introspective, and feel like it's avoiding engagement and social action. Rather than ready, aim fire, it would be ready, aim aim aim aim aim. I'm not saying you need more. But I do. And maybe I am saying you need to be careful that you don't either sail away on that balloon, as you said, or use talking about ideas as an excuse from living them."

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"Do you realize you're talking to a former member of the Junior National Rifle Association? Sometime when I take you back to Kansas City to meet my family, I'll show you all the awards I received for expert marksmanship--I could not only aim, but fire, and fire well!"

"Actually, that's a side of you I'm glad I didn't know. I much prefer the non violent, loving, searching, person before me."

"I hear what you're saying. And I agree there is a danger that I get lost in ideas. But as best AS I can tell about myself, I don't see how I--or really anyone, though I know others do--can act, even exist, without at least trying to address the big questions in life. You're right. That is my Archimedes's fulcrum.

"When God asked Adam where he was, Adam said 'I am hiding.' I've committed to no more hiding, no illusions. So I feel compelled as part of that self-searching to ask and try to answer as honestly as I can, for myself, and not from a hubristic effort, but as a personal

one: Who are we; who can we become; how to achieve our potential, and become the best humans possible? What is the nature of the universe we live in? It seems to me that these questions are what frames the meaning of life. Answering them helps me decide whether life is worth living. And if so, how."

I look at the Frenchman's black and white photograph on my wall. "But maybe there's truth in what you say. I'm not sure all these questions are really answerable. I know that feeling of paralysis. I have to honestly ask myself am I hiding behind the questions and the words themselves. Sometimes I think I am. But overall I don't. I trust that so far this path has been essential for me. Yes, I love that big perspective, the overview. Yes, there is part of me that does resist coming down the hourglass and choosing. But, I'm not sure these questions are solvable, even with colored pens." I try to smile.

"Not without" and I point to the photograph of the man at the train station jumping over the water "not without a leap. Not without making a choice."

I pick up my flute, and start playing "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child... "

Joie listens for a while, then says. "When you play, your soul comes out. It's lonely, haunting, eerie, melancholic. Yet in a way it's serene. Your notes are pure, cleansing."

I feel myself wanting to start crying again. She hears me, feels me, and doesn't run away. I feel loved by her, accepted. "You are such a blessing in my life. A woman of valor. I don't know how you got so strong and confident and trusting and loving. And I really don't know why you shine all that on me. But I am so thankful."

I set my flute down and hug her. "These days here in Safed are like paradise, a simple, almost monastic-like existence, with daily

and weekly rhythms of writing, walks, meditation, playing the flute, few but deep social interactions. I feel like I've achieved the perfect daily weaving that the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet talked about. I fear leaving here. I fear losing this lifestyle which works so well for me." I pull out a journal and a piece of paper. "Look, when I first got here, I even made a chart with the days of the week on top, and my activities on the side so that each day, I could check off the activities as I did them. After a few weeks, I felt I could trust myself enough that I no longer needed to check them off, that I'd internalized them. I was afraid to show this to you, or really anyone, for fear I'd look like someone who can only live when their life is surrounded by and lived within little boxes. But they give me security. Helped me feel that I'm living the life I want, that is congruent with the top of my hour glass."

Joie takes the chart from me and looks it over. I'm concerned how she is going to react. Her face is pensive, intent. Then she bursts out laughing. "Thank you for your beautiful statements about me being a woman of valor and a blessing. There is a lovely romantic, even poetic side to you. And then there's this." She holds up the chart. "This is certainly NOT my way of organizing a day. And I'm not sure I really appreciate this column 'Time with Joie.' At least all the boxes are checked off. But I know this is really your way to trying to maintain some sense of control in this crazy world. So, no, I'm not offended. I think it's darling. Though limited. Be careful of fingers and moons, as Dr. Lisbet might say, right?"

"Thank you." I wipe imaginary sweat from my brow. "One thing that's so wonderful about our relationship, for me, is that I can be myself with you, and am not hiding anything. Even my, shall we call them, idiosyncrasies, my tears and vulnerability—I show you everything.

I can't tell you how important it is to me that you can see me as I am and not recoil in horror, not run away."

"No, I'm not to going to run away. You can trust that about me. But let me say one thing about you and your different options. As I think back to your dream this morning, you really have several choices of roads to follow. As you know only too well, with Yom Kippur coming up, all roads lead to same place: death. So the only really interesting question is which journey, which path do you want to follow. For me, the best path is one of relationship, not only to relieve the aloneness and scariness of the journey, but also life for me is about love and connection and sharing. I want a life companion for the journey. But I will say to you, in all honesty, whichever fork in the road you choose, please keep my Indian bell near your heart. And know that it is inscribed with a poem that I wrote when I was nine years old:

Love is entwined with all of its kind.

"Now, I'm ready for some yoga, how about you?"

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As I start to get up, I say, "Your poem reminds me of a line attributed to Aristotle that I learned in my Greek class. Maybe you'll like this better than Homer."

When I first heard the line, my Johannes self thought it would be a great "move" with a woman. Little did I know I was saving it for Joie.

"When asked what a friend is, he (Aristotle) said, 'Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.'" This is quoted in Diogenes Laertius, (5.20). I write it out for her.

ἐρωτηθεὶς τί ἐστι φίλος, ἔφη, μία ψυχὴ δύο σώμασιν ἐνοικοῦσα  
"It really is a paraphrase of Aristotle's original statement in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166a30)." I write:

ὁ φίλος ἐστὶν ἄλλος αὐτός

"Literally, "A friend is another self."

She looks at me with such tenderness, while saying in a teasing voice "Uh, oh, scholar, a little long winded and academic, and if not too Roman plebian, really, it's all Greek to me!" Then she gives me a big hug "But I love the idea of friends and soulmates, one soul in two bodies.

"Now let's go do yoga. And seek union with the divine."

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"What was your play about?" she asks. "My parents are both writers."

"That must have been wonderful growing up to have them as models of creativity. There wasn't much creative spark in my parents. Or even interest in reading. Or in music or the arts. Other than mom's love of Johnny Mathis and Dad's love of eating a bowl of ice cream while reading a paperback western."

"So where did your creative spark come from?"

"Who knows. God? Camus? Trying to cope? That's mainly what my play is about. How about you? Do you write?"

"I wrote a book of poems which my parents published when I was nine. I write when the muse strikes me."

"See, you're so lucky. What a joy to grow up in a creative stimulating family."

"You're right. I am lucky. They're amazing parents. I'd like to hear more about your play, if you'd let me."

"Do you have any of your poetry with you that I can read?"

"Grandma might have some. Maybe we can look at it this evening. But you're not answering my question. Resisting?"

"Well, it's kind of dark and sad. I'm not sure I want to go there today. Today is a day of light and joy. Here, I've got a doodle I did when I was thinking about why I like Reform Judaism, and how it fits my personality—the rebellious side of me that doesn't like to be told what to do. It has to do with Teshuvah as applied to 'returning phone calls' and the prohibition against work on Shabbat. Some of the halachic Orthodox rules started to seem pretty petty to me. I'm not sure who it's written too—maybe an imaginary rigid Orthodox Rabbi? Maybe to God? Anyway, here it is:

I can call you in a funk  
I can call you when I want  
I can call you on Shabbat  
You can't tell me when to not  
I can call you night or day  
You can't tell me what to say  
I can eat green eggs and ham  
Cuz I am J oh yes I am. . .

\*                     \*                     \*

She laughs. "Well, the rebel in you would fit well in my family. But you might have had some trouble, too. Although my parents are intellectually creative types, there was a lot of pressure put on us to excel at being creative and smart. It's not that easy, always having to show that you are gifted and talented. But I'd still like to hear about your play, even if it's dark. Sometimes that's the best literature." She points up toward the sky. "You can see that the light is waning. Part of life is the light. But part of life is evening and dusk and darkness. You know the shortest verse in the New Testament?"

"No."

"'Jesus wept.' It's in the book of John. He's crying at the death of his friend Lazarus."

"How do you know the New Testament?"

"My Uncle Isaac is a Presbyterian theologian. A scholar of the Old and New Testament. He told me. Luke tells us Jesus also wept at seeing how hard it was to get people to realize the ways of peace. Tears, darkness, sadness are also part of life, even on Easter, don't you think?"

"That's deep. I thought you were always told to keep it light. Corners up. And isn't your grandmother Jewish? What's your uncle doing being a Christian minister?"

"His father, my grandfather died very young, at 36. My uncle was devastated. I think he felt that Judaism had failed him, but Christianity promised life everlasting. Interestingly, despite his conversion, he never stopped thinking of himself as a Jew. "

"I'd like to meet him. He sounds fascinating. What a family."

"You might. He comes over for archaeological digs. He helped me get a job on a dig near Beersheba when I was sixteen."

"Wow, Is there anything you haven't done? I was swimming at camp in Wisconsin when I was sixteen. I feel like a Kansas City hick."

She starts rhythmically tapping her hand on her leg

I'm going to Kansas City,  
Kansas City, here I come.  
They got some crazy little women there  
and I'm going to get me some.

"They had great blues and jazz singing."

"You just sang that to mock me, didn't you?"

"I take the fifth." She has a great earthy giggle.

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**"Namaste" Prem Devi touches her palms lightly together in front of her and gives a slight bow. "This beautiful word is the way in which we start and end our yoga session. In essence it means, the light and goodness in me bows to the light and goodness in you; the**

god, or goddess in me bows to the god or goddess in you. It is a greeting that looks for the best in ourselves and each person we meet." I love this greeting and slowly and carefully bow to Prem Devi and each person there as I say the magical word.

"Now, stand with your feet slightly apart, palms together, thumbs against your chest. Your palms are pressed gently together, almost as if in prayer.

The person who sees action in inaction  
And inaction in action,  
that person is wise above all.

"These are lines from the Bhagavad-Gita, one of our classic wisdom texts, and they really set the stage for what we're going to do this morning in yoga. The root of the word yoga means to 'yoke', and the goal of yoga, if you want to call a path in which the journey and the goal are the same, is to join and unite ourselves to the divine."

"Ah, like the Sufis. Cleave to God," Al Hazrumi interjects.

"Exactly. So, when we begin an exercise, we want to center ourselves and come from a place of stillness and inaction, while still seeing and feeling all the beauty of breathing, blood flowing through our bodies, the action that is occurring even during inaction. When we start the posture, we are doing an action, but we want to keep ourselves as calm, still, and peaceful as when we are 'doing' inaction."

"Xujing and dongjing. " Lin Zscho adds. "Yin and yang."

"Shh, let her teach us," Jacques scolds, while I jot notes. I feel like I'm in a paradise of the mind, where an interfaith dialogue is organically emerging before my eyes and ears. This reminds me of the Rebbe and the blank piece of paper. The stillness before and after



exercising mind and spirit; now before and after exercising the body and spirit. Prem Devi continues:

"After you've raised your hands and arched your back gently on the inhale, the next posture in 'salute to the sun' is to let your hands go out to your sides, like two soft bird wings, or falling leaves being slowly and gracefully pulled by gravity toward the ground. Let your spine gradually bend forward as your palms move toward your legs, and your head falls toward your legs as you slowly exhale.

"As you breathe in again, just hold the posture you are in, and notice where your hands naturally fall on your legs. Is it at your knee? Above your ankle? The tops of your toes? This is where you are now. The goal in yoga is to accept where you are and who you are. This is not a race or a contest to see who can stretch the most or the fastest. It is seeing who you are, accepting that—action in inaction—there is nothing to change, you are perfect the way you are.

"And, now, with the next outbreath, slowly and gently let gravity pull you downward just a bit more. Maybe a quarter inch, maybe a half inch; whatever is right for you. In this way we learn both acceptance of who we are, and to slowly stretch and grow, testing our limits—inaction in action. That way you know you are becoming as flexible as you are capable of being.

"Now an inbreath, when we pause. The stretch is on the outbreath. Good.

"Now, an outbreath, while you let yourself see if there isn't another quarter or eighth of an inch which your body will allow you to grow downward. Don't force it. Don't push. Otherwise, your muscles will recoil and tighten. Just allow yourself to surrender to gravity. Feel the joy of the stretch.

"And remember, all of us have limits, no matter how centered we are and no matter how flexible we become. Learn your limits, too. That way you begin to trust your body, what it can do, what it's not yet able to do.

"The largest goal is to yoke yourself to the divine. The means, how far you stretch, the different postures, are just the journey. They are like playful waves dancing in the ocean of the divine. The path and the goal are the same."

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In spite of everything Prem Devi is saying, I catch myself looking around to see how far down others can go. Lin Zscho, Akishige, and Joie are actually able to place their palms flat on the ground. My fingers, outstretched, barely can touch the top of my feet. Why is outcome so important to me? Is it the belief, and fear that nothing will ever be accomplished if we don't need to act and push ourselves, if we're already 'accepted'? Is it from Grandpa Julius' admonitions to be the best? Is it from feeling competitive because if I'm not, others will get ahead? Afraid I then won't be loved? Prem Devi is saying the opposite. Begin with self-love, then grow from there. She's turning everything topsy-turvy.

I think of Akishige's witticism, "To hit the target, shoot first, and whatever you hit, call it the target." There is something freeing in that. Just like it's freeing to stretch as well as I can and be content with what I can do. But does that optimize our potential for growth, or is it really a recipe for allowing us to settle for less than who we can be?

I look over at Joie. She looks lovely and peaceful stretching. Also sensual. I feel some arousal, which both embarrasses and confuses me. How does acceptance and limits and not stretching apply to

orgasms? I'd like to ask Prem Devi about that. I'm confused about sexuality, now, and I'm conflicted with Joie. I feel caught between worlds. I know what my old self, Johannes, would say-- that though the sexual foreplay and chase may be fun, it's meaningless and useless without the climactic orgasm-- it's all about outcome.

John would say leave it all behind. It's the flesh that stops you from reaching the divine. I wish the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet were here. I need some guidance. I'm in new territory. I don't want to fall back into old ways. Yet I'd also like to see if I can find a path to wisely grow beyond the sexual abstinence of John. Is there a way forward? Who can I talk to about this?

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Prem Devi is now asking us to lie down. "The corpse pose. Shavasana. Just as we began in stillness and meditation--action in inaction-- we end with stillness. Let the earth hold you up, allow your breathing to proceed at its own natural pace. There is nothing you have to do to try to control it. Trust your body. Let your feet naturally fall to the side. You may notice a heaviness in your body. Allow all thoughts to float away. Let yourself be in the emptiness and fullness of the present."

I feel like the white piece of paper at the end of Talmud study. Maybe this is what Lin Zscho means by the void of emptiness. I'm a blank canvas ready to be written and drawn on. I wonder what the picture is going to look like when I arise from being a corpse.

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"My play is about the same issues your uncle was struggling with. I understand his anger at God for his father's death when he was still so young. I guess my play at first is like something out of the Old

Testament, the protagonist railing against humans, trying to get them to wake up, cast off their worldly illusions and attachment to golden calves.

"Then there's a shift, and in the Abraham, Job tradition, he is a person of faith arguing with God. Like Abraham, asking for mercy for Sodom; like Job, asking why so much pain and suffering. But then something shifts again, and the protagonist is no longer arguing with God, but attacking God. Why does an innocent child die. Why does anyone die? Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world."

My speech is becoming more rapid. I feel like the proverbial stone pushed off the top of the mountain, rushing downhill. I'm not sure I want to be sharing so much with this person I barely know, but the words continue to tumble out.

"And then there is another turning point. Does he lose his faith in God at that point, and realize that there is no God--the existentialist acknowledging--with fear and courage-- a meaningless, indifferent world; or does he keep the charade of God against whom at least he can protest, and be angry, because it is less painful to yell at God than to face that there is no God, and he is totally alone in an uncaring, random universe. It's like a teenager who can rebel at his controlling, mean parents, versus realizing you're actually an orphan, and there is no one to yell at for your pain." I try to calm myself and smile. "My grandfather tells the joke of the person who shoots his parents and then throws himself on the mercy of the court, saying he is an orphan. Kind of like that. I kill God, and then say, poor me, life is so hard."

Joie looks at me with a tender, direct stare; then she looks down, but says nothing. I feel comforted by her presence, and continue.

"The play is my trying to tear down all the bricks that hide us from facing God directly. Why does God let a person's father die so young? Like what happened to your uncle. My rage is not at a particular religion, but at God,."

"And now?" she asks. She has such beautiful, clear eyes, like the depths of the ocean staring at me.

"I don't know. Now, this moment, I'm happy. I like being able to talk with you about these issues. I had an experience of such unity and understanding and connectedness this morning in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Now, I feel that everything might work out."

"That was a beautiful vision. But was that the world now, or as it could be? Or was it heaven?"

I notice feeling some irritation by her question. Why? It's not unreasonable. But it makes me think too much, and starts to break the mood I've been having. It's like a leak in the dam, through which some of the feelings from a few days ago, that I want to keep walled off, could start to seep back into my mind. I pause, and consider whether to share what I'm thinking with her or even with myself. Can I be both honest and vulnerable and still keep the glowing beauty of this morning?

"It's hard to look around the world as it is today and say that everything has already worked out. Still, I want to believe that, in some way, the world now is good and meaningful. Not a world in the future, or in heaven. But, just a few days ago, I felt completely the opposite. I truly believed the world was only dark and empty and heartless in its indifference. Either God was uncaring, impotent, or absent.

"I don't know how to reconcile that view and those feelings with the ones of this morning where I felt and experienced a unitive,

loving, compassionate world. But I can tell you one thing, I'd rather feel like I do today than like I did a few days ago."

"Sorry, I can see that I raised a sensitive topic."

"It's not your fault. It's the topic itself. I guess there's still more work for me to do. But if you want to seek forgiveness, how about singing another song?"

"With pleasure."

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"What are your views of tantra and orgasm?"

Prem Devi is sitting quietly after our yoga session, while others have drifted over to begin eating lunch. She offers me a seat, and calmly looks at me. I'm surprised at how boldly I asked the question, and also at how non-reactive she is at hearing it.

"Namaste. Have you studied tantra?" I namaste back.

"Not really. Just read a little in college. I think I might have used it in ways which were not its true purpose. For me, orgasm was always the goal. Then I tried to give up the body completely. No orgasms. Now I'm confused, and wonder if maybe there isn't a deeper way of understanding the body and sexuality that isn't so black and white."

"Are you confused about whether you should or shouldn't have sex? Or orgasms? Or engage in intimate physical relationship?"

"Yes to all of the above."

"Our tradition gives many answers to those questions. At times Ramakrishna would say it's 'women and gold' that keep people from a spiritual life. He taught that one will never succeed on the spiritual path if one attends to the world, including sexual desires. In simple terms,

*no relationship, no sex, no orgasm.*

"Yet our tradition also speaks of the love between Radhna and Krishna, man and woman, as one of the highest yearnings and realizations between God loving God--divine forms of the universal. Don't you have something similar to that in your Song of Songs? Again, in simple terms, this might be the way of:

*relationship, sex. (with or without orgasms)."*

I nod and take some notes, as she continues:

"Then we have wonderful stories of Krishna with the gopis, the cowherd girls and all his amorous adventures. Krishna would come to earth and take the form of what the woman needed most, and have both spiritual and physical lovemaking relationships with them. So here we have many relationships, much sex, and probably lots of orgasms.

"So, which answer are you seeking? We have many."

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"Isn't one better?"

"Perhaps. That depends on you, and what better means to you."

"Well, whatever helps me to become more spiritual, wiser, more compassionate person is better."

"That's not about orgasm, is it? That's about how you handle your heart and your relationships."

I write down what she's saying.

"Tantra is about taking the sensual, sexual energy--would that be Freud's eros?-- raising it from the sexual, red fire center connected to the earth, and bringing that energy up into your green heart chakra, expanding the amount and depth of your love. As that energy goes to your heart, it passes through the orange emotional center, where you want to raise the positive emotions, cleanse yourself and let go of any negative emotions. The chakra energy then passes through the yellow sun-like area we call muladhara, and Lin Zscho calls the

tantien, right below your navel. This is your source of personal power and strength.

"There can be a delicate dance between this chakra and the heart chakra. Some people with large heart chakras, who are very loving and sensitive, need to increase the energy of the yellow chakra, develop more self-assertion strength. Others who are very strong in muladhara need to ensure they don't become too filled with personal power and self-absorbed, and must bring some heart chakra energy down to soften their yellow energy.

"Then the energy rises upward through the throat chakra, bringing the love and kindness of heart, ensuring right speech and care in word choice. Our energy continues to rise to the 'third eye' intuitive center; and finally to the crown chakra, connecting us to the cosmos. It's not about orgasm. It's about opening all your chakra centers. The sensuality and sexuality of the first chakra circulates through all the chakras and connects you to the divine, and the divine energy can also circulate down, connecting you to your first chakra."

As she is talking, I'm alternately taking notes and trying to breathe energy between and among my chakras. I like the idea of my sexual energy as a life force, not confined to my lingham, but helping open my heart and be part of and circulate through a rainbow of the chakras within me.

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"Tantra also helps you realize, as we discussed in yoga, that the path and the goal are the same. If the orgasm is the only or the main goal, then its achievement becomes the end of the journey, a petit mort, a little death. So tantra focuses on the path: the journey, the quest, the adventure, the mystery, the connections and dance along the way. The important point, again, as we discussed in



yoga, is yoking yourself to the divine. Hatha yoga is one 'finger' using physical postures; tantra, either alone--with the inner beloved--or with a partner, a beloved, is a way to use sexual energy and relationship to yoke yourself to the divine--within yourself, with your partner, with the universe. Some schools talk of never having an orgasm, except for procreation. Other schools say circulate the energy several times, then you may allow an orgasm."

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After I finish taking notes, I ask, "So it's back to what Jacques said: it's all existential. Regarding orgasm and tantra, the choice is mine, and there are no right or wrong answers."

"On one level, of course, you need to be careful that you bring the proper context and intention to working with the chakras. But with that caveat, I'd say it's more about matching--to the person, and to their developmental level. And the importance of cultivating and purifying your spiritual intention. Let me give an example not about tantra per se, but you will see that it explains the idea of matching and development. Then I'll return to tantra specifically.

"Ramakrishna's students asked him, since all is One, doesn't that mean no student is better than another, so why should we cultivate discipline and spiritual practices? He admonished them that because all is One at the deepest level, does not mean there are not differences in each student in terms of how filled they are God's presence of us. Some naturally are better than others; some are more filled with God's presence through cultivating their spiritual practices. He said that we all have to do spiritual work to get wiser, even Mother Kali! He likened the path of spiritual wisdom to a ladder, or stairs, which you climb to go higher and gain the roof top. He also said, as we discussed regarding matching, and fingers and moons, that

there are many ways and paths, many different stairs that can be climbed. Jhana, the way of knowledge and discrimination; bhakti, the way of emotional ecstasy; both can be wise paths. Both are the same, he said, like water and a block of ice. Both can help you climb higher until you finally reach the roof."

"And then?"

"And then from the roof, you realize that the ladder, stairs, building materials are all made of the same substance. All is God."

"So you climb the stairs because you want to get closer to God, to differentiate from that which hinders you from reaching God, and then once you find God you realize all is God?"

"Paradoxical, isn't it? I agree. The very next day after he told his students that Oneness doesn't mean no differences between them, he told a woman who was complaining about how her sister wasn't very wise, that she shouldn't make such discriminations, that all are God!

"I think it has to do with where you are on the ladder. You climb the ladder to escape the multitude and find the One. Then, if you are an Arahat, you stop there and escape into the cave in the Himalayas. If you choose to be a Bodhisattva, then you may return and embrace the many as the One. Ramakrishna called it retaining the ego of knowledge and returning to help others.

"What is your path?" She smiles and gives a slight bow.

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I continue writing down what Prem Devi is saying, including the question, What is my path?

"I think it's pretty simple. I want to be a good person. I want to leave the world having brought more light to it than darkness. That's really about all. I do the Jewish nightly prayer, asking forgiveness. I'm happy on days when I know I haven't intentionally

tried to hurt others. I hope to learn more about myself and learn to be more careful so that I reduce the unintentional hurt I cause. But I must admit I'm shocked at how often negative feelings come up in my awareness—even some competitive feelings during the your yoga lesson. It seems the more I become aware of all my thoughts and feelings, the more aware I am of how many less-than-God-like thoughts cross my mind every day."

"Gandhi said that the goal of life is self-realization. That takes practice. Practice. Practice. Ask any of our friends here. It's a constant effort to stay aware. What you're doing is admirable. And necessary. To reduce the hurt to others, we do need to know ourselves well, be committed in intention to being a healing person, be able to be empathic and see the other person's view, and be non-defensive about who we are. As you well know, and have heard many times both from Dr. Lisbet and from those here, 'People are only as safe to be around as they know themselves, and are committed to a path of self-purification.'

"That applies to life in general, and to the specific question you're asking about tantra. If I may be so bold as to apply an Akishige-like double entendre koan to our discussion, as I've noted, Ramakrishna said

God's winds are always blowing  
But you must raise your sail."

With a bemused smile, she gives a Namaste bow.

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I realize she initially began to directly answer my question about tantra and orgasms, then veered off into a deeper contextual musing, and finally returned to my original question. She ends with a koan which is slightly salacious and which I find surprising coming

from her. Am I supposed to connect the dots? Is she saying I'm on the right path, and just need to keep mindfully aware of dust, or is she saying the dust really does need to be addressed? It feels like tantra and orgasms are now only a subset of this larger question.

"Are you saying that I'm on the right path, even though sometimes things seem to get worse, and I feel like I'm not making any progress?"

"Oh, there are so many levels. Remember when we talked about developmental stages? Most people live at the lower levels, fearing punishment if they are caught, and doing right based only on what society tells them. At some point, as they hopefully evolve, they gain greater wisdom. Akishige described this in Buddha's eightfold path, including right speech and right action. We all would be wiser if we could learn to take a breath, pause, and reflect, before we act and speak; to learn to have greater self-control. As the Bhagavad-Gita says, to 'have not a hair's breadth between will and action.' That's the path you're on now."

"But how do we know that our views are the correct ones, that our values are right?"

"Ah, you know the story: 'learning from experience.' But to do that means we have to hold our views lightly. As Ramakrishna said, to have core beliefs, but not be self-righteous about them. To practice and respect our path, but not feel there is nothing we can learn from others' paths. He once asked the non-dualists what they thought they could learn from those who followed the path of dualism. They scoffed. Then, he said, you can learn from their yearning after God, even as you yearn after non-duality."

"That seems very wise. I remember the Rebbe saying Martin Buber was asked a similar type of question, involving what we can learn from those with whom we disagree. 'Why did God create atheists?' to which he

replied, 'So that people wouldn't think that everything was dependent on God, and we had to do our part.'

Prem Devi laughs. "Another wise person. They exist in all traditions. Dualists and non-dualists think they are on opposite sides. Some in India won't even talk to those who believe differently. I've learned the same is often true here in Israel between the atheists and the Orthodox. But as Gandhi said, even those who are our 'enemy' are still part of ourselves, and we must treat them with respect even as we disagree with them."

"But if we hold our opinions and truths 'lightly and provisionally, and are open minded and seeking, how do we keep from being so flexible that there is nothing we are passionate about, that gives us a firm core? Are you saying that there is no right path, only the one I choose? First, how do I know if that path is truly right for me? And secondly, does that mean there are no universal principles or standards, each can just choose whatever feels right?"

"Ah, great questions. That's where it gets tricky."

She smiles and says, "I'm hungry. Let's go get something to eat, and we can continue our discussion over the meal." As we are walking, she says,

"It's even worse than that. At the deepest level, I'm saying that there is no path. That the path and the goal are the same. We Hindus, like the Buddhists, excel at making ladders—including their horizontal ladder, like their ox-herding pictures--and then saying, oh, by the way, there is no ladder, no ox, no self, no path, nothing to learn, it's all One. Or Empty. Depending on your perspective."

"So, have I answered your question about tantra and orgasms." She throws her head back and lets out a throaty laugh. "I'm really hungry. What a feast. Jacques, you've outdone yourself."

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Heigh ho, nobody home  
Meat nor drink nor money have I none.  
Yet will I be merry.

"Do you realize that can be the some tune to sing

Ma tovu ohalecha Ya'akov,  
Mish'k'no'techa Yisrael.

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob,  
Your dwelling places, O Israel,..."

As I listen to Joie sing, I find myself lulled once again into a euphoric state. Even in a nursery rhyme, there is something hypnotic, soulful, playful, and enchanting about her voice, as if it comes from the depths of her heart, a yearning toward God—merry and good-- giving expression to God's voice, how I imagine God would want to speak,.

All my attention is on her. She commands center stage, but she does so in a nonchalant, casual, undemanding way. Occasionally, she will glance at me, but then looks away, and never loses her rhythm or focus. If I were to die today, listening to that voice, I feel I'd be instantly transported to heaven on the wings of the sound.

When she finishes, I clap. She looks embarrassed. I tell her how beautiful her singing sounded to me. and she responds, why don't you sing a song.

"Ok, you asked for it. Here's the backstory to the song. After my parents divorced, I remember my first Christmas. Mom would get a small 'Chanukah bush' and put it in the living room of the apartment. The next night mom and my brother and sister left the apartment to go shopping. I didn't want to go, and when they left, I was alone. I turned on the twinkly blue and green lights, and the record player, and sat listening to what was then my favorite song, 'The Little Drummer Boy.' Did you know there were 21 rum pa pums?.

Little Baby, pa rum pum pum pum  
I am a poor boy too, pa rum pum pum pum

"Oh, baby. That's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. I don't know whether to laugh or cry."

Shall I play for you, pa rum pum pum pum,  
On my drum?  
Mary nodded, pa rum pum pum pum  
The ox and lamb kept time, pa rum pum pum pum  
I played my drum for Him, pa rum pum pum pum  
I played my best for Him, pa rum pum pum pum,  
rum pum pum pum, rum pum pum pum,

Then He smiled at me, pa rum pum pum pum  
Me and my drum. Dum da dum, da da da da dum.

I have a sheepish look when I finish singing, like a shy boy revealing a vulnerable truth. "I liked the image of doing something well, and Jesus smiling at me. I've never told anyone that story before. But I guess it makes sense to tell someone on Easter weekend, doesn't it? When that little baby's life ended and re-began. The same way I'd like to believe mine is re-beginning."

Joie reaches over and gives me a tender pat on my shoulder. I find myself wanting to hold her, or lie down in her lap and let her hold me. But I begin to feel dizzy, things are happening too quickly. A voice in me reaches up and grasps me with a warning, "What are you doing? She's a temptress, taking you from your spiritual journey just when you've finally reached some deeper understanding. Careful that her comforting voice isn't that of a siren lulling you onto the rocks."

Then another voice wells up, whispering, "And she doesn't know all your plagues and darkness. If you let her get too close to you, she will see who you really are and run away." And a third "Even if she doesn't run away, you will only end up hurting her, making her unhappy as you do with all who come into contact with you, infecting her with the darkness that is you."

During the less than thirty seconds that it takes me to have these thoughts, I've said nothing. Joie removes her hand from my shoulder, and says "Like my Uncle Isaac, I want to believe that there is a heaven on the other side of death. That there is eternal life and that my uncle will meet his father in the future. And that I will meet my grandfather, whom I only know through his words and writing. He wrote a wonderful collection of short stories, called 'The Intellectual Lover'. I bet you'd like it."

"Why?" I notice a curtness in my voice. Does she? I'm ignoring all the lovely, tender heartfelt feelings she's expressed about her uncle, her grandfather. Why did she say I'd like a book called the "Intellectual lover? I feel myself closing back up again.

"Because it's about a man who finds love with many women, all of whom have different wonderful qualities. One is intelligent. One is beautiful. One sensual and exotic. One, playful and mischievous. Then we discover the story is a tribute to his wife, one woman who embodies all these things. It's really beautiful."

"Your grandmother must have been very sad when her husband died so young." My voice sounds empathic, but I realize I've taken her joy at the beauty of what her grandfather wrote, and focused on the saddest part. "It was my grandmother's death that caused me to write my play. I remember my grandfather comforting my grandmother on her death bed while she was in great pain, but trying to be brave for him, as he was for her. He said to her, lovingly, yet almost begging, moments before she died, 'Grow old with me! The best is yet to come.'"

"I'm so sorry. Were you there? That must have been so hard."

"Yes, it was and still is very difficult." I breathe in rapidly, through my nose, as if I'm holding back tears. Was I there? Not physically. But I was there emotionally in the writing of the play.



Fiction leads to truth, my creative writing professor would say. And I'm sure my grandfather would say I'm within the bounds of truth.

"But my hurt is no different than your uncle's, or your grandmother's or anyone's. It's unique to each of us, but the real tragedy is its commonplaceness, and how much suffering each of us has to go through because of death. Were you in the class when the Rebbe told the story of life being like a raft."

She shakes her head no.

"A person is crossing over the river of life death on a raft. At one point on his life journey, there were lots of people on the raft with him. He let everyone in: work colleagues, neighbors, church associates, friends, family, children, grandchildren. But as he got older, he let go of those least essential, as either they left the raft, or he simply didn't have time and space for them on the raft. First co-workers, then acquaintances, letting them go, so that as he got closer to death, he was leaving more and more people behind. Then, he had to let go of his grandchildren, his children.

Each begged, please don't pitch us overboard, we want to stay with you---and he with them. Finally, only his beloved wife was left. Holding hands with her, their fingers came apart, as she left the raft and he had to continue the journey alone."

I feel myself welling up with emotions. I have tears in my eyes. I will myself to hold them back. I take a breath, and try to speak in a calm manner, as if things are actually in control.

"We are all on that raft. Life is letting people on and off. But in the end, the letting go is inevitable. We die alone. Right now, my raft is empty. I have, at my young age, already accomplished the task. That pain is behind me. Why would I want to repopulate my raft only to endure all that suffering again?"

I expect her to pull back, even leave. Instead, she touches my shoulder, and looks directly at me with those soulful blue eyes, "It sounds like there's been a lot of hurt. You really are a tender soul. I'm sorry."

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As Prem Devi and I gather our plates and begin to dish the salads and fruits, I see Joie and Akishige in an animated conversation. When they see us coming, Akishige bows and says, "We have found a convergence in our paths. Through rebellious playful divergence." He bows again. "It could be a koan, yes? I asked Joie if she had the same intense interest in spiritual matters as you, Jacob Ki Tao. She said 'No, she was a history and English major, and still is.'" He bursts into laughter. "That's the kind of response that will get you invited into the Zendo."

"It's true. Some people are able to transcend spiritual vortexes and conversations, because they are already there," Prem Devi joins in. "But what is the convergence in divergence?"

Joie responds, "Oh, I heard Jacques asking Akishige why he wanted to travel to India--was it to learn more about Zen's roots, about Hinduism, the "mother" of Buddhism; or to trace the path of Buddha or Bodhidharma. And his response was 'No, it is because I hear they have excellent rice curry.'" We all laugh, then Jacques chimes in. "well, I imagine you're now here in Safed, because you've heard Israel has great hummus, and so your spiritual quest continues. See what you think of my hummus, falafel, and pita. You know, I didn't go to the Cordon Bleu School for nothing."

"You see," Prem Devi looks at me, "People following their own paths. Lightly. Playfully. With dedication." She nods to Joie, then

Akishige, then Jacques, to whom she says, "Ah, beautifully spiced.  
What a master."

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As we are talking, I see Al Hazrumi whirling in a quick stepped Sufi dance, as he twirls his way toward us. I'm reminded of a dust cloud as Dana and I were hitchhiking across Kansas.

When he reaches the table, he says, "Just preparing for my afternoon 'sermon.' I'm honored to address you all after our meal. The dance is my meditative prayer of preparation." He smiles. "But my other form of preparation was to ask Akishige about wisdom. May I share your response?"

Akishige nods.

"He told me about a teaching in the Abhidharma, Buddhist scriptures that attempt to offer a systematic understanding based on the specific, immediate teachings of Buddha given in the narrative sūtra tradition."

"Is that like inductive and deductive scientific traditions?" I ask, more to show my own knowledge than really ask a question. No one looks at me or responds. The consequences of hubris. I should have kept silent. I learned nothing by talking.

"Someone should do that for Ramakrishna--his teachings recorded by M are not systematic. They are simply his daily teachings; whatever he said depended on who was before him." Prem Devi looks at me. "Perhaps someone with a very scientific, precise bent of mind who relishes overviews might be appropriate for the task? But, O apologize, please continue Al Hazrumi."

"I was talking with Akishige, and he shared a lovely lesson from the Abhidharma with me, and I asked him if I could share it with our

group, as a way if seeing if I understood the lesson, and as an introduction to my talk this afternoon."

Akishige bows for him to continue. "Buddha said there are two types of people in the world. One type, when you are around them, you feel drained and tired; the other type, when you are around them, makes you feel enlivened and joyful."

I can easily think of those who fall into the former category, and as I look around at the present company, I can also feel the joy of the latter.

"The book goes on to say we can learn from both, but once we have learned our lessons from those who drain our energy, we can let them go, and surround ourselves with a sangha, a community, of those who nourish us."

Well, I'm doing just that. So far the lesson is perfect. I've let go of those who drain me, and look where I am, now.

"As I understand it, the text continues, and says that both types of people are also inside each of us. We can learn from that part of us which drains and depletes us, but once we've learned our lessons, it is then time to let go of that side of ourselves that no longer serves us." Al Hazrumi looks at Akishige. "Did I say that correctly?"

Akishige bows once again.

Al Hazrumi says, "Well, that can be considered the hors d'oeuvre of my talk this afternoon, or perhaps it can serve as the complete meal. In any case, my thanks, Akishige; it's a wise teaching. Now, sorry for the interrupting, let's return to eating.

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I say to Joie, excitedly and earnestly, "I think that's what I'm trying to do, that's what my life is about."

"Eating? Surrounding yourself with joyous people?" She smiles playfully.

"No. Well, yes. But I think why I spend so much time trying to figure myself out is that I want to know every part of me, even the negative parts, the parts that bring me down. But not to dwell on them. To learn from them. I was talking to Prem Devi about Gandhi and self-purification. I think that's my goal."

"Sounds good to me. Jacques' hummus is amazing, isn't it?"

"Are you taking me seriously?"

"Always. But not too seriously, right?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if you are self-purified, how will you judge everyone else around you who hasn't done as much work or been as successful at the task?"

"Fair enough. Probably I'd feel a certain self-righteousness toward those who haven't worked as hard or diligently as I do. Is that one more area I'll need to purify?" I take out my notebook and jot down this idea, and Joie's caveat. "But do you remember what Dr. Lisbet, and also Prem Devi said about what makes a person safe to be around? I want to be safe to be around. But I think your caveat is a good one. Partly I want to be aware of all my flaws so that I don't inflict them intentionally or unintentionally on others. But partly I think I want to be aware of them, and learn everything about myself so that no one can criticize me for something about which I haven't already thought through myself first. That way there's no unexpected criticism. But if there is, I can learn from it so next time I can't be blindsided. Maybe that's why I'm so non-defensive."

"And modest."

"Perhaps this is the ultimate defensiveness? I'm so afraid to be criticized that I prepare responses to all possible criticisms."

"I'm not sure that's fair, either. Because you really are willing to learn and work on yourself. You do take seriously what others say about you, and are about as non-defensive as anyone I've ever met."

"Ah, I like the sound of that."

"Modesty is next. But seriously, most people I know, including myself, don't like to hear criticism, no matter how nicely it's couched. It violates, at least for me, my self-image. Maybe it feels like the 'poison' versus 'dust' that Dr. Lisbet talked about. For some reason, you're really willing to learn all you can about all sides of you, see it as dust, and try to work with it."

"That's sweet, Joie. Thank you for seeing me so clearly, with just a hint of rose-colored glasses. Sometimes I fear the dust is really poison, a plague. I need to better digest and internalize Prem Devi's yoga lessons--learning to make little changes as best I can, polishing away the dust, becoming better at recognizing and honoring the slow, small ways in which I am improving. I can only grow and stretch as much as I can. Each day a little more. I hope."

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As we are talking, Prem Devi comes over and joins us. "I apologize, but I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. It's a joy watching two love birds flutter their wings around each other." She gives her throaty laugh, then turns toward me. "Your goal of self-purification is admirable, as we've discussed. But remember, I told you this was complex. At one level, we need, as Ramakrishna said, to practice our spiritual disciplines and to work on cleansing ourselves."

I nod vigorously. "Exactly. As the Kaballah says, the world is a university for the soul."

"Yes, and; or Yes but. . .Ramakrishna also said that everything is by God's will. It's not by our effort alone. Or even if it is by our efforts, those efforts themselves occur through God's grace."

"How can those both be true?"

"Actually, it's even more complex, or simpler, depending on your view. Ramakrishna liked to say, at the deepest level, the path is lila, all God's play. All God. So, really, there's nothing to strive for, nothing to purify, nothing to learn. The world isn't a university for the soul. The world just is God." She laughs again.

I don't laugh. There is something that profoundly bothers me about what she is saying. I guess if you believe in an all-loving, all-wise, all-powerful God, and if God is "One," what she says follows logically. But emotionally something troubles me in her words.

As I'm trying to sort out my thoughts and feelings, Joie interjects, "I like that. That means I'm perfect just the way I am and that there's nothing about me that should ever be criticized. If people believed this, then everybody would be a lot more accepting."

Finally, I blurt out, "I hate that idea. It challenges everything I've been doing to work on myself. I feel it's only by my concerted efforts—and I'll even give God's grace and the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet as God's instruments and helpers a little, ok a lot of credit—that I've made quite a few changes in who I am." I think how I've worked to overcome my mom's depressive collapses, agoraphobia, and suicidality, and passive-aggressive sarcasm. How I've reined in my dad's angry impulsiveness, bullying and physical violence.

"I try to watch every word I say and take care in my speech and actions. And you're saying there's nothing to learn and everything is

perfect as it is. Intellectually that may follow from your belief system, but experientially, it makes no sense to me. It doesn't make sense societally, either. Just look at the pain and suffering of the homeless, of soldiers fighting wars. That's all One and God and perfect? I'm just not there yet. And I can't imagine how I ever will be - or even if I want to be."

"Don't be so serious. Unless you want to. This viewpoint says that God still 'plays' in the world. But you understand it's just form. Similar to what we were discussing about tantra earlier....it's serious and sacred, and it's fun and playful. No matter which path you choose, enjoy your maya--your illusions--and see them as such. They all lead you to the same place. God. Because you're already there."

"Why, if I'm already there, and if all the world is God, and we are all part of the interwoven fabric, all a piece of the cosmic puzzle, do I often feel like a stray thread in a too complicated quilt?"

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i Mom. It was so good to hear from you. I'm glad Nana received my missive and passed it around to everyone. I hope she's not worrying too much. There are lots of angels here surrounding me, as well as all of your love. Your missive entered my contemplative cave here in Safed, and what a kind and lovely intention that you would like to send Joie some flowers to celebrate our deepening relationship.

I put down my notebook and pick up her letter..

Hi Son, Nana passed around your letter. Sounds like you've met some wonderful wise people, and a special someone named Joie. We would like to send Joie some flowers. When would be a good time to do this? Please let me know.

I toss her letter aside, and try to calm an angry feeling arising.

What kind of a question is that "when would be a good time to do so?

Why not just send some flowers? Is she trying to receive double

thanks, one for the gesture, one for when the flowers arrive? Then my anger increases as I remember on my birthday, a couple years ago, she sent me some flowers. They were all dead. I called to thank her, but told her she should call the florist, because all the flowers that arrived were dead. She started laughing. Hahaha, wasn't that a funny joke? I specifically instructed him to send you dead flowers." Huh? I was flummoxed then, and still am. What part of that is funny? Really?

Perhaps I can let anger become sadness, or compassion. I need to forgive. But not forget. I notice some distrust, like Lucy and the football being pulled away from Charlie brown. over and over. I don't want to give her that chance again.

What a beautiful and loving thought and kind intention. But I must admit I am stumped by the seeming simplicity of the question. On the one hand, it seems like such an obvious question-kind of like, when is it good to have a happy thought? when is it good to do something nice? When is it good to think about chocolate? ! ? W And I know how you love chocolate! The simple answer is anytime.

But perhaps it is deeper than my initial understanding. Therefore, I did share it with the group of elders here. . We discuss concepts of self, evil, death, wisdom, enlightenment, and challenge each other, within a loving context, about differing beliefs about the nature of the universe. I am so grateful to be in the company of these wonderful people. I asked if they would be willing to help me answer your question, and as you can see below, it caused a deep reflection among our gathering . It reminded me of when we used to talk about some of the poetry you were reading. I hope you enjoy ( and then I do have a specific suggestion at the end!:) Here are some highlights from that discussion.

Jacques, a non-theistic existentialist, sees your question as very deep. He believes from a Greek standpoint, the issue of time is important. There are two words for time in Greek: *chronos*, which means chronological time (2 0 clock, 3, -- this is horizontal time) and *kairos* is "infinite time" when time is an altered state: vertical time. He suggests that your question is talking about the intersection of *chronos* (when you send it) and the effect it will have (*kairos*): a loving moment when time stands still.

Al Hazrumi a Sufi master from Islam, when hearing the question, jumped up and began doing a whirling dervish dance, creating the form of a flower by his fluid motions. "Your mother is brilliant. She is realizing that our 'jihad' is an internal one, a struggle to cleanse ourselves, and to flower in our oneness with Allah."

Reverend Noel, a Christian contemplative, stands up to join Al Hazrumi in a dance, adding that sending the flower is a sign of rebirth, is it not? Flowers are like the Rebbe's Shabbat candles, an outer manifestation of an inner flowering, bringing light and joy into the darkness.

I can ever hear Reb Jonathan, who was my teacher and therapist in Jerusalem, humming a spiritual niggun as the conversation continues, providing context and form. "As the mystical Zohar says, 'the soul You have placed in me is pure.' Our task is to 'fertilize' the soul, and let the flower bud as it is supposed to, removing the husks (*kelipot*) which impede our spiritual light from shining forth, and creating our unique piece of the cosmic puzzle."

Prem Devi, a Hindu and follower of Ramakrishna, gives a Namaste bow to the dancers, and says "I want to acknowledge the importance Jacques place on time, but I believe your mother's questions is not only about time, but also about flowers." She poses several questions in a clear, Socratic style. "Isn't your mom asking, from a psychological and spiritual perspective, whether there is an innate soul, a holy bud within each of us? If so, can we "force" that bud to flower? Or is it like trying to pry open the bud of a still-closed rose? Isn't your mom really asking when is the right time for a bud to flower? Isn't she discreetly asking where in your relationship you are...and would sending flowers now be premature, or timely?"

Akishige, a Zen master bows, and agrees. He says "What a wise mother, she has indeed asked a profound koan. To flower or not to flower, really says that emptiness is form, and form emptiness. sunyata is tathata, and tathata, sunyata. The essence of the flower occurs in form and formlessness. Any time is as perfect as any other time.

Lin Zscho, a Taoist tai chi master smiles, as he gets up and begins a tai chi dance with Al Hazrumi, in which I image the Rebbe joining "Allow the way. All is one. The flower grows on its own time. Time, to those who know, is daily and infinite. There is no wrong time. No right time. The river flows and is one. It is like the finger pointing to the moon. Don't confuse the finger with the moon. The flower is a finger, and the moon is the loving intention, the love to which it points. Between mother and son. Between beloveds. Among all of us.

Joie shares in a sing song voice, "Let a thousand flowers bloom!" as she joins the dance.

All of us gather together in song and dance, flowering in a timely way. Even surly Jacques begrudgingly gets up. "You know, sometimes, as Freud said, a cigar is just a cigar. Maybe the question is not as complex as you all are making it."

At that point I sit down and take notes furiously. Then, looking up to summarize, I ask "Would it be fair to say, sometimes it's simple wisdom. Sometimes it's complex wisdom. Sometimes it's simple wisdom on the other side of complex wisdom.

So, dear mom, I hope that helps answer your question of when would be a good time to end flowers. You can choose "Simple wisdom." You can choose "Complex Wisdom": the deeper meaning of flowering, flowers, and the nature of time. Or you can choose "Simple Wisdom" on the other side of complex wisdom: Anytime it is sent with loving intentions!

Actually, Joie had a brilliant idea. She noted although she is SO touched by your gesture. that because of security, the challenge of sending flowers might be quite complex. She suggested how about just sending her/us a note of your love. Or, if you don't to make a grand gesture, how about contacting the Jewish National Fund, and offering to plant a tree to help make the desert bloom. And remind me one day to tell you the story of the tall tree and the story of the Golden tree." Your loving son, J.

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I awaken early, and lie in bed. I say my morning prayers. Then take out my dream journal to record a dream I remember from last night. Is it ironic that I just wrote a letter to mom, and my dream is about dad?

I'm eating a meal at a restaurant with Dad and my brother. My father tells me I ordered too slowly, took too much time, and am indecisive. Then he tells me I ordered too quickly and

narcissistically. I say, "Look, I can't win with you, what's your problem?" Before he can answer my brother says, "The problem is not with Dad, it's with you. There's something about you that causes others to be annoyed with you."

INTERPRETATION: I want to belong to a family, but feel attacked and criticized, an outsider. Affect: I feel really sad and isolated, wondering what's wrong with me. I want but have trouble belonging and being part of a family. If I'm all parts of the dream, Dad and my brother are the critical side of me, always judging myself, doubting my own abilities. My brother and I have a good relationship, so what does he represent? Maybe he is jealous of my first-son status? Maybe that side of me vying for our Dad's attention? Maybe he and dad represent that part of me that is often criticizing myself?

I continue to lie in bed, feeling bad affect from this dream mainly from and toward my father and his criticism. I remember Dr. Lisbet telling me when I spiral into a challenging negative place to try to counteract the bad affect by remembering something positive. I think of the time when dad was the baseball coach. I was the shortstop, A ball was hit to me which I fumbled. He yelled at the opposing team, "Hit it to him again." At first I couldn't understand why he was saying that...did he want me to make another mistake? Then I saw the smile on his face and his encouraging look, and realized he was saying, I have confidence in you. You'll get it next time.

I also remember when I was a small boy about to take a shower for the first time. He taught me to adjust the handles and feel the water as it ran out the faucet, before I pulled the lever to turn it into a shower. He said it always feels hotter once you pull the shower lever. I now know that's not true. Yes, he was "lying" to me. But why? Because he didn't want me to burn myself. Yes, he wasn't a perfect father. But he did love me, did try to protect me, and did encourage me in his own way. He wanted me not to be afraid of adversity. He wanted to tell me, difficulties only make you stronger, more determined. Trust yourself: "Hit it to him again."

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I once more say the Modeh Ani, then get up, get dressed, and go to our group's common campground area. Later Al Hazrumi is going to be sharing a discourse on stories. When I arrive, I notice that Jacques and Akishige are talking at breakfast and motion for me to come over.

As I arrive, both are quietly eating hot cereal. After several minutes of silence, Jacques turns to Akishige and asks,

"Are you about ready to begin?"

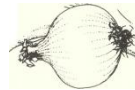
"I have already begun," Akishige notes, as he takes another mouthful of rice.

Jacques appears puzzled, and glances at me. "Do not be perplexed," Akishige clarifies. "I agree with you. As we have discussed, our goals are to live what you call an 'authentic life'; what I call 'every moment Zen.' Each action is important, including what and how we eat."

"You caught me," Jacques smiles.

"I did not catch you. You eat well." Akishige smiles back with a nod, as he reaches over and picks something up.

"What is this?" He turns to me.



"An onion, of course," I reply.

"Are you sure? Here, feel it, take your time."

"Yes, I'm sure it's an onion."

He almost imperceptibly shakes his head right and left.

"With all due respect, this is an onion," I say with a certainty while feeling I may be overstepping my bounds.

"Onion is a word. Just a noise. We often use words as a shorthand, but miss the reality behind the words and labels."

"Try to pretend for a moment that you are this object. Pretend you are inside it. What do you feel?"

I'm game. I close my eyes. I feel like I'm back with Dr. Lisbet doing a mental exercise, like the stump and the river.

"I'm angry when people cut through me callously."

"Anything else?"

"Although there is a hard exterior, I have many layers, and a soft core; it hurts me when I make people cry."

"Perceptive and delicate. You see how full the world is right in front of us. Yet our labels often keep us from seeing this sensory richness even though our eyes are open. Meditation helps us to truly open our eyes so that we may see what is before us. That is one of meditation's so-called 'goals.'"

I hear clapping and it's Jacques. "Very clever exercise....partly! I certainly agree with you that we should all try to focus on what is before us, without preconceptions. But maybe you could have picked a different food? Jacob's answer for an onion violates our personality theory, n'est-ce pas? It's much more Freudian--layers of self--and then humanistic--a soft sensitive core! Hardly either existential or Zen emptiness! What about a donut?!"

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"Ah, very clever and astute, Jacques. Akishige bows. He then unwraps a small scroll, showing it to Jacques and me.

"Please tell me what you see first."



Jacques studies the picture and then responds, "I see a large mountain on the top half, and in the lower half a waterfall, a tree, and fog climbing up the mountain."

"Ah so, of course. Now look again. Do you see the humans? Notice in this picture of the Chinese landscape that the humans are quite small. I've done some studying of Western art and philosophy, and this picture is in contrast to the Greek idea, perhaps best represented by Phidias and Praxiteles who sculpted deities in perfect human form. Their type of sculpture reflected the Socratic disposition to reduce the world to the dimensions and laws of humans' reason, which in turn became the basis for your Western tradition of science. Chinese painting is opposed to this anthropomorphism.

"Human beings are insignificant before nature: nature, which is mysterious and omnipresent and not to be understood by our intellect."

Jacques inspects the picture and nods. "If your point is that we humans are small amidst the vastness of nature and the cosmos, then you're preaching to the choir. And yes, amidst the angst, and fear and trembling, I have also experienced the awesomeness and wonder of which you speak."

He pauses, then continues. "Even though I believe we are but small insignificant creatures in a random, meaningless universe, I also believe it is our responsibility, as Malraux once wrote, 'to deny our nothingness.' Through a process of existential choice, thoughtful goal setting, creating a plan and direction for our lives, we can, to a certain extent choose how to live in authentic meaningful life. In that sense we can shape our own destiny, even within an indifferent, meaningless universe. I believe we have the skills to learn more about ourselves and to choose to become the kind of persons we admire. I don't have faith that this would occur naturally, by some inner unfolding, as you seem to imply."

"Yes, I am implying that," Akishige chuckles. "I believe that humans are born with a pure Buddha nature, and have the capacity to be an artist of life, in harmony with the universe. In Western thought, the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin comes close to this view when he hypothesizes an evolutionary unfolding towards a greater destiny, an omega point of higher consciousness, divine unification, and love. Though I have different "God" beliefs than he did, I believe--as in metta meditation--that love is within us all. As Buddha said,

May you be happy

May you be peaceful

May you be free from pain and suffering.

"This love, our Buddha nature, needs only to be uncovered, and then cultivated. I also believe that words we use often obscure the reality in front of us. You cannot quantify living, for life —as your psychologist William James suggested and Lao-Tzu long ago noted--is like a stream of consciousness. You cannot cut a stream up into pieces. A stream flows and is one."

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"I do not disagree with you, Akishige, about the difficulty of quantifying and its imprecision. But I believe it is sometimes important. I once saw a hierarchy of conversations that an individual may have--Talks with God, talks with Angels, Talks to self, Argues with self. Loses argument with self." He pauses, pleased with his humor, adding, "I don't imagine God and angels respond, but I do know we talk a lot with ourselves, and it is important that we be precise about the nature, type, and value of our conversations!"

"There is a certain amount of necessary suffering in life. That is our human condition. But I feel it's important we don't add unnecessary suffering, especially through our negative cognitions. "I believe that to move from self-defeating patterns of interaction--with oneself and others - to more productive ones, we need specificity to precisely pinpoint our unnecessary negative thoughts and self-defeating styles. This precision can also help us learn to choose more skillful, wiser thoughts and feelings. That certainly seems to me one way we can learn to better achieve this love for self and others.

"And if I may, one more thought. I respect, and sometimes even envy, your still, calm understanding of emptiness and ways to observe our suffering mindfully and with compassion. But as I've shared with you, I don't have such a favorable view of emptiness-- thinking about emptiness usually fills me with dread and angst. And I'm not sure that I want to diffuse that angst, for to me that is part of being alive and human."

Akishige bows respectfully, and then is silent for several moments, before he says, "What beautiful sharing. So many ways to look at a topic." Then he recites simply,

"A Morning dewdrop

Hanging from a thin blade of

Grass...reflects the world"

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I can see that the breakfast is coming to an end. I thank both of them for inviting me over. I jot down some notes. My sense is they agree that any efforts to attain a vision of human well-being are limited if only the content of their dialogue is considered. The very fact they had this conversation, in such a respectful way, was a joy to watch.

I felt their dialogue was in many ways like Akishige's poem, a morning dewdrop...reflecting the world. I know in my own life, self-reflection can be a complex undertaking. Too much self-interrogation leads to "analysis as paralysis," as in *Hamlet*. On the other hand, without self-reflection, often at a very detailed level, we may not understand the depth and complexity of who we are. I wonder if Akishige's haiku suggests that each action and thought in our life can be like a dewdrop, giving insight and reflection into ourselves. Certainly each of them stressed that only through the most constant patience, diligence, and daily practice would there be a true understanding (according to Akishige) and a potential for authentic being (according to Jacques). Zen believes in a radical empiricism (beyond thinking to direct experience); likewise Jacques stressed the importance of action and engagement, not just intellectualizing about issues and concerns.

Both agree that it was important to appreciate and be open to the sensory richness around us, to increase our self awareness and to seek, as much as possible, a harmony with one's feelings, with nature, and with other people.

A full breakfast, indeed.

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We have a few minutes before Al Hazrumi is going to share with us this morning some stories from his tradition. I think of the picture Akishige showed us and his comments about Western art. For some reason, by association, I recall two dreams from last night that had totally disappeared from my mind. I pull out my dream journal and write.

In the first dream, I'm in an art class in which I'm making beautiful Hebrew letters, alephs, beths with lovely vibrant colors-- light blues, pinks, indigo, magenta. The forms are simple, elegant, not too ornate. For gimme I draw a person who is neither clearly male nor female, and blind in one eye. The nose is not centered over the mouth correctly, and I realize I can't erase it because blindness creates indelible coloring of art.

INTERPRETATION. Huh?? "blindness creates indelible coloring of art." Maybe this means that when we make mistakes by our blindness, they are always part of us. We have to go forward with what we have. But also, there is beauty in the beginning of the dream, the aleph, and even with "beth." There is beauty in my life, and maybe the gimme has its own Picasso-like beauty, just not in the classical style.)

Then there were a jumble of dreams, none good. In the first one, I'm biking up a hill. A younger kid, next to me, falls off his bike. He doesn't seem hurt. Then someone hits a golf ball (poorly) and I dodge it. Next I'm in a truck going up a hill, apparently not fast enough because people behind me are honking. After that I'm in a house being flooded from a sewer pipe that broke. My journals are soaked. The waters eventually subside, but things are cracked, and crumbling, splintered wood. I go outside and see that the neighbor's house seems unscathed, and has a warm, cozy roaring fire in it. I'm in tears. In my home there is a painting that has been soaked in water. It looks like it's crying too. I have a desire to take a picture of the painting or write a poem about it, and realize I'll be okay.

INTERPRETATION: Clearly the affect of the dream at the start is horrible and out of control. I am the kid falling off the bike, golf balls are being hit at me, people are honking at me, my journals are ruined. The neighbor's house is interesting. In the dream the comfort of that house creates a poor me feeling. But if I'm all parts of the dream, perhaps it is a sign that things will one day be all right, or that there is a warm, cozy place within me amidst all the turmoil. Further, if I can step back--through creativity--art, photography, a poem --I can gain a perspective and the will to carry forward, and the affect at the end of the dream is hopeful and optimistic.

May it be so.

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"Praise to Allah. How blessed we are all to be here together. I am like a part of your Jewish Havdalah candle from last night, still burning. I am aware of our intertwined wicks, as I, a human candle, am

now speaking to you on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, after Prem Devi, our Hindu. So many wicks casting such a beautiful flame toward Allah, praised be the Name.

"In the time allotted to me, I'd like to talk to you about stories.

"Each of our traditions is a story. That story has a beginning, about how all of this got started; the story has a goal, toward which we are striving; and the story foretells an end, toward which we are heading. We pass these stories down, in written and oral form, from generation to generation. What I want to explore with you is whether we can, by understanding our stories, including their differences and irreconcilabilities, still help each other and our world learn to dance and intertwine in a healing, sacred way."

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"Each story has a beginning."

Al Hazumi holds up an apple which he has taken from Jacques' banquet feast, and takes a bite. "Last Sunday on the Jewish New Year, we celebrated the birth of creation with the blowing of the shofar. In the beginning. Let us think back to the apple dipped in honey. We wished each other a sweet year. All of our traditions begin with unity, whether One God, or emptiness and the void. Fullness and emptiness are simply flip sides of the same coin. Oneness. At that point our faiths, our beliefs, our worldviews are undifferentiated, universal. It is easy to reconcile them.

"Then, as we have seen, there is what Akishige called the second stanza. Things get more complex as each of our particulars goes its own way. For example, in celebrating the New Year, whose New Year are we celebrating? Whose story? Tishrei is not our New Year. Nor do we count either by the Hebrew calendar which asserts we are now only 5732

years from the beginning of the world. Nor is it 1971, the number of years since Jesus was born. The first month in the Islamic calendar is Muharram, which this year begins February 27. Further, our years are counted as *Hijra* years because the first year was the year during which the Hijra occurred— Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina. So the year for us, for those who want to calculate it, is approximately six hundred twenty-two years earlier than the Gregorian calendar, plus you must take into consideration that since we are on a lunar calendar—with 354 days--, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, , our years are shorter than yours."

He smiles and takes another bite of the apple. "Ah, complexity and differentiation. Each of our stories then has to account for the differences. And to address the issue of the dust, the evil, the shadow, the absence of light The Jewish Bible talks of 'eating the forbidden fruit,' the metaphoric cause of our human banishment from the Garden of Eden, the event that introduced good and evil into the world. Welcome to complexity and the second stanza."

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"Each of our traditions has a goal.

"That goal is to overcome evil, the shadow, dust, the absence of light, maya, through effort, transcendence, prayer, and faith." Al Hazrumi nods to Prem Devi. "Like your teaching of yoga, yoking with the divine, Muslims seek, through prayer and intention, to cleave to Allah. We also have our angels, light-based creatures, created from light, by God. Belief in angels is one of the six Articles of Faith in Islam, without which there is no faith.

"In the second stanza, all of our traditions suggest that something needs to be done to make things 'right' again. Even if that effort is to cease effort." He looks smilingly at Lin Zscho.

"Can we return to the Garden of Eden by going back to the first stanza, and pretending that we haven't learned what we have learned? Or do we need to take that knowledge, wrestle with it, and go forward? 'In and through' as some Buddhists might say. Right, Akishige?

"That is why we Muslims pray. To cleanse and purify ourselves so that we may return to God.

"We are now in the holy and meritorious month of Shaban, the final month of preparation for Ramadan. As we prepare for Jacob's holy day of Yom Kippur beginning Tuesday evening, when the final script is written in the Book of Life and Death, we Muslims prepare to celebrate Ramdan, our most holy month, when the Koran was revealed to Mohammed. This occurrence of Ramadan and the Days of Awe occurs only once every thirty-three years.

For us, Ramadan is a time when we slow down from worldly affairs and focus on self-reformation, spiritual cleansing and enlightenment, and establish a link between almighty and merciful Allah and ourselves by prayer, supplication, charity and showing good deeds, kindness and helping others.

"Like your Days of Awe, it is an especially concentrated time of spiritual focus. However, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we also pray daily. In fact, we pray five times a day. Let me tell you a story about why we pray five times a day. It's from the Isra and Mi'raj, the journey that Mohammed took at the end of the month of Radjab—the 27<sup>th</sup>--, which, as I noted, occurs this year at the same time as the Jewish Days of Awe."

"We are told of this story, from verses 1 and 60 of Chapter 17 of the Qur'an and other details were filled in from the hadith, the supplemental writings." Nodding to me he adds "Perhaps our Hadith is like your Talmud, Jacob. In any case, here is the story.

"One night in 1 BH, Muhammad was resting peacefully in Mecca in the Ka'aba, the inner cubicle of the mosque, when the archangel Gabriel comes to him. Now angels, as we in the theistic traditions know, are messengers, and Gabriel is interwoven in all of our traditions, first seen in the Book of Daniel, when he explains to Daniel about the end of days--a light pleasant conversation I hope we will have later on this afternoon.

"But for now, beginnings. Gabriel awakens Muhammad, cleanses his heart, then brings him on a strange, angelic beast, winged steed, to the 'farthest mosque'. This 'Night Journey' is mentioned only once in the Qur'an:

Glory to (God) Who did take His Servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose precincts We did bless, - in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth (all things). *Surah 17.1*

Although not explicitly stated in the Qur'an, we believe that mosque is where the Dome of the Rock now stands. Here ends the first part of his journey, the Isra--the night journey--, and the second part begins, the Mi'raj--the ascent. Muhammad gets back on his steed, ascends through the seven circles of the heavens, and speaks with earlier prophets, from Adam to Abraham. He comes to a tree, which is the boundary, beyond which Gabriel and the steed cannot go. But Muhammad continues until he stands in the presence of Allah, who tells him that Muslims need to pray fifty times a day.

"When Muhammad leaves Allah, he meets Moses, who tells him that fifty times is too much, and that Muhammad should go talk to Allah and ask for a reduction.

Then Allah enjoined fifty prayers on my followers. When I returned with this order of Allah, I passed by Moses who asked me, "What has Allah enjoined on your followers?" I replied, "He has enjoined fifty prayers on them". Moses said "Go back to your Lord (and appeal for reduction) for your followers will not be

able to bear it". (From the Hadith, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 1, p. 213).

"As an aside, I hope I don't seem anti-Semitic, because I mean what I'm about to say in only the most admirable way. But you Jews certainly have amazingchutzpah. It's like Abraham arguing with God about Sodom and Gemorrah. You don't have any qualms about taking on Allah.

"In any case, Moses urges Muhammad to go back several times and continue asking for reductions, until finally it is reduced to five times a day. Moses says God might still go lower, but Muhammad believes five is appropriate. As it says in the biography of the Apostle of God,

I replied that I had been back to my Lord and asked him to reduce the number until I was ashamed, and I would not do it again. (Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasulullah*, p. 187).

"Allah then reassured Muhammad that doing five prayers a day would allow the person to receive the benefits as if he had done fifty prayers. Muhammad went back to his bed in Mecca that same night.

"So, now you know why we pray five times a day, thanks to Moses. It is our way of helping reach our goal—of keeping ourselves close to God, keeping ourselves pure, and being faithful servants to Allah and his teachings." He pauses, and looks at each of us slowly, with a calm, kindly expression. "I've given you a lot of information. I hope not too much. Before proceeding to the end of days, let me stop here and ask you for your thoughts and questions and comments.

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"So do you really believe that Muhammad was bodily carried to heaven by Gabriel?" Jacques asks.

"Oh, Jacques, ever the enlightened rationalist. That's like your virgin birth question. Metaphor, brother, the mystical experience,



reaching 'higher' levels of consciousness" Reverend Noel comments.

"Look at your companions. You know us better than that by now!"

"Moving up the Chakras, from the root to the crown, like in tantra," Prem Devi says.

"Jacob's ladder," I add.

"The ox herding pictures. The empty mirror," Akishige smiles.

"Exactly, " Al Hazrumi smiles. "It's the journey, the uplifting of the soul stage by stage, until there is a communion with the Absolute Soul. Form. Emptiness. Oneness."

"Gabriel is a busy angel. And one who connects all our traditions. It was Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke who reveals to Zechariah that John the Baptist will be born to Elizabeth, and who visits Mary to reveal that she will give birth to Jesus," Reverend Noel notes.

"Gabriel plays an important role in Islam, not only in this Night Journey. According to our tradition, he is the angel who revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad." Al Hazrumi picks up an apple from the table. "We ate the apple dipped in honey to begin our joining in the celebration and soul searching of the Days of Awe. We prepare for Tuesday evening's Yom Kippur fast with an ever deeper cleansing of our hearts and souls, seeking to remove the dust within. Next month we celebrate Ramadan, when Gabriel revealed the Qur'an, by self-cleansing and fasting. Ramdan means scorched, burning. Fasting during this month is thought to figuratively burn away all sins."

He takes a bite of the apple, pauses, chews, swallows, sets the apple down. "I wish we could end my story-- our story here. All of us working with prayer, and camaraderie to overcome the negative in the world, to rise up toward the One, cleansing ourselves, overcoming our

evil inclinations, and becoming one with our higher Self, our no self, our Tao."

He takes a breath, then says, "But each of our traditions has a view of the End of Days. And each of our traditions have different views about how much effort and responsibility humans have, and how much Allah has for hastening that time. And there, the task of reconciling the particular and the universal becomes more complicated. I believe that is the task we must now face."

He holds up the apple again, smiling where the bite has been taken from it. "Like Akishige, I am optimistic that there is a third stanza of the poem. I believe we can show ourselves and the world that we can return once again to a Garden of Eden paradise-like state, on the other side of eating the forbidden fruit--on the other side of the theological and geographical battles-- Jerusalem as the city of fire, consumed by particularistic territorial fighting over sacred space--the Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock, the Via Dolorosa. I believe we can once again experience, and then remember, the context of the undifferentiated state, where yin and yang, black and white, good and evil, are seen as growing out of the cosmic void and Allah's will. And, as our Sufi poet Rumi wrote

the smell of apples arises  
from the orchards of my soul...  
one whiff and I am gone,  
toward a feast of apples I am going.

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I again raise my hand to speak. I feel somewhat childish, as though I'm back in class, but if there were anyplace I'd like to be a student, this is the class I'd want to be taking, and the place where I'd like to be taking it. I take the stick from Al Hazruri. "It seems there are lots of convergences." I point to his apple. "First, you have

the traditions working together. I love the idea of Moses helping Muhammad talk with God. This is really what our working together is all about. And, regarding Rumi and apples, Reb Luria said that in his Shabbat prayers 'I sing in hymns to enter the gates of the Field of Holy Apples.' Might not our end of days be that glorious, mystical, undifferentiated place, beyond words, sung by poets?"

Jacques looks at me with only partially feigned scorn, and reaches for the stick. "Have you completely gone over to the other side? What happened to your vaunted charts and boxes and analysis? Please, tell me it's not so." He smiles. "By the way, you know that as ethereal as Reb Luria was, living here in Safed, he also knew that life was lived on the physical plane, too. He traded spices for a living! You also must stay grounded, young man."

I tell Jacques that although I appreciate his paternal guidance, I really don't want to think about what I want to do for a living right now. Not when Yom Kippur and the need for facing my death is two days away; and when we are talking about the end of days. For me, those questions take precedence and make trivial the issue of how to earn a living.

"Fine, but then face what it says honestly. You've read the Book of Daniel, where our fine flapping friend Gabriel helped Daniel interpret his dreams and visions of the end of the world. It's not all fields of apples, is it? It's the fourth beast, with teeth of iron and claws of bronze, and ten horns on its head that will devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it. Poor Daniel was quite distressed. Wouldn't you be, if that's what you had to look forward to?"

I nod at him, "Of course. But that is only one ending. There is also the vision of the Messiah in Daniel (7:13), 'one like a Son of

Man' coming and ushering in an everlasting Kingdom. It's not clear to me from my readings what that time is going to be like, according to Jewish lore, but it sounds pretty good to me. The rabbis use the term Olam Ha-ba, the world to come. Our world now is like on the eve of Shabbat, and the world to come is like Shabbat. It is a heaven-like afterlife, a Gan Eden, Garden of Eden, like the blissful time of Adam and Eve before the fall. The souls reside there in a disembodied state, 'and many of those who sleep in the ground will awake, to everlasting life' as it says in Daniel 12.2. There will be bodily resurrection in the days of the Messiah. Some schools say resurrection is not a one-time event, but is an ongoing process. The souls of the righteous are reborn to continue the ongoing process of tikkun olam, the mending of the world. Other schools believe that there is no resurrection, but rather reincarnation---gilgul---which is one way to explain the traditional Jewish belief that every Jewish soul in history was present at Sinai and agreed to the covenant with God." I look over at Jacques. "Now, maybe the rationalist part of you would have difficulty with that. But the poetic part would have to say it's a lovely and emotionally satisfying vision. And it can be integrated with Christianity, Islam, and" I nod toward Prem Devi and Akishige, "even, I believe Hinduism and Buddhist wisdom."

"Look, if you want to believe in la la land, that's fine. I believe everything is relative and there are no absolutes, so if that's the one you wish to choose, so be it. But at least look honestly and authentically. Yes, we can find a story in Islam that recounts Moses helping Muhammad, but the way that story is often interpreted is that Moses tried to get God to go too low. So it's not exactly flattering to the Jews and not necessarily the story of brotherhood you'd like it to symbolize. True, some Christians and Muslims see Jews as their older

brothers; and some Jews take pride in how they provided the foundation for Christians and Muslims to further spread the word of One God. And yes, our flapping friend Gabriel scurries throughout Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but why don't you ask Reverend Noel about the end of days in Christianity, and where the Jews will be then?"

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Reverend Noel takes the stick from Jacques. "Just as it is believed by some to be Gabriel who helped Daniel interpret his dreams about the end of days, some also believe that Gabriel is the unidentified angel in the Book of Revelation who blows the horn announcing the Judgment Day. There, we read about the seals being broken from a number of books, and, as each seal breaks, terrible events ravage the earth and humanity below. The Whore Of Babylon spawns Satan. Four riders set out to the corners of the world; Plague, Pestilence, Famine, and Death. Blood rains down; everyone dies, horribly. The forces of good-- God's angels and archangels, of whom we know only two by name, Michael and Gabriel--war against Lucifer and the forces of evil for human souls. Gabriel has the crucial role of blowing the last trumpet blast, calling on the dead to rise up. Rotted, disembodied corpses are reassembled, and stand in line to have their lives assessed. Good Christians join the forces of Heaven, who by now are winning the war. Those who are not good Christians get cast into the bottomless pit, which seals up forever once they are inside. The righteous now dwell in heaven forever, meeting Jesus and the angels. So, it all turns out nicely in the end, at least for those who qualify."

"Ah, and the Jews?" Jacques asks again. "Either become Christian and accept Jesus, or sayanara, baby, the pit. Not exactly universal harmony, eh?" He smiles, but it is not a happy smile. "Even if

Daniel's Son of Man foretells Revelations, you must still admit the incredible self-righteousness and black and white thinking of this end of days narrative. Daniel says 'All peoples, nations, languages shall serve Him.' Christians use this same absolutist rhetoric as the Jews did in Daniel.

"You may criticize me for being too wishy washy and passive, unable to take a strong stand for anything other than existential relativism. Moral values are fine. But these beliefs are not just for the sake of morality and human well-being. That noble goal gets tangled with a morally absolute and self-righteous view that only your way is right, believing in the superiority of your own way, while diminishing and demeaning others who may have similar moral values, just not YOUR path. I believe this is done for psychological reasons. If you believe MY way is the only truth, you must admit that provides comfort for the adherents by diminishing uncertainty and ambiguity in this challenging world."

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Jacques hands the stick to Reverend Noel, to whom he has been addressing most of these remarks. "Thank you, Jacques for your candor. Yes, I'd like to respond how I, as a mystical Christian, understand the end of days, and even some of the less seemly passages in Revelations, but why don't we allow Al Hazrumi to complete his discussion, and share with us the Muslim story about the end of days." He then hands the stick to Al Hazrumi.

"We, too have our final day of Judgment, and the Last Day, too. It is one of our six articles of faith. To share the most 'universal' view, it says in the Qur'an (2:62)

Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians...and (all) who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness,

shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.

He looks over at Jacques. "That sounds pretty kind, at least to all the monotheistic traditions, doesn't it? Like the other Abrahamic religions, Islam teaches the bodily resurrection of the dead, the fulfillment of a divine plan for creation, and the immortality of the human soul; the righteous are rewarded with the pleasures of *Jannah* (Heaven), while the unrighteous are punished in *Jahannam* (Hell). A bit like karma, right, Prem Devi?"

She places her right hand out, palm down, and gently turns her wrist right and left, as if signaling more or less. She then turns her palm upward, and gestures in a rotating motion toward herself, saying "Please continue."

"Some in our tradition, the Shias, believe that a messiah, the Madhi, the divinely guided one, will come to bring peace and justice to the entire world, unifying everyone under Islam and Islamic law just prior to the final Judgment."

"Ah, the particularistic rules. A time of perfect peace and justice—under YOUR Way." Jacques grins sardonically, as if a prior belief has been confirmed.

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"There is some truth in what you say, Jacques, but our eschatological stories also contain elements of cooperation among religions. At the end of times there will also arise the Muslim Antichrist (Dajil) who will try to discredit Islam and the Prophet with lies and so undo the work of the Mahdi. He will convince large groups of people with false claims of prophecy and miracles involving fire and the raising of the dead.

"But Jesus Christ, who in the Muslim tradition is still physically

alive (having never died, rather than having been resurrected after death), will return to earth. Jesus will discredit Dajil and then physically kill him with a spear. The arrival of the Mahdi will coincide with the Second Coming of Jesus and usher in an ideal world."

"The Sunnis, another great Muslim sect, also believe that the Final Judgment will occur with the appearance of the Mahdi as the final Muslim Caliph and the simultaneous ascending of Jesus Christ. However, Sunnis do not consider the Madhi to be a messiah, but 'just' a wise human being. The signs of the end of days in Sunni Islam revolve around the purification of earth of non-believers, either through mass conversion or by death.

"As in Revelations, what leads up to the Final Judgment is not pretty. The blowing of the first trumpet kills all humans on Earth Qur'an 69:13; the blowing of the second trumpet marking resurrection and brings the dead back to life (Qur'an, 35:51. Finally, Allah descends and there is a Judgment of all the resurrected that may take thousands of years under a scorching sun.

"The actual process of separating the soul from the body depends on the person's history or record of good and bad deeds. If you were a bad person in life, the soul is ripped out very painfully. But if you were a righteous person, then the soul is separated like a 'drop of water dripping from glass'. It is also noted that The Angel of Death will look like a terrifying beast or demon for the souls of bad people and will look like 'the most pleasant sight' when he comes for the souls of good people."

Jacques starts clapping. "Poetic, at least if you're a good soul--a drop of water dripping from glass. Sweet, gentle. Of course painfully ripped out souls isn't quite so charming. But again, that's seemingly based on morality, and living a good life. But it's not just



morality, is it. Why don't you give us some of the additional particulars that aren't so charming? Why don't you say that according to some of the Hadith, one of the consequences of Jesus' return is the conversion of the Christians to Islam, whom Jesus himself corrects of their false beliefs." Jacques throw his hands up into the air. "Can you believe it? Just like the Christians will eventually make Christians of Jews, or else the Jews will perish in hell; the Muslims Islam converts the Christians to the true faith of Islam, with Jesus' help, of all things!"

He looks over at Akishige. "Are we on your third stanza yet?"

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Akishige gradually opens his eyes and calmly looks at Jacques. "Hard questions. Who knows the true? What is important is reducing suffering now, isn't it? As we've discussed, Buddha said, there are some questions which 'tend not to edification.'"

"Exactly. It's like the number on angels of the head of a pin. Why do each of your traditions create stories like this? They have too much time on their hands. And the stories say more about us and our fears and hopes and need for feeling special and that our 'tradition' is the 'winner' than they do about the end of days. How can anyone really know the end of the story? Oh, right, the good book says it. But each of your books say a different thing. Whose book is right? Oh, yes, each of your books says it is the one that is true."

Jacques pauses to catch his breath, before continuing. "I don't mean to be unsympathetic. Facing the end of our story--death--is not easy. That's why we all try to figure out ways to cope with it. But the best I've found is from Epicurus. He said we base our fears

not on mature opinions, but on irrational fancies, so that they are more disturbed by fear of the unknown than by facing facts. Peace of mind lies in being delivered from

all these fears. Why should I fear death? If I am, death is not. If death is, I am not. Why should I fear that which can only exist when I do not?

"All your speculation, all the fuss, could be helped if you would just say three words. 'I don't know.' Where do you get off concocting such stories? They may be intriguing fiction, but good grief."

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As he starts to set the stick down Akishige reaches out for it. "Ah Jacques, there are some things you do not know, but we experience. In our Buddhist tradition, we believe that our existence is inherently fluid and impermanent and that there are many moments of transition in life, death, and rebirth. We call these between states, bardo. Each is an opportunity for us to 'wake up' and become wiser, and thereby reduce our and other's suffering." Akishige bows and returns the stick to Jacques.

"Fine. Though I don't believe we're really going anywhere, or have any final end state, I can understand the idea of each moment being a choice where we can decide to live a more authentic existence. In life."

"I agree. In life. Of course. But our tradition believes that after death, our mind or soul continues to live after death, and the great book Bardo Thodol, what some have translated as the Tibetan book of the Dead, but more literally means Liberation through Understanding the Between, is really a discussion of one such transition, and how we humans can help guide ourselves with meditative clarity at the time after death and before our next rebirth."

Akishige then nods toward Prem Devi, "We Buddhists, like Hindus, also have our views of the end of time. But in both our traditions, things go on and on. We believe in a cycle of creation and destruction, of which the current epoch represents only the latest

step. Buddha, realizing the impermanence of all, believed his teachings would disappear after 500 years. According to the Sutta Pitaka, the 'ten moral courses of conduct' will disappear and people will follow the ten amoral concepts of theft, violence, evil speaking, greed, and the end of the worldly laws of true dharma. This will occur just prior to the coming of the Maitreya Buddha, a Bodhisatva and successor of the Sakyamuni Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Maitreya will appear on earth, achieve complete enlightenment and teach the pure Dharma." Akishige then bows, as Prem Devi reaches for the stick.

"Our cyclic understanding, like yours, Akishige, is both external history and internal spirituality. We also see a cycle—during four yugas, or periods of time—from the complete decline in the state of nature and civilization—the completely impure—to the completely pure. In the Kali Yuga, civilization becomes spiritually degraded, human lives are shortened by violence and disease and there is a general state of decay in nature. But for us, there is no eternal damnation of souls. There is always hope for the individual in the next reincarnation. And for the society in the next Yuga. The impure Kali Yuga is followed by the First and Perfect Age, the Krita Yuga (Satya Yuga). As described in one of our two great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata:

Men neither bought nor sold; there were no poor and no rich; there was no need to labour, because all that men required was obtained by the power of will; the chief virtue was the abandonment of all worldly desires. The *Krita Yuga* was without disease; there was no lessening with the years; there was no hatred or vanity, or evil thought whatsoever; no sorrow, no fear. All mankind could attain to supreme blessedness."

whatsoever; no sorrow, no fear. All mankind could attain to supreme blessedness."

"Ah, bravo!" Jacques beginnings clapping. "What a neat little bow. Akishige tells us that the third stanza is the first stanza. Prem Devi, you point out that we will return to the first Yuga of perfection. The Jews say we go back to the Garden of Eden; the Alpha and Omega. The messianic age arrives, through a first Messiah, the return of Jesus, and/or the coming of the Madhi. I'm so happy that everything works out so well for everybody. A lovely story. Such a happy ending."

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Jacques pauses, rubs his chin and goatee, then continues. "Why do you all create such ending stories, I continue to ask myself. Maybe you feel that, because you created a beginning to your story, you must create an ending? You monotheists all have the same basic creation myth: a single all-powerful God creates nature out of nothingness and makes all of nature subservient to humanity. Adam blows it in the garden. He may be forgiven by a merciful God for his lapses, but something is not right in the kingdom."

Jacques looks at us slowly, one by one.

"Isn't it interesting that all of your traditions, have a 'fall'-- a second stanza --, and the good stuff, the end of times perfection, doesn't come until after a really ugly messy middle period. And guess what, all of you acknowledge that right now, we're in that messy period. I wonder why?" He gives a sardonic smile, then says, "That's the only part of your story that is real, because we can experience it. Going from the first to the second stanza is easy. All you need is a little awareness of yourself and the world. Going from the second to the third stanza hardly seems inevitable. If we're honest, the beginning and ending is just a story--and a fanciful one at that. Who makes this stuff up? You've got to give them points for creativity, at

least. Or denial. But, hey, who wants to face reality--especially the reality we live in-- when you can create fiction?"

Jacques once again strokes his go-tee, then says, "Zin Zscho, I noticed you haven't weighed in. Where's Lao-tzu in all this?"

Lin Zscho stands, and does a chi-gung motion with his hands, palms up, beginning at the belly, the tan-tien, then raising his chi toward his heart. There his hands slowly turn, palms toward the ground, and he lowers them as he exhales. Then he sits.

We all begin laughing, including Jacques.

"Well done, maestro, but how about a few words?"

"Aristotle said that the beginning of philosophy was moving from myth (mythos) to logic (logos). Your phenomenologist, existentialist, and I might add in the kindest way possible Eurocentric Husserl said that it was a mistake to even 'speak of Chinese philosophy' because of its anti-rational bias. Therefore, I just allow the Way to speak for me." From his sitting motion, he once again closes his eyes and does the beginning chi gung motion.

However, after he completes the motions, Lin Zscho continues talking., "By the way, I'm certainly no Heidegger scholar--if that's even possible, but I imagine you are all aware of his insight that 'Being and nothingness are not given beside one another. Each uses itself on behalf of the other. Being is none other than nothing; nothing is none other than being.'" He bows toward Akishige with a smile, then says "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Sunyata and tathata." He then turns toward Jacques, "Yin and Yang. Endings, beginnings, middle. It's all part of the way of the Tao."

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Jacques moves his arms slowly in the wave-hands-like-cloud gesture that Lin Zcho taught us at the tai chi session. His movements

are somewhat quick and choppy, but you can see what he's trying to do.

"I love learning tai chi from you. But you're right, this kind of talk does drive me crazy. Your silence is preferable to the explicit God-focused monotheistic pronouncements. At least there is no God for you. Sorry, Reverend Noel, Al Hazrumi. Jacob, I don't fully know where you stand, but I believe your God is Oz, behind a curtain; and, stripping back the curtain, there is no Oz. My atheistic, existential view is not for the faint of heart. But if you look around, it's hard to deny the reality that we live in a cold, barren, indifferent universe. As Sartre said, without a god, we live with incessant anguish and doubt. We have no compass to guide us but the one we make. And of that compass, we have no certainty. As Ivan said in *The Brothers K*, 'If there is no God, all is permitted.'

"But I would argue that this really refers to a lower stage of human development. If no one is looking, if we can do anything, then why not see that as an invitation for hedonistic, blatantly self-interested immorality? Maybe a bit like when students go off to college - they get out from under their parents' surveillance and go wild, literally. But at some point, we humans have to grow up and find our own way. And relying on a punishing and rewarding fantasy God doesn't strike me as the most mature way to do that."

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"Paul Tillich says that faith involves doubt. There is no question that I have had times of doubt in my life," Reverend Noel says with a pained sincerity. "As did Jesus, when He cried out in Gethsemane, 'Why have you forsaken me?' I see what you're saying about the state of the world around us. Clearly we are in the second Stanza. I may find more sparks of God than you in the present. As Dostoevsky said, 'My hosannas have been created in the crucible of doubt.' I also see the horrendous conditions of which you speak: the way we treat other; our daily inhumanity to each other. But tell us, Jacques, without belief and faith, how do you go forward?"

"The images that speak to me might, to others, be grim, but for me they are ennobling and powerful. I am inspired by Camus' Sisyphus pushing the rock up the mountain, knowing it will once again roll down. I cherish Malraux's exhortation to 'Deny our Nothingness'. I have no illusions that we can make things better. But I still feel the need to try. I have no belief in absolutes, but I do the best I can to find the values that I believe are authentic. There is no god telling me to do this. To me, that ennobles humans, not diminishes them. We, for no reason other than an existential choice, proclaim our willingness to

be responsible for what we do to ourselves and one another. Look at Sartre's efforts to be intellectuellement engagé: showing that a writer could engage deeply in political struggle; using essays and journalism as well as plays and novels to try to change the world. Or Camus, writing philosophy and novels to attempt to make sense of the crazy indifferent world we are thrust into. To me, if there is going to be a next step in our human evolution, they will be the leaders. We must learn to face reality, not run into some fanciful world to escape it."

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There is an uncomfortable silence. Jacques breaks it. "I'm sorry. You asked a sincere question, and I gave you a sincere answer, until the end. That wasn't a fair statement, it was my annoyance and anger toward most people with whom I have this type of conversation. Reflex emotions overrode my situational awareness. I wasn't being sensitive to the present company. You are the kind of people that make me believe that there may be some hope for us after all. I know that none of you is here to escape reality." He looks at me. "Except maybe our friend here. He still has to get out into life a bit more, before he's earned his place at this table." He smiles. I'm not quite sure how to react. I look down at my hands. I will myself not to look over at Joie.

"Please accept my apologies," Jacques continues. "I meant everything I said except I didn't mean to imply that any of you, by your beliefs, were trying to escape reality or escape commitment to the world we live in. Sorry."

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I wonder if Jacques is apologizing to me, too. After all, he specifically pointed me out as someone he thought might be trying to



escape life by hiding out in Safed. That doesn't seem fair. Though it's not as though I haven't had the thought myself. And Joie certainly is making noises that at least her time "up in the air"-- of Safed, of uncertainty in our relationship--is coming to an end. It's a good thing there are nightly prayers. I believe I have some forgiving of Jacques to do. And he should ask my forgiveness, too. Even better, it's a good thing we're nearly at Yom Kippur--in almost forty eight hours exactly. I think this might be a good time to talk to Jacques about what he meant. But before I can say anything, I hear a deep chant resonating through our group.

*Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*

Akishige, eyes closed, is enunciating each of the words slowly and clearly. When he finishes the phrase, he goes back to the beginning and repeats it, more slowly.

*Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*

At first I wonder why is he doing this now. But then, as others join in, I do too, pronouncing the strange words with care. I close my eyes and continue repeat the words. I don't know what they mean, but having my mind filled with their sounds blocks out all the chatter and thoughts I was having. I feel myself entering a quiet, peaceful place, and my mind begins to clear. After some period of time, the echoing sounds stop, and I slowly open my eyes.

After what I hope is a suitable pause, I raise my hand. Akishige nods toward me, and I ask, "What does that chant mean?"

"What did you experience?"

I tell him, and he replies, "So, you already know its meaning. You feel it. That is the purpose of the Sutra, to help people experience the validity of the Lotus Sutra for themselves. More words aren't necessary." He smiles at me.

"Of course, for the deeper meaning, I understand how useless words are. But could you indulge my rational side, so I can take a few notes—just for entertainment?" I'm beginning to understand how these Zen guys think.

"It is a chant to overcome problems and achieve indestructible happiness, developed by the Buddhist monk Nichiren in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and derived from the Lotus Sutra of the first century. It is based on the belief that all people have an innate Buddha nature and are therefore inherently capable of attaining enlightenment in their current form and present lifetime. Each word is rich with meaning:

*Nam* is like an exclamation showing reverence and is often placed in front of the name of an object of veneration. It indicates a commitment to devotion. It is used in Buddhism as a prefix expressing the taking of refuge in a Buddha or similar object of veneration. There is the intention to fuse, devote, submit one's life to and with the universal law. In this case drawing from that universal law infinite energy for compassionate action.

"Maybe, Jacob, it is like your Shema, a way to wake up." He turns to Reverend Noel. "It also shows how our self-effort is linked to the universal, as you discussed earlier." He then smiles. "Isn't it interesting how those words that are most difficult to translate take so many words to try to define what can't be defined! *Myoho* is the mystic law of the universe, or life itself, the Dharma underlying all phenomena.

"Is that the same as your Adonai, Jacob? Your universal principle, God?" He then addresses Prem Devi "Might that be like Brahman?"

*Renge* means simultaneity of cause and effect, like the Lotus Flower, which blooms and bears seeds at the same time. It is the "natural" law that governs karma.

"Could that be similar to similar to others 'concepts' we've discussed, like the Oneness of birth and death? Form and formlessness? 'Israel' and 'Echad?'"

Kyo is the sutra teaching of Buddha, and more broadly indicates all phenomena or activities of all living beings. Kyō is a thread passing through a bolt of cloth, as well as 'scripture'.

"We also have our sacred books, just as do each of you in your own honorable traditions."

He pauses and then repeats the words as a chant.

*Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*

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"The historical story of the phrase both shows the possibilities and the complexity of the universal particular discussion we have been having. On the positive side, Nichiren has taken the word Nam from the sanskrit *namas*; whereas *Myōhō Renge Kyō* is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese title of the Lotus Sutra. So, on one level, it seems we have the particulars working together.

"But as we go deeper, we see that something so lovely and simple, like almost everything we talk about, is filled with complexity. To begin with, in the vision of this sutra we find that even though Buddha died five hundred years earlier, Buddhas are ultimately immortal. Reverend Noel, is that your version of Christ resurrected, even though it occurs not three days, but five hundred years later? Another difference may be that, if Buddha is immortal, then it may mean that, unlike Jesus, he never died. Does it also imply he never was born? These questions raise intriguing speculation about the historical Buddha versus an archetypal, metaphorical Buddha. I believe there are similar discussions regarding Jesus.

"Let us look still deeper. As I mentioned, this chant by Nichiren is based on the Lotus Sutra, which is considered to be a discourse delivered by Shakyamuni Buddha himself toward the end of his life. Mahayana Buddhism--the so-called and self-proclaimed 'upper vehicle school' compared to what they call the Hinayana tradition, 'the lower

vehicle school'-- states that this Lotus Sutra was written down at the time of the Buddha, stored for five hundred years, and then reintroduced into the human realm at the time of the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir. Why? Because, they said, humankind was unable to understand the Lotus Sutra at the time of the Buddha, and it needed to be withheld until peoples' wisdom caught up with this sutra. The tradition further claims that the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are higher than the teachings contained in the earlier Sutras of Buddha."

Akishige looks at Al Hazrumi. "Do you see shades of Koran and Hadith, Sunni and Shia?" Turning to Reverend Noel, he asks, "What about divisions of Protestant and Catholic; and different sects of Protestantism? It is amazing how inevitable it is that such beautiful teachings also can become the source of so much dissension.

"In this case, not only are the Lotus Sutra and the Hinayana/Mahayana split creating potential for particularistic discord, but Nichiren, and his subsequent followers, are noted for positioning themselves in opposition to other forms of Japanese Buddhism, such as Zen and Pure Land which Nichiren saw as deviating from the orthodoxy of Mahayana Buddhism. Nichiren felt that the phrase *Myōhō Renge Kyō* is the distillation of the entire Lotus Sutra, and all the sutra's teachings are summarized in this phrase, which reflects the Perfect Truth. By extension, followers of Nichiren Buddhism also consider *Myōhō Renge Kyō* to be the name of the ultimate law permeating the universe.

"Some of Nichiren's followers try to evangelically convert other Buddhists by attacking their current beliefs and convincing them of the validity of Nichiren's teachings. And where have we seen that before? Or maybe the more interesting question is, where do we not see that?

"What is lovely about our group assembled here is that we can all relate to the vision of Nichiren Buddhists--they believe that the spread of Nichiren's teachings and their effect on practitioners' lives will eventually bring about a peaceful, just, and prosperous society. That is really what we all want, isn't it, regardless of our particularistic traditions? But just as Al Hazrumi said that the Madhi will achieve that goal through Islamic law, and Reverend believes it is through the Second Coming that the same vision will be accomplished, we see the universal being clouded by the particularistic needs, desires, wants of each group. Why does this occur? Perhaps we need to talk to a psychologist like Dr. Lisbet. But I do know that the particularistic desire for specialness is... universal.

Nevertheless, despite the history of subsequent divisiveness, I still like Nichiren's phrase, and, so, in the end, in the third stanza, I continue to use it. And, Jacob, I also like your Shema. I may use that, too. Echad. " He smiles, closes his eyes and sits silently, breathing.

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"Would you like to take a walk?"

I can see that she's still trying to comfort me. But is that what I want? I've just told her that my raft is empty, and I'm not sure I see a reason to refill it, only to once again have to face the suffering and pain of re-emptying it. Her telling me what a tender soul I am feels kind and heartfelt, her 'sorry' genuine. But her efforts to console me also cause me to feel even more vulnerable. There is no ultimate solace for this pain. It seems she's trying to crawl onto my empty raft. Why should I let her? Why not just sail on? I'm totally free now. I have released the burdens of my past, have forgiven and

healed with the world.. Why sully the present and the future by taking on new burden?

"Sure, why not," I say and stand, offering my hand to help her up.

She takes it, but once we are standing, I let her hand go.

We begin walking, our hands by our sides. I feel stiff, like the Tin Man in Oz, my arms swinging mechanically. Should I put my arm around her? Retake her hand as a sign of affection? I do nothing. We say nothing.

I notice that she walks at a faster pace than I'm comfortable with. I have to make an extra effort to keep up with her. Why should I be the one who has to adjust to the pace she's setting? Should I tell her to slow down? Or at least ask her? Should I just fall behind and let her see that she's not being sensitive to me?

"Do you know it was Eve's fault that there is death, because she wasn't strong enough to resist the snake, and she gave the forbidden fruit to Adam to eat?"

She slows down and looks at me, startled. Then she bursts into laughter. "You have a great sense of humor." She takes my hand.

I actually start laughing, too. I have no idea why I said what I did. I don't really believe it. Maybe I'm trying to find a way to push her away? But why say that? Because I'm afraid to just say, leave? Because underneath my fear, I I cherish the companionship more than I want to admit? Because I don't know what is true anymore, and she appears on this day and maybe she's sent for a reason?

"Oh my, yes. What a wicked woman Eve was. The cause of all our pain and suffering.. But do you ever wonder why God told them not to eat of the forbidden fruit in the first place?" Joie asks as we continue walking.

"I actually have wondered that. I remember the Rebbe saying that when God asked Moses to lead the Hebrews forth from Israel during this time of Passover, Moses said that he wasn't the right person, that he was slow of speech. God said in effect, Moses, I made you. I know that. Well, wouldn't God, who made Adam and Eve, know how they were going to react to being told not to eat the forbidden fruit? Supposedly this is to show that God gave us free will, but what good is free will if you're given no skills of decision making, no understanding of how to make choices, or how to anticipate the consequences for actions. They were just told 'no.' Was that fair of God? Isn't that just a way to blame the victim?"

"Ah, do I detect a liberal bias? Intriguing. But maybe it was part of God's plan. After all, without Eve, there would be no knowledge. Only blissful ignorance. I think we owe her a debt of gratitude. Remember John Stewart Mill's belief--drilled into me by my grandma I might add--'It's far better to be an unhappy Socrates than a contented pig.' How do we learn except by thrusting ourselves into life, and seeing what happens?"

"Do you think unhappiness is the price we have to pay for knowledge?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. I don't think so. I think if knowledge can lead to wisdom, understanding, and tolerance, then it can help alleviate suffering. But maybe there is a period when our old beliefs are disconfirmed, or we learn uncomfortable things about ourselves of which we weren't aware--that things get worse for a period." \*

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We walk for a few minutes in silence. I'm thinking to myself "What a wise woman." But I don't have the courage to share that with her.

We stop by the Church of All Nations to look at the ancient olive garden. The knotted gnarled shapes of the trunks give way to translucent soft green leaves. "Did you know that olive trees do not have rings and so their age can not be ascertained? My grandma told me that. That's what she tells anyone who asks her age. It cannot be told. She's an ageless olive tree."

We continue walking until we get to the top. I look out at the thousands of graves. Death everywhere. ""According to Jewish tradition, the Messiah will appear here and bring the dead back to life." I think to myself that somewhere down there is the Tomb of Mary. Could Mery actually imagine a year ago, when we celebrated Passover together, that the next year I'd be in Jerusalem looking at the grave of her namesake? At the spot where, according to tradition, Mary ascended into heaven? Mary, Mery still lives in spirit.

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"One day I want to read you my favorite fairy tales about death and life. It's what I want to believe." She turns her head abruptly away. I think I can see that there are tears in her eyes. It's hard for me to imagine her crying. She seems so strong. In my mind, she is the rock and I'm the one who needs comfort.

I'm not sure what to say. I don't want to embarrass her if she's trying to hide her feelings. But I don't want to be insensitive. And maybe it's not tears, just something in her eye.

Cautiously, I say, hoping it will help, "In Second Samuel 15:30, it is written, 'And David went up by the ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up...' I put my hand on her shoulder. For a brief moment, she rests her head on my shoulder. Then she points to the city, and speaks with a clear, strong voice.



"Isn't it beautiful: the Church of the Orthodox Convent of the Ascension, the Al-Aksa mosque, the Old City wall, all stretched before us. This is such a sacred place. You'd think if miracles could happen, this would be where they would occur." She places her head once more on my shoulder.

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I dig my fingers into the soft, brown earth next to Reb Luria's grave. Scooping up a handful of dirt, I look out over the hills of Safed surrounding the graveyard.

I'm reminded of what I said to Joie on Easter Sunday, every physical life ends in death.

In another hour it will be erev Yom Kippur, the day on which our fate is sealed in the Book of Life and Death.

I received a letter from the Rebbe yesterday. He reminded me that

Part of our Jewish tradition, and something I follow, is each year during the Days of Awe, to prepare for my death on Yom Kippur. Some may think that macabre, but I feel just the opposite. Death focuses the mind brilliantly, as Samuel Johnson said. Seeing my upcoming death helps me ensure that my life has the proper priorities.

I again pick up a handful of the dirt covering Reb Luria's grave and crumple and play with the dark, gritty, dusty soil.

I sit here in the graveyard facing as fact the inevitability of the death of our physical body--Reb Luria, my grandmother, Lieutenant Judke, my older brother, my grandmother are dead-- and so too will I be one day. That is a central fact of each story. That is how my journal will end. I will stop writing because there will be no more me.

That's how every human's life story ends.

All the rest is interpretation and editing.

Maybe that's why we create fiction.

We can leave death off-stage, and pretend it's not part of the story we're telling. We can create a story which says that a person's death has meaning, giving one's life for a cause larger than oneself. We can say a person had a full rich life. We can elaborate on the details of the "how" of death; some ways of dying seem more tragic, others more normal. We can tell stories of how death doesn't really exist, and there is more to come.

But what human can really say, at the deepest level of their heart, that any of these stories can fully and completely take away the sting of a loved one's death; or the fear of their own?

And yet how we try. The Holocaust was a monstrous, horrific event. Yet some people try to create meaning even from that. What a distorted version of logic and emotion it requires to say with no compunction that a happy ending - the creation of the state of Israel-- makes up for all the torturous suffering that occurred.

It makes no sense that a final Revelation, a final kingdom of heaven on earth, either from a first Messiah coming, or a Second One returning; or some fanciful heaven in the sky, can in any way explain away all the misery and anguish that has been and is still part of life on earth.

How can anyone in good conscience and without the slightest bit of doubt, honestly see such pain and suffering, and then say it's all Echad, One without a Second, it's all God; I and the Father/Mother are One; there is no God but God; Atman and Brahman are One.

That's an awfully large leap over an awful lot of dust--both on our part, and in our view of the unknowable but all-loving, all-compassionate, all-powerful God.

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I put my arm around Joie's shoulder, feeling the warmth and pressure of her head resting on my shoulder. I welcome the sensation, even as I fear it. "Yes, I agree. This is where miracles could occur."

We take one final look from the top of the Mount of Olives, then turn and begin walking back.

I have a feeling of panic, and begin walking faster. I realize that I've left my journals where we were seated under our "special tree." I know they have no value to anyone else, but to me they are my life. I take my arm off her shoulder, and begin running, shouting "I'll meet you back at the tree."

What an idiot I am.

As I run, I think maybe I was supposed to leave them, and even lose them. Maybe it's time to leave all of the past behind, even my writing about my past and, as Kierkegaard said, burn all the manuscripts. I feel a sickly emptiness at that thought. No, not now. I'm not ready for that.

When I arrive at the tree, I see that a few pages have been scattered by a gentle breeze, but that they are all there. I feel relieved.

And perhaps just slightly disappointed. Maybe there would have been something freeing in not having to carry so many ideas and thoughts around all the time.

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes, I was just worried that I'd forgotten my journals. Maybe someone might have taken them, though I don't know who would want them. But they're important to me. They're still here."

"I bet the loss of your journals would have made an interesting story. My novelist parents would love that device. 'An Arab Bedouin discovers a manuscript on the Mount of Olives. He turns them over to

the Hebrew University. Who was the source of these writings? Philosophers, archaeologists, historians, literary professors all pore over them to decipher their meaning. What profound statements, what nuggets of great wisdom are buried within them? Scholars from around the world flock to Jerusalem to study them. Conferences are held to decipher their depths."

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We're both laughing and giggling as she speaks. "All right, all right. Enough." I say. "As I shared, they're important to me."

"You've got so many." She points to my array of manila folders. "Which is the most important to you, now?"

As I thumb through the folders, I see ants crawling around them.

I think back to the time in Golden Gate park, when I crushed those other ants, half a world away. I'm ashamed of myself. I was like some mean tyrannical God, killing for no reason.

I gently brush them aside.

Then I become angry. Why couldn't God act as gently with us, His/Her little ants?

"I want to believe in miracles. Today of all days. It's Easter Sunday. For Christians, the Resurrection. For Jews, the first day of the Omer, the week of Chesed, Love, and the day of chesed. Love in the context of love."

"That's beautiful. And here we are, talking about miracles in Jerusalem."

I feel my anger fighting with tears. "I want so desperately to believe in a loving God who performs miracles. And there are some." I tell her of my experience this morning in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

"That really is a miracle. And so poignant and, yes, beautiful.

"If this were a story, that would be where I would like it to end, too." I take her hand. "And maybe the boy then walks out of the church and meets a lovely, wise, beautiful compassionate girl at the Mount of Olives. How about that?"

"Sounds good." She squeezes my hand. "What a perfect ending. When the Bedouin finds your story, it will be read as a personal and spiritual journey with a beautiful, happy ending. You take a walk after your experience in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and find yourself seated beneath your favorite tree in the Mount of Olives. You are day-dreaming about what might happen next in your life, how to keep the feelings of the Sunday service alive; and, ironically and even incongruently, of all things, working on a crossword puzzle. You had no idea that your soul mate would appear and say to you, 'Hey, you're sitting under my tree.' That's great. I love it."

"I see I've found an editor, too."

"That would be fun. Whenever you want, I'm ready. We could even have the story end while we're reading the Fairytale of the Golden Tree to each other."

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I sense a joy in her as she relates this ending. More joy than I feel at that ending. But I'm not sure what is bothering me. Instead of sharing my confused feelings, I respond

Isn't it amazing how the ending of the story, just by a slight variation, can create different feelings? I remember my creative writing professor discussing story endings during a lecture. He gave us a one sentence set up about a vicious, controlling mother and her daughter, now an adult, struggling with the after-effects of her painful upbringing. He asked us, How do we want to end the story?"

Joie looks at me with a bit of confusion on her face, then seems

to regain her composure and says neutrally:

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

I'm not sure of her tone. Is there a bite? An attempt at humor? Mocking me for my ability to shift words, tone, ending, suggesting I'm going through the looking glass? I choose to ignore her statement and just continue making my point about endings.

"Does it end with the mother alone in a dark room? Though there may be some sadness at this ending, a touch of poignancy, the reader may simultaneously feel it is 'just deserts'. Perhaps the daughter has just visited, or thought of visiting, but instead drives away, free, hopeful, with new possibilities before her. Perhaps there is a forgiveness scene, when the mom apologizes, shares as explanation, but not as excuse, how her life, her suffering, her own upbringing made her the unhappy person she was. The daughter hears this, hugs her mom. Does the daughter then then leave with a hug, a healing, a places in the heart ending

Or "will the daughter stay to care for the mother? If she does, will this usher in a new, happier chapter for both of them? Or will the daughter feel trapped and her anger resurface?

"Which ending would the reader want? Why? How does the ending reflect the reader's heart? The characters' hearts? The writer's heart?"

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I continue brushing away the ants, and then look up. Joie is still quiet. Is she thinking about what I just said? Is she even interested? Then I realize that my little monologue really shifted the feeling tone of our conversation. She had offered to be my editor, and

she had created a happy ending. Why did I respond with what my professor said? I think if I'm honest, her ending started to make me feel uncomfortable. Why? Was I feeling trapped by the commitment implied by her story? Was I unwilling to accept a fairytale ending? But I shared none of that with her, just a story of how different endings create different feelings. No wonder she looked confused. At least be honest with her.

"There's only one problem with your ending."

"Only one? That doesn't sound so bad."

"Are you always this sunny? What an optimist."

She says nothing, just runs her hand through her hair, placing it behind her ear, and looks coyly and demurely downward toward the folders, and ants.

"My Grandpa once told me there is always at least one fly at the picnic. But for me, this is a big one. If the story were to end on Easter Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, that would indeed provide the perfect Hollywood ending, one of emotional uplift and hope. Perhaps it would offer a world view which says that injustice and hate will not forever afflict the human race; that righteousness and mercy will triumph in the end. Lord knows, we all need that, something that leaves us feeling happy and with renewed energy to carry on.

"Again, there's just one problem with not ending the story on Easter Sunday under an olive tree reading a fairytale."

"And would that be?" Joie asks.

"Monday."

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"What happens on Monday that is a problem?" She smiles

"The same thing that happens after you cross the Reed Sea. You're in the wilderness." I respond, only partially smiling back at her.

"Once you leave the church, and that altered-state, unitive experience, you realize that the Arab girl is still begging, that an Orthodox rabbi would never take a candle from a female, much less an Arab. Homeless people still live on the street. Refugee camps, good people like Karim, are still filled with hopelessness and helplessness.

"And all those who are suffering during their life, as well as those who have relatively good lives, like my grandparents, all of them will still die. That is how the story ends for everyone on this physical plane of life. That's the way the fairytale end."

I feel myself becoming angry and tearful again. This is hardly the conversation I would want to have with someone whom I'm trying to impress. But it is the only conversation that makes sense to me. I continue.

"I find myself ricocheting back and forth. I see the miracles. And I see the suffering. I wish I could just be a blind believer with complete, unwavering faith. But I see too much suffering and pain.

"Or I wish I could be an atheist. Yes, I'd lose God as someone to be angry at. But I don't want to let God off the hook by saying he doesn't exist. I believe in, and see the miracles of life. I've felt God on Sinai. I felt God this morning. But I also have felt Jesus' cry to God, why, if I believe in You, 'Why have You forsaken me?'

"Why does it so often seem that God has forsaken us? Why does God allow horrors to happen? Why are there random events that crush people like little ants? The tornadoes in Kansas, earthquakes in California. I know it sounds abstract, but to me it isn't. And I know



the questions aren't new, but to me they are. It's Leibniz and Voltaire and the Lisbon earthquake, all within my own mind."

She looks at me quizzically.

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"In response to the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, people wondered how God could have allowed so much suffering. The mathematician-philosopher Leibnitz defended God, describing the earthquake as nature following its own laws; and arguing that those laws and nature itself and 'the universe in its immense diversity was necessarily created by supreme wisdom.' Everything would eventually work out for the best, and the seeming chaos, even evil would all lead to a larger good."

"Ok, now I know what you're talking about. High school English. Voltaire responded to Leibnitz with the histrionic book, *Candide*, with Leibnitz represented by the character of Dr. Pangloss who, despite witnessing one catastrophe after another, insisted that 'everything is for the best in this best of all possible worlds.'"

Pretty and smart. "Exactly. *Candide* is often cited as the best argument there is for the atheist's position. There is no God; the Lisbon earthquake was a cruel piece of natural philosophy. . . we shall find it difficult to discover how the laws of movement operate in such fearful disasters in the best of all possible world--where a hundred thousand ants, our neighbors, are crushed in a second on our ants heaps....dying undoubtedly in inexpressive agonies, beneath debris from which it was impossible to extricate them...What a game of chance human life is.

"It seems there is something in most humans--certainly a part of me--that is afraid to face this indifferent universe directly and unflinchingly. Rather, I, we, make excuses for God. We say the flood of Noah's time was punishment for a sinful world; the Methodist John

Wesley attributed the Lisbon earthquake to 'sin....that curse that was brought upon the Earth by the original transgression of Adam and Eve.'

"It's hard for me to imagine that our all-loving, merciful God is still punishing us for original sin. It would make more sense that God would want to punish us for current wrongdoing. But if you are all-powerful, is that the best, wisest means to chastise sinners that God can come up with? Earthquakes which also kill innocent children. It's hard not to believe that natural disasters have no moral significance-- that they're not acts of God-- other than to show us our common vulnerability in the face of a random, indifferent, and to us harsh and pitiless nature. The rest is just our minds trying to interpret these events in a way that makes what is not understandable, seem to be so."

"You said there was a debate in your own mind, but what you've just said doesn't sound as though you have much doubt. If you were to end the story, would you want to end it with that belief in an indifferent universe? A final random earthquake meaningful only in its reminder of meaninglessness?"

"Well, part of me does. Unless it's a conscious act of death, we have no control over our life's ending, do we? Is there a good death? The cause of our actual death seems to me irrelevant, one as cruel a hoax as the other, all part of the indifferent universe.

"I once thought I wanted to be a lawyer. My law professor said I would be good, because I could take either side of a position, and argue it. The problem was, or is, I can do that. So that often I don't even know what I believe. Or I believe both, which makes no sense--an atheist and a believer

"What I'm sharing with you, that I've shared with no one else but the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, is that I did in fact think of ending the story on Good Friday. Life, unless you live in a bubble--and Lord knows, I've tried--, is not the best of settings and circumstances. The young man I once was, as Dr. Lisbet observed, was hiding, like a poor imitation of Buddha, and had to come out of hiding from behind the castle walls. We live in a world where the Titanic really does sink, where illness, aging and death are our reality, where suffering surrounds us. To be truthful, I'm even a little surprised myself that I'm still here. Life could have ended this story--or I could have ended my life--before reaching this point."

I look at her carefully. She doesn't flinch or pull back. Instead she looks directly back at me and says, "I'm glad you're still here. It sounds like you were in a lot of pain."

"Thank you. I'm glad I'm here, too. Yes, I was in a lot of pain. And yet now, today, I feel joyful. Like somehow a resurrection occurred. This morning, the pain was, I don't know how to say it, transcended, forgotten, banished. Now, with you, sitting here, I sense that it's still there somewhere, but mitigated, and I realize it wouldn't be fair or honest--to myself, to life's story--to end with a death--a self-crucifixion."

I look down at my journals, searching for the play. I want to read her a passage from it. I have trouble readily accessing it amidst all the folders, and instead just say, "Such an ending is too bleak. It acknowledges only the unrelieved suffering, the dark night of the soul, the doubt, the pain, and death itself. Although there is a truth in a viewpoint that recognizes the pain of life, it is not the whole truth. It paints too nihilistic a picture, ignoring the light and beauty that also exist, if not as redemption, at least as counterpoint."

"Look." I point to the olive trees and the hills beyond. "There is so much beauty in nature, too. Even in the little ants crawling about. Life itself. That can't be discounted. It's amazing, miraculous."

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We watch the ants moving about my journals, neither of us saying anything. The sun is coming near the horizon, casting longer shadows with its filtered light. After a few moments, Joie says,

"It sounds like you're still looking for a belief, a fulcrum to stand on, some story that you can believe."

"You're right. Maybe the problem is that I'm still too young, and not yet ready to die. I know when I do die, the ending I would want is not one of crucifixion. I'd want to die during the Days of Awe, maybe on Shabbat Teshuvah. In peace, as it will be written in the Book of Life and Death. But right now does not seem my time. And I am thankful for the resurrection within life that I've been given."

"That's a beautiful image. I really do think you'd like the Greek fairy tale about the prince and princess. I like to believe that there is always hope. That when there are difficulties, we can meet them, learn from them, and overcome them."

"Ah, you are indeed a wise angel I should always keep over my left shoulder. Do you ever use the 'black box' the Rebbe talked about?"

"What is that?"

"Reb Jonathan suggested that each week, before Shabbat, we look back over the past week, take any cares or troubles and place them in a symbolic black box as part of a cleansing ritual, laying aside the week's cares in preparation to greet the Shabbat bride anew. It's also a way of saying, I've done my work for the week. I've tried hard. God,

I give my problems to you for twenty-four hours. See what You can do with them."

"I like that. It's a lovely way to give yourself a rest from always doing. That's something that would be good for me."

"I agree. And I need to do it more faithfully. The problem is, I experienced enough now to know that even the best, most peaceful, and happy of Shabbats come to an end. Every week, no matter what, it ends. The lovely braided havdallah candle is dipped in the wine glass, with its sighing ahhh of sadness, signaling the end of Shabbat's monastery in time. Once more, the reality of life impinges, and the struggle recommences to bring the kingdom of heaven onto earth on a daily basis.

"I am also experienced enough to know that it is impossible to sustain this morning's feeling of bliss day to day. Just like the glorious glow from my vision of the Sinai experience, became a distant memory after I left the mountain amidst the day to day realities. I know the task now becomes how to live and integrate the vision of the mountain into the reality of daily life.

"After the resurrection, there is Monday."

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very life on earth ends in death.

Is it macabre that I'm sitting in this graveyard, running my hands through the dirt of Reb Luria's grave?

For me, for some reason, this seems the best way, this Tuesday afternoon, to prepare for erev Yom Kippur, the final day of the Days of Awe. According to tradition, the Book of Life and Death is open during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and questions of who shall live and who shall die are addressed by God. On Yom Kippur God writes and seals our fate and the Book closes.

Where and how to begin a meditation on death?

Death is a fact. Only the content of the ending changes. The time. The place. The cause of death. Different stories, but same root issue. Same ending. No one escapes the earthly plane alive. We all know how our story ultimately ends here on earth. It ends like Reb Luria, buried in the soil beneath me. From dust we come, to dust we go. All that's left is for us to try to figure out what story or reaction we are going to have to the reality of physical death.

How do I begin to come to terms with death. My death.

Part of me wonders if it wouldn't be better if we could escape thinking about death, or at least postpone those musings as long as we can...until much later in life. Then, oops, huh, bye.

When Grandpa Julius was falling in love with Grandma, did he once think, as he was preparing to elope and start a fifty year life with her, about how the story would end? That he would sit weeping beside her bed as she was dying, riddled with cancer?

Alas, poor Yorick... Here hung those lips that I have  
kissed I know not how oft. Where be now... your songs? your  
flashes of merriment

Because every life ends in death, it is inevitable that every  
relationship, no matter what its narrative arc in the middle, also ends  
in loss. This should not be a surprise, yet its commonplaceness and  
inevitability seldom mitigate the shock. We always seem surprised.  
Why, God? Why now? Why this way? Even Grandma seemed shocked, as if  
for the first time she was going to have to face the reality of not  
being here. That this was something that Grandpa, or the best doctors,  
of the most money couldn't save her from.

Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let  
her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come;  
make her laugh at that.

Given this reality, what is wisdom? Anger? Sarcasm? Sadness?  
Terror?

I look at Reb Luria's grave. It's almost as if I'm addressing  
these questions to him. Or feel he's asking these questions of me.

I feel thankful that I not alone in facing these questions. I  
have a sangha of older, wiser brothers and sisters, to turn to for  
guidance. In the face of death, what is the best wisdom of which we are  
capable?

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Last night I had two amazing dreams, and one pretty obvious and  
prosaic one. The first was a movie in scenes that I am watching. Two  
young boys, about six years old, say to each other "You're my best  
friend ever and I will always be there for you." The movie narrates  
the story of their lives together-- high school activities, family get-  
togethers, mutual friends, football teammates--in great detail. Then  
one dies. It's not clear now--disease? Car accident? Was the other  
friend in any way responsible, even if unintentionally? Were there

problems between them? The friend who is left behind is sad, nearly inconsolable. The movie ends with the scene of the two at six years old, saying "We'll always be friends. Always be there for each other."

In the dream I'm weeping. And at the same time I'm standing back above and outside the movie, admiring the craft of the movie as brilliant, so well-conceived, so touching the way it ends. And even as I'm crying, I'm asking what is its meaning? Is it about inevitable loss? The poignancy of trying to touch and reach out? Actual life dreams inevitably fading? The dream as positive because for a stretch of the journey they did have that closeness?

As I'm just starting to wake up, I hear myself say in the dream, I wish I could create something that touching and poignant. Still in a hypnagogic state, I realize "I" created this story, and it's a dream where I made a movie. And I can take this dream and maybe one day put it in a book, in my writing. And this is ALL in the dream.

I awaken, and write it in my dream journal.

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In the second dream, I'm on a journey, along a winding road. Hot lava is flowing on the dirty steep descent. I feel safe, like I'm at Disneyland, on a ride. But I'm trying to be careful. It's not clear where the ride is heading. In addition to the molten lava, I also need to be careful of glass on the path, and even need to break some glass to get where I think I'm heading. I'm careful not to cut myself. As I look around there are lovely, swirling currents, dark muddy tans, browns, oranges. I end up at a beach oasis and plush, grassed hotel grounds with piped music. I look around and don't feel that enthused. It's not really that nice. There are cars honking, and backed up trying to find parking. I wonder, is this what all that arduous journey was for? Then an ocean wave appears that looks like it is going to overwhelm the hotel grounds. I try to find a tunnel to hide in and escape. As I enter the tunnel, I wonder why I'm running. The tunnel won't be able to shelter me, and I think of Prem Devi telling me about Ramakrishna's belief that all is one, and we eventually return to the ocean of which we were always a part.

INTERPRETATION. The journey has danger, but also beauty. The destination has beauty, but also parking problems. There is no perfect journey or perfect ending. There are problems and joys in both. At the end (death?) an



ocean wave looms. Is the tunnel where I go to die...a coffin? The ocean wave represents fear of loss of control; it is also that which chases me--both outside of me, but that part within myself that I run from and fear, trying to escape. Maybe from Ramakrishna's all is one perspective, life is "maya," a game, the ocean is the 'one' to which we return and of which we are a part, and all is bliss, at each phase, even though I'm not aware of it. There is beauty (and challenge) in each phase throughout life's journey).

The prosaic dream.

I'm driving down a road to a cemetery and hit a dead end. I realize as I turn around even though my car is modest, the people at end are really poor and will steal whatever they can of what I have. I feel tightness, fear.

INTERPRETATION. The timing and interpretation of this dream seem so obvious. In waking life we're talking about death and mortality, and I dream of driving to a cemetery. Not that interesting. And, of course, my car arrives at a dead end. Again, pretty literal...dead end, death. End of the road; end of life. What about the poor people. I think they may symbolize in real life, my fear of having what I have being taken away/stolen from me (including my life). Perhaps some guilt at my life of privilege, even in my current circumstances. But why if I'm at the end of my road, and don't need anything once I'm gone, do I fear losing it? Perhaps it's really just the fear of letting go, and loss, and fear of death. Maybe with such a challenging issue, my unconscious didn't think it needed to be very creative.

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"There is an ancient Chinese novel about a dissolute nobleman," Lin Zscho begins. "The author of the novel, according to legend, wrote the book in biographical form about this personal acquaintance whom he intensely disliked. After writing the book, he put poison on the corner of each page and gave a copy to the nobleman. The nobleman, enthralled by and engrossed in the story about his own life, lustfully licked his fingers to turn the pages. In so doing, he poisoned himself before he could finish the last chapter, which told of the author's plot and the nobleman's subsequent death.

"We are all that nobleman--conscious of the last chapter's inevitability, yet never allowed to read it."

"A great story," Jacques exclaims. "Spoken like a true existentialist."

"Doesn't it seem a lot better if we could stay in the first stanza?" I ask Lin Zscho, then look toward Akishige. "When Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they gain awareness, and realize for the first time that they are naked. Adam hides and says 'I was afraid because I was naked.' Before awareness, they lived non consciously and blissfully in the Garden of Eden. After awareness, they saw their nakedness, felt awkward, and became afraid. Why know of death? How does it help to see how frail, helpless, and vulnerable we are? No matter how aware we are of our finiteness, that does not change either our frailty or the inevitability of our death."

"Ah, now you're speaking my language, son," Jacques interjects. "'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, all is vanity.' The best book in the Bible is the wisdom of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. The horror of death, and the futility of life. SPLAT! Welcome to my world."

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Prem Devi picks up the talking stick, with a smile on her face. "Jacques, I must say I'm impressed. In addition to your existential focus on loneliness, isolation, meaninglessness, you also have the horror of death right at the top of your list. Confirms yours world view, right? I imagine you have never met an abyss of emptiness or nothingness that you didn't rejoice in."

"Easy for you to mock, with your reincarnations and seeing everything as a play of the gods." He smiles back at her.

"Even easier. She retorts. "Your SPLAT! is my SPLASH! Everything's God. Atman, your personal self, is Brahman, the universal Self. Death is nothing more than a wave, which, when unenlightened, thinks it has an independent existence, splashing back into the ocean

of water, from which it emerged, to which it returns, and from which it was never separate." She holds up her water glass, again, smiling. "Splash!"

It's easy to see the good natured teasing going on between them, even when talking about such a difficult subject. I think of Grandpa Dave's cracking jokes at what seemed like the most inopportune times. "You always have to be able to laugh, no matter what." And that of course was the main point of his always-being-written book, "You Don't Have to be Meshuginah, But It Helps."

Prem Devi looks around at our group. Akishige and Wang Lin Zscho are smiling at her, and nodding. Akishige starts chanting, "Ma ka han ya hara shin gyo. Form is the emptiness. Emptiness is the form." Wang adds, "Xu-jing, the cosmic void, the emptiness from which yin and yang spring, to which all returns."

Jacques turns to Lin Zscho. "Help me out here. At least you don't believe in reincarnation or rebirth, do you? How do you deal with the last chapter of the book?"

"Our wise sage and poet, Chuang-Tzu, like you, my good friend, did not believe in life after death. He, like Lao-Tzu, did not believe in God as you monotheists understand the concept." Lin Zscho looks at David Noel and Said Al Hazrumi, then glances questioningly at me and Shakti Prem Devi before continuing. "But he did feel that there is a path underlying all, the Tao, involving a unity, a void from which we all come, and to which we all return."

"Get to the punch line, man. How does that affect how you accept death?" Jacques counters, with a touch of annoyance, as well as interest.

"There are many possible dongjing responses to your question, as long as they emerge from a place of xujing centeredness. Chuang-tzu,

at his wife's death, banged on a drum and sang. His colleagues questioned the propriety of this. 'If I were to fall sobbing and wailing for her,' he replied, 'I should think that I did not understand what was appointed for all.' He saw death as part of the harmony of the Tao.

"Even at his own death, when his disciples said they wanted to give him a majestic burial, he said, 'I shall have heaven and earth for my coffin and its shell; the sun and moon for my two round symbols of jade, the stars and constellations for my pearls and jewels. . . What could you add to them?'"

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Lin Zscho seeks to place the stick in the center of our group, but before he can do so, Jacques grabs it. "Are you kidding me? It's one thing to be like Epicurus in facing death: "Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist." Jacques is on a roll. "But it's another to accept death so peacefully--and I might say simplistically-- with poetic flourishes of heaven and earth for a coffin. Give me a break. That is not me. If it's going to be poetry, I prefer Dylan Thomas."

"Dylan Thomas?" Akishige inquires.

"A Welsh poet. In one of his poems he beseeches his father on his death bed, 'Do not go gently into the good night.'" Jacques turns to Lin Zscho. "That is a dongjing strategy I can support. I want my dongjing strategy to be maximum yang. I like Dylan Thomas' vive la résistance, to the bitter end. Jacques' eyes are narrowed, his shoulders hunched like a panther stalking.

"If we look at nature, we see that every living thing strains, fights, regroupes, attacks, always maintaining a fighting spirit to surround, reclaim, and protect itself. The bark of a tree

grows thick at the site of a scar. After a prairie fire, new shoots of grass thrive on the nutrient rich ashes of previous growth. Our body is designed to expel that which is not helpful to it, and to fight foreign bodies which seek to injure it. There is nothing wrong with resisting our physical extinction with every fiber of our being." As he speaks he seems to gain energy and strength from his words, his relatively frail body looking stronger and more powerful.

"That is certainly one dongjing strategy, a possible maximum yang, Jacques, although," and Lin Zscho looks down at the earth before raising his head with a sly wink, "I don't know how good the xujing of this Dylan Thomas was, or yours either."

"Point well taken. But I'd say this xujing you keep insisting on is vastly overrated. Especially when facing our demise. Why should we be what you call calm and accepting, and what I see as passive, helpless, resignation. It's our strength, our struggle, our resistance, that gives us life."

"Perhaps, at times. But you are confusing xujing with a maximum yin dongjing strategy. We believe our dongjing strategy--however much yin or yang it contains-- is only as effective as the centered xujing place from which it evolves." He takes a deep breath, then adds, "Also, didn't you say the poem was about telling his father how to die? Maybe when we ourselves are in that place, we might choose a more centered, more accepting attitude."

"I couldn't disagree more." Jacques protests. "Why should we be centered and peaceful facing our extinction? For that matter, why should we be centered at all?" Turning to me, he adds. "Yom Kippur has not started, right? I can still say these things and not violate any holy laws?" Did he just give a wink? I nod, and he continues.

"It must be torture to try to get through a whole day, like your Shabbat, suppressing the truth in favor of pious platitudes. Look at this world. We should shout at death's injustice. And we should rage at life's injustice. You can keep your centeredness. It is not for me."

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Jacques hurls the stick to the ground with a flourish. Akishige picks it up, closes his eyes, and recites

"Once blossoming buds,  
now flowering, soon will fall  
slowly, one by one."

Partially opening his eyes, but looking toward the ground in the center of circle, he says, "In Japan, we write haiku poems about facing death. There are, as Lin Zscho says, many different wise ways. I feel in my poem, what we in Japan call wabi sabi, the spirit of eternal loneliness-- a bitter sweet feeling at the core of life. In Buddhism, we know that blossoms, no matter how beautiful, wither and decay. That is sad." Then he smiles. "But in the face of the natural cycles of life and death, blooming and fading, we don't want to be 'stone Buddhas'--a Buddha without feeling. Part of living is feeling the pain of yearning, parting, loss.

Hardly a hint  
Of their early death  
Cicadas singing in the trees

"Singing their joyous song. Presumably aren't aware of their brief life span and looming death, but the poet knows both of the end of their singing, and the end of his ability to hear it---his death. He is still is able to enjoy being in the present moment---almost---but yes, there is a hint of mortality even in the moment of listening."

Akishige then looks up, his gaze steady. "As Buddha said with his last words 'All conditioned things are of a nature to pass away. Practice with diligence.'"

He starts to put the stick down, then keeps it in his grasp. "Let me tell you a story which my father told me when I was quite young. There once was a fierce samurai warrior who burst into a priest's meditation hall. The Zen priest continued meditating, not looking up. Finally, annoyed, the warrior said, 'Perhaps you do not know who I am. I am someone who can run you through with a sword without blinking.'

"The monk looked up peaceably, and replied, 'Perhaps you do not know who I am. I am someone who can be run through by your sword without blinking.'

"The warrior at once realized the monks greater power and wisdom and became his student."

As Akishige moves his arm to place the stick in the center of our group, he concludes, "We need to learn to train our minds to understand and accept this lesson of impermanence. And we can learn to keep a strong unwavering and peaceful attitude even in the face of death, which is really only the impermanence of life."

He gently places the stick down, bows, and once again closes his eyes.

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We are all quiet, following Akishige's lead, and I close my eyes. After a few minutes, I hear a guitar playing, and Joie begins singing.

All the world is just a narrow bridge,  
just a narrow bridge, just a narrow bridge.  
And above all is not to fear at all.

My mind tries to cope with this talk of death by going very abstract, as if I can tame the fear through thinking, perhaps even integrating different views. Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism all believe in reincarnation. Judaism, Christianity and Sufism believe in a resurrection. How can they both be right? As Jacques once said, death is a matter of high interest, and low information. I wonder about the psycho-spiritual wisdom that might underlie different views of death? At the root, aren't these merely ways to relieve the suffering that results from knowledge of the demise of our physical being?

The abstract then shifts to the personal. I start thinking of my first experiences of my frail health. I have vague memories of my terrible cough at four or five and my blue eyed Grandma and Grandpa Julius taking me to Arizona to live with them over the Kansas City winter to heal me.

My first memory of almost dying by my own stupidity occurred when I was about eight, biking to school. There was a shortcut--my secret path-- I would take each day down a long, relatively steep gravel path which led to a narrow bridge. The bridge of Joie's song?

My parents said I could take the shortcut as long as I walked my bike down the hill.

One day, after months of walking, I decided to bike, keeping my feet on the ground as brakes.

But my feet slipped on the gravel and they weren't long enough to dig into the ground to provide sufficient traction. I felt myself losing control, as the bike started going faster and faster down the path. I was not able to slow down. I could feel the trees whirring past me, but was able to focus clearly on the bridge below, which was about three feet wide. I tried to aim my bike toward it. On either



side of the bridge was a steep ravine, maybe 100 feet down,  
filled with sharp, rocky boulders.

I missed the bridge.

I closed my eyes and screamed, waiting for the inevitable.

When I opened my eyes, I was still at the top of the ravine. Some  
fallen branches and a thick bush had cushioned my fall, like an  
airbrake, holding me back from the edge. I was barely scratched.

My magical thinking about my own invulnerability and death had  
begun.

My parents helped, too. They kept death from me. The Titanic  
didn't sink; our dog Salty went to a better home; great-Grandpa Zayde,  
and great-Grandma Richmond who made delicious stuffing were apparitions  
in a distant corner of my mind, vague memories who disappeared with no  
mention, no funeral. Nana's brother, Herman, was happy in Eastern  
Europe and that's why he didn't come to America to ever visit with  
Nana.

I can see that my efforts to mock God in my play, Devarim, or to  
think of taking my life is to reflect such a small modicum of  
control in a situation in which I have very little.

And now I'm hearing about how to face death without blinking.

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When Joie finishes singing, Akishige says, "Let me describe for  
you a sumi-e brush stroke painting which I envision when I hear Joie  
singing about a narrow bridge. I carry this picture when I travel, as a  
reminder to 'practice with diligence'

"On the bottom right corner of the painting is a very small  
figure, walking across a narrow bridge, carrying a small bundle over  
his shoulder. We can't tell where he's come from, as the right hand  
portion of the bridge ends at the edge of the painting. The bridge

stops at a land mass in the middle of the picture, and there is a winding path leading, beneath windswept trees, to a small house. The land mass narrows, and where it ends in a mist-covered body of water, there is a small sailboat.

"Above the trees, the house and the boat are fog-covered mountains, and for a certain portion of the picture, the water, land and mountains merge with the fog and we can't tell where land ends and water begins. On the far left of the picture there is just haze, and it is not clear what lies to the left of the picture. Just like our life journey, we are on a narrow bridge. We do not know where we have come from, and where we are going. The beginning, much of the middle and certainly the end, is shrouded in mystery."

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"Look, friend Akishige, I do admire your story of facing death with such stoic stillness. But let's face it, it's easy for you to be unblinking facing death and talk ephemeral foggy about where we go in life's mysterious journey. You've got your reincarnation to fall back on. Oh, well, oops, let's try again in the next life." Jacques looks vaguely self-satisfied, as though each blow he strikes for existential angst and unremitting misery pleases him.

"I did recently read a book about a shaman named Don Juan, and what he said makes sense to me. He taught we should live with death as an advisor over our left shoulder, live each day as if it's our last and we will die tomorrow. This helps us prepare for death and prepare for life. One day that will be true. In the meantime, it does help make me realize what is important and value the time that I do have."

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Reverend Noel starts to pick up the stick, but I ask him if I may say a sentence. "For me, the poetic description of the picture is a little hard to visualize I'm wondering if you have a copy you could show me."

You're in luck. I do carry a small version of it with me when I travel, to remind me I'm on a narrow bridge. Next time we meet up, I'll bring a copy for you."

Reverend Noel then takes the stick and says, "Let me comment on the ease of facing death. You would think that I, too, having great faith, and believing in God and resurrection, would also find it easy. But I, too, still have doubt, and fear."

Let me tell you a story I heard from two different colleagues, one a Hassidic Rebbe, one Sufi regarding the wise fool Nasrudin. Both tell the same story." He looks over at Said Al Hazrumi, "Please correct me if I get it wrong.

"A seeker is hanging from a limb, over a deep ravine, with a tiger above, and raging river and sharp rocks below. He looks to heaven and says, 'Is anybody up there?'

"A voice rings out, 'Trust and let go.'

"He looks at the raging river and sharp rocks, then back at heaven, and says

"Is there anybody else up there?"

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After we all stop laughing, Reverend Noel says, "Letting go and trusting are not that easy to do. But as Akishige has taught us in breath meditation, we need to allow the outbreath as part of the breath cycle. It makes it easier for me, when I think of the final outbreath, to feel I'm releasing myself into God's hands. Not easy, mind you, but easier."

"Enough. I think maybe we're all missing the point." Jacques once more enters the conversation in his blustery style. He looks around at all of us. "Don't get me wrong. I think death is an important topic. One of my all time existential favorites. But in my opinion, you all are putting much too much attention on the nature of death and the question of whether there is life after death. The real question is whether there is life *before* death."

"Jacques, you continue to throw down the gauntlet even as you pick up the stick." Akishige has now opened his eyes, and reaches toward Jacques for the stick.

"I also have doubt and fear. I just watch them mindfully, as two stars in the night sky. Doubt, fear, all feelings and thoughts. They come. They go. Just one more mind state. Further, Jacques, At the deepest level, Master Zscho and I let go into the isness, sunyata and tathata, the empty, full void as our final resting place. This is similar to your existential nothingness, Jacques, but not nearly so depressing." He grins and bows kindly toward Jacques.

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"I also believe, as expressed in the Zen Ox herding pictures, that the cycle of life can continue...the wise Bodhisattva returning to the market place to help teach others.

"Further, even *within* life, I also believe we have the chance at every moment to tame the raging bull within, 'drop our bundle;' and become enlightened, to wake up while living. We can learn to live in such a way that our enjoyment of life is not threatened, but can even be enhanced by the specter of death.

"In Zen," Akishige continues, "we have a similar tiger story." He looks over at Reverend Noel.

"Same seeker, same person, same tiger, same ravine. There are also two mice, one dark, one light—Lin Zscho's yin and yang—who are nibbling at the vine, which is the only thing keeping the person from falling into the ravine. However, rather than focusing on the dangers all around, or turning to heaven for guidance and rescue, the person notices a strawberry.

"The story ends with this sentence...

'How sweet it tasted.'"

Akishige bows. "This is Zen's simple wisdom, on the other side of complexity. No matter what we are facing—death, terminal illness, raging enemies, even amidst the chaos-- a person can choose to find small moments of joy. As Paul Reps said, "With a sip of tea, I stop the war."

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As the sun begins to set behind the hills, Reverend Noel takes the stick from Akishige, and comments, "I've never before understood how you can attain such equanimity about death—and life-- without believing in God. Now I believe I'm beginning to.

"For me, as I said, when I imagine my final outbreath, I want to release into God. But really each outbreath may be our last. There is no guarantee that the next inbreath will follow. So each outbreath can be viewed as act of trusting and letting go. If a new inbreath does follow, then that is when we should feel gratefulness for the gift of life.

"To me, we can use the reality of death to help us see that most of what we think is important in life, is not really worth our time and energy. It is what Prem Devi might call of illusory importance. If we take death seriously, it can help us, like Jacques said, live a more meaningful life, focusing on the truly significant things."

Reverend Noel raises his hands to the sky, "I'm an admirer of the Catholic monk and theologian Thomas Merton who said, the more you 'see death as a natural process, not trying to fix it, then you can see the divine that comes through all life.' That certainly has the Taoist quality of acceptance that Linn Zscho has been teaching us. though with the faith context of Oneness, rather than void.

"Forgive me, but let me add one more thing. I'm an avid reader, and there is a powerful scene from Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* that has touched me my entire life. In it Myshkin, the epileptic, the 'wise fool' is talking with a man who, earlier in his life, stood before a firing squad, convinced he was going to be executed--an event which actually happened to Dostoevsky.

"It's been a long time since I read it, so I'm paraphrasing now. Myshkin tells how the man recounts how, with five minutes remaining before the signal to shoot was to be given, he divides the time into still smaller intervals, two minutes to review his past with his family; two minutes to ponder dreams unfulfilled; and one minute left unstructured. After the first four minutes, with only one minute left, he realizes the preciousness of each minute of life, how each second could be so valuable. He vows that if there were some way he could be spared, he would never again waste a minute, much less a second of his life. He would be attentive and appreciative every moment.

"Years later, when he tells the story, Myshkin asks, since he was given a reprieve, has he been able to follow his vow to live each moment fully, with continual appreciation and awareness. 'No' the man replies. 'It's not possible.'

Reverend Noel looks at Akishige. "Perhaps we need to learn to train our mind better, as you do in meditation, to achieve what you

have called 'beginner's mind--every moment Zen.'

"For me, I try to do that by prayer. I seek to find daily ways to be grateful for the blessings around me. I work to reduce my ego. 'Thy will, not my will.' And even though I believe in an afterlife, I also believe that death can give us a heightened awareness and appreciation of this life's value. And of course, just like Jesus died for our sins and to ease our suffering, I believe we each have an obligation to help relieve the suffering of those around us. When I die, I want to make sure I've given back everything I have, externally and internally. I hope to achieve what I've heard called the Miltonian effect: 'The last of life, for which the first was made.....calm of mind, all passion spent.'"

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There is a pause, as we all continue to sit as a group, letting Reverend Noel's words waft through us. He is still holding the stick, and rather than put it down, continues. "But until I die, I want to make sure I create as much light in the world as possible. Each of us creates a mission for ourselves, who we want to be. I want my thoughts, words, actions to be a light, or at least point to the light. I have been moved since I was a young man by the words in John 1:4, which inspired me to be a witness to the light.

The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

"Light - be it truth or understanding or knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I and others reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark

places of this world - into the dark places of human hearts - and change some things in some people."

I listen in a state of near rapture to what Reverend Noel is saying. His vision is so beautiful. Maybe my problem is I'm spending too much time looking at the dust on the mirror. If I only notice the dust, it is like having a finger before my eye when looking at the Grand Canyon. Then you only see the finger, and miss the beauty before you.

I need to look at the light. Keren, Hebrew for a ray of light, one of Job's daughters. At times of darkness, that ray can shine light on the past, and hopefully be a beacon of light into the future.

As I'm having these uplifting thoughts, Prem Devi takes the stick and begins to speak. "When I was in Bali, I was enchanted by the Barong dance, where on one plane of reality, there is an eternal battle of good and evil, light and dark between Barong and Rangda. Yet on another plane, as Lin Zscho described xujing, the harmony and unity from which yin and yang arise, there is a cosmic unity underlying the duality. In Hinduism we celebrate the holiday, a holy day, of Diwali the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance, light in the diva lamps, light in our hearts. Namaste."

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I take comfort in these thoughts of Prem Devi and Reverend Noel. I feel myself filled with radiance and hope. I remove myself from the gathering and climb a small knoll nearby to meditate. During this Kairos moment, I hear echoed the words of Revelation that Reverend Noel had shared with us:

And when he had opened the seventh seal,  
there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour

Filled with peace and brightness, my mind is quiet.



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Until it's not.

The comfort is fleeting. For some reason, the silence within ends, and a conversation with Mery arises about art. She was explaining to me that dimensionality is caused by light and shadow. You need both. Then I think of the drawing of the rowboat and the hand, and the nuance of how self-rescue and God rescue is created by shadow and light. Why can't anything be simple? Why do the antagonists of black and white seem to be subtlety, context, and ambiguity?

Then the sun begins to move over the ridge. A chill descends as it suddenly disappears behind the mountains. The whole canyon is now in dull shadow.

Why does reality have to impinge on such an uplifting message?

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When I return to the group, they are seated around the glowing embers. Roshi Akishige stirs them with a long stick, letting little flaming sparks dance skyward. My mind begins to settle as I sit amongst the group, and I feel safer from my thoughts, in the warmth of the fire their company.

Jacques shares quietly. "I have a feeling right now that I actually am experiencing what Aristotle meant by philosophy being born in wonder." He smiles. "You all know how much more attracted I am to

Kierkegaard's belief that for us moderns, philosophy is born in existential fear and trembling."

"Wondering," Prem Devi mutters aloud. "What a wonderful word. Both thinking about, and thinking and feeling with wonder." She smiles. That appreciation in itself would make my teacher Ramakrishna chuckle."

Akishige continues to stir the embers. "Remember when I mentioned death haikus. Maybe we should each try to write one. We could begin with Prem Devi's word 'wondering.' Wondering, in wonder, about our lives, our death, its meaning." He turns to Lin Shao. "Oh Taoist master, what say you, would this be a worthy task for our seven sages of the Safed bamboo grove?"

Lin Shao merely bows with a sly grin.

"Inshallah," Al Hazrumi begins to chant, repeating the word over and over, curling upward in a slow moving dance as he stands and begins weaving in and around the fire. "You're asking, what is the last line of our life, our story. That is up to Allah." He twirls again, hands raised to the sky.

"Tea's ready," Reverend Noel calls to us. "Chamomile with a touch of ginger." He pulls the large kettle off the fire and pours out eight cups. "I like the idea of our life as a haiku, and the haiku reflecting our life and death." He pours carefully and serenely. "Yes, it's up to God, but as Akishige has taught us, we choose how we react to what God offers."

Aikshige, who started the conversation, sits quietly. I watch him, seeing his still, effortless breathing. He who can face life and death with stillness. As I look at those before me, I feel dizzy. My mind is whirling with all the knowledge and intelligence and wisdom these individuals contain; my body is swaying as I try to follow the

movements of Al Hazrumi's Sufi dance, and to reconcile the peace and joy in his quick twirling movements with the slow, deliberate tai chi dance of Lin Shao when he "embraces" Tiger and returns to mountain; and with the stillness of Akishige "just sitting." Can these pieces of the puzzle ever fit together?

I realize my mind is wandering as I sit in wonder. As usual, to try to bring order to chaos, I pull out my pen and paper. Haiku: 3 lines, 5 syllables, 7 syllables, five syllables. Simple meaning, complex meanings, simple meaning. What is it like to be alive and still; dead and still. What is the transition moment, our last breath? Can I think about these things with joy, or will there always be fear and trembling in me? I think of the Modeh Ani, the morning prayer of thanks; of the Shabbat, a monastery in time. I begin writing....

*Wondering.... What is  
The last line of my haiku?  
Grateful.... .....breathing  
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Still*

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The sun has gone down behind the hills. I feel myself torn. I've prepared some comments about Yom Kippur and the beginning of the evening service. Do I interrupt the flow of our conversation to turn to the Kol Nidre? Joie has learned the music and agreed to play it as part of the service. Or do I just allow what is happening to proceed?

I watch the sky light up in oranges and reds, and think that if the hill weren't there, the sun would still be above the horizon. What "counts" as sunset officially. Am I violating the beginning of Yom Kippur by waiting? Then I chide myself for my attention to formalistic protocol, and imagine God would think that what is occurring now among

us is a very good way indeed for us to be worshipping on Yom Kippur. I say nothing.

Jacques fills the silence. "I respect what you say and how you want to live, Reverend Noel. But your gratefulness to God for the new inbreath, to me, seems misplaced. I have no trouble with gratefulness. But it is not toward God. It is toward my lungs and the oxygen in the universe that evolution put there. More importantly, where I would want to focus in the breath cycle is not on the outbreath and letting go, but on the inbreath. Life itself. Human control. We can choose to take in a deep breath. We have voluntary control. We can exercise our will." He stares at Reverend Noel. "Sorry, but for me that is not a problem, but a glorious achievement. That is the symbol I want for life. That we humans can take charge and develop control, and are not just passive recipients of fate."

He pauses. turns to Prem Devi and asks, with an air of defiance, "What would your Ramakrishna say to that?"

"If he were not in ecstatic samadhi, he might agree with you up to a point. He would agree that the voluntary control you talk about is necessary. But for him the question is what do you use the voluntary control for? It would not be directed primarily toward taking action in the world, but for attaining enlightenment. To do so, he said that for most people need some type of sadhana, spiritual practice; and the goal is to climb the stairs toward God." She looks over at me.

"Like Jacob's ladder." She smiles kindly, then adds, "Look at the life of our young friend here," she says, pointing to me. "Isn't his life in many ways the story of the searcher, becoming progressively alone, learning to cut through the illusions of the world in order to find God. As Ramakrishna would say, you have to climb the stairs to get to the roof. 'Leave the many to find the One.' Only there, from the

roof, from the top of the mountain, can you look back and see that stairs, steps, railing, all is One."

She looks at Akishige. "For me, that is the experiential feeling I imagine when you talk of Buddha saying 'drop the bundle.' And I also loved what happens next. Once you have experienced the oneness, there is great wisdom in 'Pick up the bundle and continue your journey.' For those who follow this path of spiritual seeker, after finding the One, you can then return, to 'embrace the many as the One.' But now you realize that all life is merely dancing waves, illusions of separateness, maya. And now that no longer bothers or traps you for you see it all as lila, the play of the gods. It's all one big SPLASH as we dive and frolic in the waters of the One."

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Jacques is restrained, but I can see the bulging in his neck and temples. "I could not disagree with you more. Of course, I don't believe in any of the gobbledygook platitudes you have about soul and Oneness and God. But that's not what bothers me. To each his own beliefs. Yours are no better, but no worse than those who assume that there are gods, and somehow if you're good and try to appease them, nothing bad happens. Heaven. Afterlife. A better reincarnation. Karma.

"But what really disturbs me is your dismissal of everything as maya--on the way up the ladder---escape the world. And God on the way down. Talk about a recipe for inauthentic, fatalistic, do nothingness. That which you call maya, or lila, illusion and play, is, I believe, all we have. What you see is what you get. Unless we take action.

"Though it may not mean anything in an ultimate, cosmic sense, to do nothing about the injustices and travesties of the world on the way up the ladder--is insensitive escapism; and to do nothing about

them on the way down--because they are God--is a denial so complete that it staggers the imagination."

Prem Devi reaches for the stick, which Jacques is shaking, almost brandishing it as a weapon. She grabs hold of one end, but he doesn't let go. "I'm not done yet."

"Ok, Jacques, you are in control. Just keep breathing in with that great voluntary breath of free will." She maintains her hold on the stick. "Now more. Now still more. What do you find?" Jacques' face becomes red as his chest rises from continued efforts at taking in air. Prem Devi looks over at Akishige and smiles. "Like the Zen master pouring tea, overflowing the cup, your ego is overflowing. You will find, even if you are an existentialist, that at some point you are going to have to let go and exhale." Teasingly, she says, "Come now, more, more. I can't wait for an explosive exhale."

Finally, Jacques forcibly lets his breath out with a gasping sound.

"See, before you can refill yourself--with yourself--even you have to let go of air. You call voluntary breathing-in a metaphor for standing forth. Ramakrishna would say that the very act of doing deeds, even good ones, even spiritual ones, can be a danger, if you feel that it is you doing it, your ego, your will. What is needed after the in breath, is a letting go. What is needed as a context, is a large letting go into God." With that, she drops her end of the stick.

Jacques holds the stick up if he's lecturing a class. "Can there be false, inauthentic ego? Of course. Even for us existentialists. Is there a thrownness--Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*--into which we are born--limits to our abilities? Assuredly. But building and creating one's core self is all we have. To ignore it from fear of personal responsibility or trying to transcend ego into some nether world of

Oneness is to ignore the very essence of life, the only chance we have to create our meaning and lead authentic lives."

He starts to put the stick down, but then stops himself and adds, "So you just let the world rot? Ridiculous. My idol is Prometheus. While all humans were passive, helpless, ignorant, he learned how to irrigate the earth for food, use the stars to navigate, find herbs to cure disease. Are you saying that you now wouldn't act, even if you could, to help relieve others' suffering, because to do so without perfectly pure motives reinforces your ego? Or because it's all maya, or all God? Poppycock."

Then, with a huff, he tosses the stick down.

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If I were a student in his class, I would not want to raise my hand to ask a question, even if I disagreed with him. His manner is intimidating. I like a lot of what he is saying, but I don't completely feel comfortable. I say nothing, and just wait.

Prem Devi is not deterred. She picks up the stick and speaks playfully, though it's easy to see that she's also focused and serious.

"You're right. We absolutely disagree. First, as Ramakrishna said, 'Social work is not God's work.' Further, I believe that any action one does, no matter what it is, if it's done for egoic motivation, only reinforces a false sense of self and separates us from our true Self. Didn't your Prometheus also try to steal fire from the gods, and mock them as he carried the fire back to earth? Didn't he then have his liver eaten by vultures? What's the lesson there if not that human hubris, trying to act like gods, will be punished?"

She gently hands him the stick back.

"And if you don't steal fire, what happens? You and those around you are cold. You can't count on the gods. They kept fire from humans.

What kind of god is that? And they certainly didn't help alleviate human suffering from disease and death. At least in this physical world, which I believe is all we have, all of us die. Some part of us gives out and the rest eventually goes. Just ask Tolstoy's Ivan Illich. For me there is no God, no One; it's only a cold, silent, indifferent universe. I'd rather die with hubris trying to do something meaningful -- stealing fire, building a tower to heaven, Icarus trying to fly, emulating Prometheus, than to sit passively in some cave trying to find my unity and Oneness with an illusory God."

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There is silence as Jacques places the stick in the center of the circle. Al Hazrumi picks it up. "I understand what you are saying, Jacques. For me it is a daily practice in my prayers to trust in Allah--no God but God-- to believe that this world is holy, even in those times when it appears otherwise. As our poet Rumi notes, in one poem,

'Out beyond the ideas of wrong doing and right doing,  
there is a field. I will meet you there".

And in another

Our death is our wedding with eternity.  
What is the secret? God is One.

"Poetry, and, of course, a bit of dancing also helps shift my consciousness toward joyous delight."

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When he puts the stick down, Joie picks it up and places it next to her guitar. She covers her face as she lights the candles and says a blessing. She then begins to sing the Shehecheyanu. As she sings, I try to feel within me thankfulness for God giving me life, breath, sustenance, and reaching this season.



How blessed I feel to be here, with her, with this sangha of spiritual souls. If my life were to end this day, this would be the way I would want it to end.

I hear Joie then play the slow, somber notes of the Kol Nidre, as I sit meditating, feeling each sound vibrate through me.

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When she finishes, I share with the group that the next phase is the confessional, acknowledging where we have fallen short this past year—our sins—which separate us from others, God, ourselves, and then asking for, offering, and receiving forgiveness. I invite them to join in. I look at Reverend Noel.

"You know you have a partner in me. Forgiveness is at the very core of Christianity," he affirms. "Jesus on the cross is both God forgiving us for our sins, and a model of how we should act with forgiveness. As it says in Luke, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' And in Ephesians, 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.' Our recitation of The Lord's Prayer is a daily asking for and offering forgiveness. Of course I'll join you."

"I, also, will join in," Al Hazrumi says. "As it is written in the Koran, 'If you love Allah, follow me, and Allah will love you, and forgive you all your sins; Allah is All-forgiving, All-compassionate. Koran 3.31.' In the Hadith, we learn of many examples of Mohammud offering forgiveness, even to those who were his enemies.

Let them (the worthy) forgive and show indulgence. Yearn ye not that Allah may forgive you? Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. Koran 24:22

Jacques picks up the stick. "Well, I guess I'm in the middle on this one between you monotheists, and the non-theists." He nods at Akishige and Lin Zscho others. I certainly am aware of a few areas where I don't act as authentically and wisely as I would like—not that it makes any difference in the big picture. But in the small picture, there are more than a few folks who need my forgiveness; and I theirs. And I don't see any harm in being a few degrees more compassionate and forgiving of myself."

Both Akishige and Lin Zscho bow. Lin Zscho says "We have two levels. On one level, as Jacques indicated, we don't believe there is anything such as sin, and therefore there is nothing to forgive. It's all part of the way, the Tao. Akishige, why don't you share with him the 6<sup>th</sup> Patriarch's poem."

"Ah, the poem of Zen Master Huineng. The 5<sup>th</sup> patriarch, nearing the end of his life, held a verse competition, to find a successor. Shenxiu wrote a poem in which he said the mind was 'like a bright mirror stand. At all times we must strive to polish it, and must not let dust collect.'

"Huineng responded with a non-dual poem, for which he was chosen as the Sixth Patriarch." Akishige recites

Bodhi really has no tree  
Nor is clear mirror the stand  
Nothing's there initially  
So where can the dust motes land?

"Like the empty tenth picture of the Ox-herding series, the mirror of self doesn't really exist. Although the dust motes—sin, unskillful habits-- keep falling, there is nothing for them to land on or cling to, and there is nothing to wipe clean. Egoism is something we create. Without egoism, pride, there is nothing to bruise, hurt or wound. As it is said, No self, no problem."

Even Akishige, normally so demure and quiet, smiles at his own comment, then continues. "But, as in the earlier Ox herding pictures, on another level, developmentally, there is something to tame. From this perspective, we recognize that there is much dust on the mirror. The bull must be brought under control.

"In our tradition, it is even said that when we try to do a good act, with good intentions, we stir up dust. It is an evitable part of the process of action. Therefore, we want to see our dust--our unskillful habits, the hurts we have caused others clearly. Then we want to ask and offer forgiveness for the dust that inevitably accumulates and which we stir up. Finally, we want to cleanse our mirrors as best we can. It is all about constant, diligent practice. From this level, we join you."

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We then turn to Prem Devi, who takes the stick from Akishige. "I feel more in the middle even than you, Jacques. I live in the realm of the monotheists, and I also know both levels that Akishige and Lin Zscho speak of. On the one hand, all is One without a Second, and so there is nothing to forgive and be forgiven. But few can ever live uninterruptedly on this level. So, one of our blessings often used in temple ceremonies acknowledges just that:

O Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations:  
Thou art everywhere, but I worship you here;  
Thou art without form, but I worship you in these forms;  
Thou needest no praise, yet I offer you these prayers and salutations,  
Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations.

She smiles, and then continues. "We have many ways of addressing our sins. One is just to pray to the One. As it says in the Mundaka Upanishad 2.2.9

All evil effects of deeds are destroyed, when He who is both personal and impersonal is realized.

"In Akishige's terms, we Hindus also acknowledge that our dust--our unskillful habits--creates pain and suffering for others. We seek to cleanse it by asking the chief of the god's in the Rig Veda, Varuna, for help. As it says in the Rig Veda 5.85.7,

If we have sinned against the man who loves us,  
have wronged a brother, a dear friend, or a comrade,  
the neighbor of long standing or a stranger,  
remove from us this stain, O King Varuna.

"Varuna is god of the sky, of rain and of the celestial ocean as well as a god of law. Who better to wash away stains! Krishna in the Gita says that forgiveness is a quality of a person born for a divine state. The practice of atonement from our wrongdoing (*Prayaschitta* --Penance) is related to karma and very much a part of our worship, even in the context of all is One. So, of course, I, too will join you."

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We all come closer to the fire, and the candles. Joie picks up her guitar, and begins to lead us in the chanting of the Ashamnu, the alphabetical acrostic of general sins. Once, at a Temple I attended on Yom Kippur during college, I saw the cantor and rabbi, as well as others in the congregation, strike the left side of their breast with their right hand. I didn't like the gesture. It seemed me as a type of pretentious self-flagellation. But tonight I decide to try it again. With each word, I strike my chest. Rather than self-punishment, with each symbolic blow, I feel that I am knocking on my heart, asking it to open, to be willing to be as naked and honest as I can be about all the sins--the separation-- I have created in my life. I think of the oppression of the pharaohs of the outer world; and of the oppression

of my dust and inner pharaohs, those parts of me which harden my heart.

I listen and feel as an alphabetical litany enter me: Achsav. I want more, and I want it now.

Arrogance, Bigotry, Cynicism. . .

I try to feel each one, acknowledge it, and open my heart to greater purity. Greed, injustice, jealousy. As deeply as I can, I acknowledge all the sins of which I have been guilty. Lustful, malicious, narrow-minded. I try to keep from feeling overwhelmed and self-punishing, staying open to all the dust. Quarrelsome, rancorous, selfish. . .The list seems endless. . . violent, weakness of will. . .

As I hear the words I focus on my breath, breathing in, breathing out. When she finishes, I continue silently with the *al heit*, trying to be as honest and thorough as I can about each of my specific sins: my distancing from others, withholding love as a way of being controlling, unwillingness to commit—to others, to life.

I pay attention to my hand knocking on my heart, praying for it to hear the knocking, to remove all hardening, allowing purity to enter.

I look around at our group. All our joining in knocking on their hearts. One form, but a universal principle. To ask, offer, and receive forgiveness.

I look up and see the moon, almost exactly half in light, half in dark.

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As I snuggle under the covers, I close my eyes to say my evening prayers. I begin with a prayer that Akishige offers each night "May this sleep purify and refresh my body, my mind, my speech." As I recite it, I imagine each part of my body being purified; then meditate on my

breath as I imagine my mind being purified and refreshed. Then my speech.

Next I turn to the forgiveness prayers. First, I ask forgiveness from others. I think of Beth, and the rage I once felt toward her. The mean things I said, the cruel ways I acted. Beth, Elizabeth, Mery. I ask your forgiveness for any hurt I caused you, intentionally, or unintentionally, by my thought word or deed. I am truly sorry. A snippet of a Dylan song comes unbidden:

I could have loved you better, I didn't mean to be unkind,  
you know that was the last thing on my mind."

I go through the process for Richard, my parents, my brother and sister, my grandparents. The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. Joie. Asking forgiveness for the hurts I caused them.

Then I turn to offering forgiveness to others. My parents come up-- dad's anger, mom's guilt tripping, each of their abandonment of me in their own ways, dad's angry withdrawal, mom's suicide attempts. Grandpa's trying to make me a reflection of himself, controlling me with money. Mery's hurtful comments and actions. Richard's competitive meanness. . With some distance from the events, with understanding, and with compassion, I can feel the hurt and pain in each of them that caused them to act that way. I can say without much difficulty, I hereby forgive all those who have hurt me, intentionally or unintentionally by their thought, words or deeds.

And then I turn to asking and offering forgiveness to myself for all the hurt I've caused others, and myself. I think of all the pain I have caused others by my ignorance, greed, lust, laziness, egocentricity, selfishness, fear, ambivalence, self-absorption, unwillingness to commit to life. So much unnecessary suffering for them. And so much self-sabotage and unnecessary suffering I've

caused myself. Tonight, I forgive myself for the pain I have caused myself and others, intentionally, or unintentionally, by my thoughts, words or deeds.

May this act of forgiveness cause such needless pain and suffering to decrease by at least a degree or two in me and in those with whom I come into contact in the future in whatever form and for however long my life may unfold. May this seeking of forgiveness help me be reborn--if that is the will of the Book of Life and Death-- as a better, wiser, more thoughtful person.

Finally, I seek to forgive God. This is a hurt that is still there. Why does it so often appear that You have forsaken us? Why did you take my older brother who was just a little five-day-old baby? Why did you take my blue-eyed grandmother? I just don't understand. Job's answer does not suffice. I hereby forgive God for hurts caused us, intentionally, or unintentionally, by thoughts, words or deeds.

I think of all the suffering in the world. The fighting between Israelis and Palestinians; the homeless on Sixth street.

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be peaceful.

May all beings be free from pain and suffering.

I pull the covers tighter around me, and snuggle further into them. I remember the prayer mom taught me when I was a little boy. I feel her next to me as I close my eyes and begin to say it, "Now a lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God Bless mommy and daddy and grandpa and grandma and nana and. . .

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I arise early, carefully get out of bed so as not to disturb Joie, and put on my Tallit.

Praise the Lord oh my soul...

I wrap the Tallit over my head, then around my shoulders

You wrap Yourself in light as with a garment... .

I say the morning blessings, and then head back to Reb Luria's grave. I want to be alone. I noticed that Joie and I didn't touch last night. Was that because of the Yom Kippur prohibition? Because today I want to face death directly, and know I need to do that by myself? Because I fear losing her at death and any touch seemed too vulnerable?

Today I want to truly and honestly face my death as deeply and clearly as I can. To imagine that I only have ten more hours to live. After I've walked several yards from our abode, I sit down with my dream journal to record last night's dream.

A group of Hassidic rebbes, older, bearded, and with great rhythm, are dancing. I watch them and am impressed at how beautifully and gracefully they move, clapping their hands, bobbing and bending. I try to join in, and they seem to welcome me, but I can't quite keep up. I just sway, not knowing the words, but trying to feel the melody. Suddenly the dream switches and there is a Maypole dance with flowing garmented women. Again, they are lovely, smooth, graceful. I am now more of a woman, and trying again to be part of the dancing. I go under the bridges they create with their arms, while the song "London Bridges" is playing. I do it pretty well, but not at the same level as they do. I feel a little inadequate and awkward.

INTERPRETATION/AFFECT: In the dream, I'm observing with admiration, then seemingly invited to join, first men, then women. I don't quite fit with either group. Clearly this dream is giving expression to some issues of belonging, being an outsider. It also seems to have something to do with accessing both the male and female sides of me. There is dancing and joy, but also London Bridges...falling down (potential impermanence, decay? Both/and?) When I wake up, the awkward, inadequate feeling of not belonging quickly shifts as I imagine myself as all parts of the dream. I realize I created the dream, and all the good musicians and flowing dancers.



I get up, and continue to walk the switchbacks to Reb Luria's grave, As I'm walking, I remember a snippet of another dream from last night--I was in a cafeteria, perhaps a faculty lounge, and I was making hot chocolate to share with others there. The mood was celebratory, although I don't know why. I realize that the heat from the stove is causing much of the milk to evaporate, and there wasn't going to be enough hot chocolate for even one cup. I want to call everyone over and have them at least taste a sip of it, so they would know that I tried to make something sweet and good to share with them.

Life running out? Fearing that I didn't really have much sweet to share with others in this life? But that I want them to know I tried?

If I die tonight, I wonder what will happen to all my dream journals.

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As I continue to walk to Reb Luria's grave, I think of what Jacques has said, and how it relates to the conversation Joie and I had in the olive grove. If the universe is random, indifferent--Jacques's existential view-- then we all die, return to ashes and become worm food. The end is the end. How then, unless a person is a masochist, could anyone, with this conscious knowledge, ever choose to be in a relationship, knowing that, inevitably, no matter how wonderful, it will end in loss? Who would willingly and consciously court pain and suffering? By leaving her and the group, am I pushing them off the raft so that I can face death alone?

Even if you believe in life after death--is it enough to say, please let me go, I'll wait for you and we'll join on the other side. I remember the Rebbe, half-joking, all serious, saying he knows he thinks too much and you can't be too literal about these things, but he

was wondering, who will he be with on other side, Dr. Lisbet or his wife?

What if our body, and this life, is just an illusion? What if, as Prem Devi says, our body is like a dissolving jar holding water in an ocean, and when the jar disappears, we once more merge with what we are and always have been? What about our attachment to and enjoyment of our physical self? Does our experience of that body, and its connection with other physical bodies, have no meaning?

I'm surprised at the intensity of my thoughts. Is this the same person who just spent most of the past nine months trying to divest myself of the body, trying to remove every trace of Johannes-like pleasure in it, seeking to value only the world of the spirit? Has there been a shift occurring in me these past months in Safed that is deeper than I'm aware of? Has Joie climbed on the raft with me—or rather have I let her?

I find myself arguing with Prem Devi in my mind. What about the wave that enjoys being a wave, and resists reemerging and becoming absorbed in the ocean? What if that wave finds another wave it enjoys playing with? Is that only illusion? Or is there something about the life of a wave that has meaning, and can and should be enjoyed? Then the loss of that waveness should be mourned, because it creates a hurt beyond words, the inability to ever again experience the unique loved ones the wave has played with, their physical touch, closeness, shared glances. What if you like being a particular wave, and can never imagine being separated from another particular wave? Is it really that satisfying to believe that each of your separate waves are just illusions, part of a universal oceanic Oneness? What about enjoying and cherishing the particular wave, and, when it eventually vanishes, wouldn't it be normal to mourn and grieve its loss?

When I shared this concern with Prem Devi, she was empathic, "Actually, I do understand what you're saying. One of Ramakrishna's students made the same point, saying it's all well and good that there is One without a second, and we are all waves, but the feeling of the individual wave, my death, is not a happy feeling. You are not alone in those feelings."

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When I arrive at Reb Luria's grave, I sit and meditate as Akishige taught me, trying to clear my mind. After about twenty minutes, and even though it's still morning, I decide to recite the Ashrei, the afternoon prayer, "how happy I am to be in the house of the Lord," using the hand motions that Joie taught me. Each time I do that, it brings a smile to my face. How can one not be happy looking so silly and being so playful?

Even on such a serious day.

God as judge, arbiter, counsel and witness. The Day of Judgment.

What will I be judged for that matters to me--and to God? I realize that if others judge me for not following the proper rituals and ceremonies, I really don't care. Kol Nidre before sunset. Or after. Following the proper order of services. I guess I pick those parts of the Torah and services that work for me. And I pick those parts of God that seem wise and touch my heart, mind and soul.

If this is my last day on earth, this is how I would want to spend it, alone here with the God of my choosing. This does not feel like a rote fast, Isaiah, because I have to. But as a cleansing and opening. I want each part of the day to be as meaningful as I can make it, weavings of God's words, and silences which touch my heart and soul. God in Isaiah understands this. That wise God doesn't want

rituals without heart, self-affliction without merciful intentions.

Instead God looks for deeds of kindness, compassion, giving:

Is not this the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of  
injustice. . .to let the oppressed go free. . .to share your  
bread with the hungry. . .then shall your light shine in the  
darkness

That is the God I know in my heart, and Whom I seek. For me,  
that is not the same God in the traditional Torah portion in Leviticus  
Who talks about detailed behavioral actions and animal sacrifices and  
scapegoats:

two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.  
. . .and Aaron shall take a firepan full of coals...and two  
handfuls of finely ground sweet incense. . .and take some of the  
blood of the bull and of the blood of the goat and put it on the  
horns of the altar on all sides and sprinkle some of the blood on  
it seven times...

Though this is not practiced now, many Orthodox believe at the  
rededication of the temple, we need to return to these practices.  
For me that would be wrong. Too much externalizing of our internal  
issues. One goat achieves divine ablution from sin, and the other goat  
literally became the "scapegoat" upon which the High Priest would  
symbolically place all the sins of the Jewish people. I don't want a  
scapegoat, someone to die for my sins. Whether that be an animal, or  
the lamb of God. I don't want externals to absolve me from my sins. I  
want to face them, take personal responsibility for them, and engage  
in an "in and through" process by which I seek internal cleansing.

\* \* \*

This traditional Torah portion doesn't speak to me. The Reform  
Torah reading is what touches my heart and soul. Here God says that  
God's message is not in heaven, or beyond the sea, but

Very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart and you can do  
it.. I have set before you this day life and good, blessing or  
curse; choose life...

It is our choice, just like Jacques says, every moment, every

second, how we live, act, think, feel is in our hands. This is the God that I can believe in. And love. I'm fasting, as a way to cleanse myself on this day as completely as I can, to open myself to the highest wisdom and mercy of which I am capable. Not from fear of death. But for love of life.

To end my morning service, I look up at the sky and see the sun looking down on me. I wrap the tallit tightly around me. I gaze once again at Reb Luria's grave, then pull the tallit over my head, sheltering me from the sun, close my eyes, and begin a silent breath meditation.

\* \* \*

When I open my eyes, I realize the sun has crossed the morning sky, and is now behind me, casting my shadow over Reb Luria's grave. A few hours have passed. I must have fallen asleep during my meditation. So much for good intentions. The wisdom of Kol Nidre. It only took 18 hours before I broke my vow. Sigh. If I'm allowed to live, such a long way to go.

I have two choices for the afternoon Torah portion. The first is the traditional one, Leviticus 18 on nakedness, and all the places we shouldn't be sexually naked with someone, including not having intercourse with any animal, nor shall any woman stand before an animal to mate with it. For me, I want to stand naked before God. The rest is footnotes. It is easy to mock some of the prohibitions, and the obsessiveness with which they are written, but the general principle, for me, of care in sexual activity is something that is a good reminder, given my Johannes past. When and if I ever recommence physical intimacy, it will always be a wise intention for me to bring attention, awareness and compassion to such intimacy in all its forms.

Some have suggested that Leviticus 19, which speaks of being just and loving toward your neighbor might be a more appropriate section. "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy...you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." That, too, seems wise to me. So, for my Torah portion this afternoon, I include both.

And now I turn to what has become one of my favorite stories, the haftarah portion of Jonah, first read to me so long ago by my landlady, Miriam while I lay in bed and she tried to nurse me back to health. If only she could see me now. If only I could thank her once again.

I read the story in the way that Dr. Lisbet taught me to interpret my dreams, and the Rebbe showed me how to understand the Passover story: trying to imagine that each part of the story represents a part of myself, some aspect of my life, and people within it.

I, like Jonah, once fled from the Lord, and "a tempest came upon the sea . . ." even though Jonah, like me, blithely slept in the hold. The captain went to wake him up and told him to "call upon your god." Who is the captain? Someone within me? A messenger/angel from the Lord? Mery? The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet?

"The sea was growing more and more stormy." Jonah takes responsibility and admits he is the reason for the storm, and that he must be thrown overboard in order to calm the seas. I, too, had to be thrown overboard from the path I was taking. Or mixing my metaphors, derailed from the tracks I was on.

I once again close my eyes, and this time, I imagine I am meditating in the darkness of the belly of the whale. "And the sea stopped raging."

I love the message of Jonah--that change and new beginnings are possible. That we can transform ourselves and start a new journey. It's what Joie said to me on Easter Sunday about 'second chances.'

Jonah changed after his time in the whale. When God came to Jonah a second time, he followed God's path to warn the people of Nineveh of their wicked ways. The people of Nineveh repented and changed.

How do I hear that message for me?

Perhaps I can learn, with God's help, to bring an internal peace to myself, to calm the waters of the roiling sea within me. I can learn to follow a wisdom of the heart. And the path will continue to deepen if I am willing to stay on it.

Like Jonah, there will be levels and levels of change needed. Once the people of Nineveh repent,

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he grieved.

It's not clear why. Is it because he believes the people of Nineveh were let off too easily by God? That their change won't be real and authentic and long-lasting? That Jonah is more interested in justice than mercy?

God hears Jonah. The Eternal One asks, "Are you deeply grieved?" as Jonah leaves the city to find a place to watch what is going to happen. That sounds like something I would do, in fact, am doing now--being the observer, finding a place apart from the situation, watching at a distance.

God provides a gourd which grows up over Jonah and gives him shade. This is the compassionate God I love.

Then God sends a worm to attack the plant, which withers. Jonah is no longer with shade, the sun beats down and he becomes faint. Further, he is so grieved about that plant's fate, that he "would rather die than live." God replies that just as Jonah cares about a

plant that he had nothing to do with creating or cultivating, imagine how much God, who created the people of Nineveh, cares for them.

What does the ending of the Torah passage mean? Is Jonah once again waking up, to a deeper level, not only doing the service of the Lord, but feeling his heart open in service? He is feeling the importance of love and mercy as well as justice? The book doesn't say how Jonah responds. Why? Could it be that how Jonah reacts is less important than how we, who read the story, decide to act? How does the story speak to us? It is up to us to draw the lessons we need for our own lives, so that the ending of the story can be a catalyst for a new beginning of our lives. How will we continue the story?

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Of course, that's assuming that we are allowed to live. The sun is getting close to setting. These may be my last moments on earth. The gates of heaven, opened on Rosh Hashanah, are now beginning to close.

Neilah, the final part of the Yom Kippur service. Neilah, when the gates of heaven are locked. Final chances.

What is there left for me to do?

I think of Rabbi Tarfon, "The day is short, and the task is great, and the workers are sluggish and the Master of the house is pressing."

On Rosh Hashanah it is written,

on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

Who shall live and who shall die.

Facing death. I think of Buddha's words I learned from Akishige, "All conditioned things are of a nature to pass away. Practice with diligence." I hear the words of Isaiah. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever." The word is lasting.



After I wither and fade, is that what will be left as my gift-- words? Words of a journal seem a poor consolation, and an even poorer legacy. But what else do I have to offer up as a sign of my life?

I think of David Noel talking about memento mori 'Remember that you shall die' and how often there were paintings of Mary Magdalene contemplating a skull. Reflection and penitence.

Is facing death a way of trying to come to terms with and find meaning in life? I think of Mery. What a journey she birthed in me. I think of Sinai and St. Catherine's monastery, the skull house, filled with bones of deceased monks.

I will myself to be strong. I feel myself clinging to life. I image Jacques putting his arms around Akishige, as well as Lin Zscho, and hear him saying, "Finally, two soul mates. Yes, you understand. In facing life, all we have is our minds. Living is not for the faint of heart. Nor is growing old. We need a stoic mental toughness to face life. And death."

I want to feel like the Samurai warrior who can face death, unblinking. Instead, I feel fear. I don't want to die when life seems to be making some sense. I'm just beginning to bloom, to flower. I feel vulnerable. Life seems so ephemeral, dream-like, out of my control. I feel sad. There is much here that I realize I love and don't want to leave.

I breathe in, asking for help in being strong. Grateful for the in-breath.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. . . Even when I walk in the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me...

I breathe out. I try to imagine it as my last outbreath.

I feel myself almost gasping. Where is Zen discipline? Where is the still clear mind? Instead I see fear, sadness, helplessness, turbulent waters. A frail body and a frail mind. I almost can't imagine what it means that there is no new in-breath.

I feel tears. Have I given everything I have to life? I viscerally feel the desire to make sure on my last outbreath, that I have given all to the world that I have to give, that there is nothing that I have held back.

I want to forgive all and everyone. The *viddui*, the confessional, once again, repeating the Ashamnu. If this were my last outbreath, what purpose is there in holding back any animosity, any anger? I want to tell everyone how sorry I am for any hurts I have caused them, intentionally or unintentionally, by my thoughts, words, or deeds.

I have searched for every piece of dust in me and poured it out in tears. I ask forgiveness from others; I offer it to others. And now I need to forgive myself for all the hurts I've caused myself--and others-- intentionally or unintentionally, by my thought, words and deed.

The sun is partially hidden by the hills. My shadow extends further across Reb Luria's grave.

The tears are coming more strongly now. God, I ask your forgiveness. I'm sorry for my doubts. And I forgive You God, in whom I so want to trust.

I'm knocking, God. Apri. Apri. Please open your gates. Please show me how to enter. In righteousness. In love. In wisdom.

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What do I believe comes after death, if anything? Reincarnation versus rebirth? I think about what the wise members of this group have shared. Reverend Noel talked about "Living rightly on earth, and with

God's grace, we join our Father in heaven." Al Hazrumi said, "We know from the Qur'an there is an afterlife where the righteous are rewarded." Reb Jonathan noted that reincarnation is a kabbalistic belief in Judaism. Reb Luria referred to it as a reincarnation of the soul. Akishige shared that the Tibetan Buddhists have their bardot, Sky Burial, where a corpse is taken to a mountain top chopped into small pieces to be consumed by vultures. This ceremony is considered to be the ultimate manifestation of harmony between heaven and earth. Hindus, of course, are known for their belief in the reincarnation of the soul.

Prem Devi paraphrased Ramakrishna, "The nature of the universe is oneness, an ever churning dance of form and playfulness, waves in the ocean." Lin Zscho described a return to xujing and the Tao of cosmic emptiness. Jacques' belief is closest to Lin Zscho's but without the sense of cosmic acceptance. He challenges Prem Devi's playful view of reincarnation: when babies and children suffer and die, no karmic past life can possibly justify that. Jacques continually counsels us,

"Why not face the nothingness of the end; no sugarcoating. Everything on this earthly plane ends in death. Flowers decay, lives end, species are wiped out. We're worm food." All these thoughts fill my mind. How am I to know? I take a calming breath.

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I take another breath and bend in prayer, placing my head on the ground of Reb Luria's grave. Despite Jacques' dispiriting words ringing in my head, I feel a strong loving presence surrounding me. It is as if Reb Luria's energy has come from his grave, and has joined with Reb Jonathan's and they are both surrounding me.

The voice I hear is Reb Jonathan's, and he is explaining to me that now it is the time to say the Shema. I remember his words vividly from class, and hear him say.

*The shema is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to One God, said upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. It is said when praising God and when beseeching Him. It is the first prayer that a Jewish child is taught to say. It is the last words a Jew says prior to death. We say the Shema when preparing to read the Torah on Sabbaths and festivals. And we recite the Shema at the end of the holiest day of Yom Kippur when we reach the level of angels.*

I smile through my tears. I remember writing down his words, and thinking to myself, the Shema never made any sense to me. I was always confused, should I stand or sit when I say it? And if everything is One, how come there are so many melodies. I could never get the tune right. Somehow I knew enough to recognize that my questions were perhaps on the wrong level, and it was best to let the Rebbe continue.

*Today I would like to teach you the Shema as a meditation. There are many different types of meditation, all of which involve focusing attention in some way. The question is what we focus on, how we focus, and why we are focusing. Some focus on quieting the mind; some on opening the mind. The Shema meditation is an interesting combination of several different types. I would like to teach you this meditation as a deeply personal and spiritual journey.*

*In the service, the Shema is preceded by the sung prayer, Ahavat Olam (eternal love), and followed by the Veahavta, (Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy soul, and all thy might). So, the Shema is contexted on both sides by love. As we prepare to do this meditation, imagine yourself surrounded by love, using whatever creates for you some feeling of as pure a love as you can imagine. Some may think of a small baby; others of a loved one, a parent, a beautiful sunset. Whatever works for you.*

I feel myself at Reb Luria's grave encircled by all the people from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, passing candles to one another.

I add all the new friends, the guests up here at Safed. I imagine Akishige saying 'This sounds like a metta meditation.'

I add Joie to the group, having her stand next to me, holding hands with her. I feel myself surrounded by love.

*Take in a deep cleansing breath in as you say Shema.*

*Shema, to listen, hear, wake up. We are asking ourselves to break the normal habit patterns of consciousness, and open to a new awareness. For the next breath cycle, feel yourself listening with your deepest ears, as if you had an inner ear.*

*Israel. Israel is the particular, collectively, the people, and also the particular, individual. Israel means the one who struggles with and toward God, the name Jacob was given after wrestling with the angel. What is the part of you that wrestles with God; the dust, the chametz, the plague within, the part that does not act in a sacred way?*

*Say "Shema Israel" on the in-breath, and on the outbreath, feel yourself trying to wake up that part of you that is in bondage, that yearns for the sacred.*

I close my eyes and repeat the words, following my breath cycle. Wake up, Israel. Let Jacob become Israel, struggling toward and with God. I repeat these first two words of the Shema, saying them with a special fervor and intensity, dwelling on each word, trying as hard as I can to feel the yearning, the desire to wake up, trying to reach the level of angels.

*On the next inbreath, recite "Adonai Elohainu." Adonai is the eternal God, the impersonal infinite beyond comprehension. Elohainu is "our God" a personal, close, loving, intimate God. On the outbreath try to feel--not think--but feel how that can be--the juxtaposing of infinite and intimate.*

As I say the two words, I feel in my body and mind and heart the vastness of God at Sinai. I feel the closeness and warmth of the people passing the candles in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I let those

feelings mingle and intertwine with each other, like waves of the ocean.

*On your next inbreath say the words "Adonai Echad", and let your final outbreath be the Echad. All is One. The particular you that is distant from and struggles toward God is holy and One. The particular and the universal are One. The impersonal God and the personal God are One. We both are on a journey which requires us to wake up and realize our separateness, the distance we have to go to become who we want to be, and, at the end of the journey (as well as in some inexplicable way also at the start of the journey) we are already there, we are One. And that journey is surrounded by love, begins and ends in love.*

I let the words waft over me, trying to let myself feel that this journey began in love; with my parents giving birth to me physically; with Mery giving birth to and waking me up spiritually; with Joie giving birth to and reawakening me emotionally and relationally.

Breathing in Shema Israel, as I wake up my sacred self; breathing out, letting myself feel the awakening journey. I try to listen with my good ear, inside and out, to see where I am struggling--all my dust and plagues.

Breathing in Adonai Eloheinu, feeling the eternal and close personal God. Breathing out, seeking to feel God's infinite and close personal presence.

Breathing in Adonai Echad. Breathing out, Echad. Somehow, like the soft white of Basho's poem, I open myself to experience the Oneness of all the different pieces and parts and fragments, the Oneness with those from whom I am separate, the Oneness of the parts of me that feel separate from each other. The part of me that feels separate from God. I openness myself to a healing and loving Oneness.

Echad.

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I keep my eyes closed for several moments, letting life breathe me, feeling myself surrounded by love and Oneness.

I realize that all my life I've wanted a goal, a framework. For me that gives life meaning and direction. When I take a walk, before I turn around and walk back, I touch a place at the half way point. Why not just turn around? Because then the journey would feel too diffuse and incomplete.

Is touching "Echad" a goal? If I die today, it would be the end point. Do I feel incomplete?

I've always kept records of everything: they are my "touch points." How many tennis sets and matches I won. What my golf handicap index was. What my grade point average was. How many women I was with and what base I got to with each.

Now, facing my death, I realize how arbitrary and silly those goals were. As I think back on life, of all things what comes to mind is my last golf round at Pebble Beach. I remember that on the 18<sup>th</sup> hole of that last round, I made the putt for a par. For some reason that seems satisfying to me. As if I could die now and things would be complete.

Then I think of tennis. And I realize that I didn't win my last set. Against Richard. By the logic that I'm using, I should be upset. Instead, I start laughing. I realize that I don't care. I'm happy to have had the chance to play tennis, to compete, to trash talk with Richard. I remember the poem *If* mom gave me on my sixteenth birthday by Kipling: "and treat those two impostors just the same." Winning and losing. I'm amazed at the feeling I'm having. It seems my mind is allowing me to be at peace with whatever happened. If I made the last putt, that's great; if I lost the last set, that's fine, too--there's something positive I can find in the process of playing the game.

This is a great attitude with which to die. And, if I'm allowed to live past today, this would be a great way to live: "then you will be a man, my son." Thank you, mom.

After several breath cycles, I let my eyes open, grasping nothing, just receiving with my eyes the world before me.

Blessed is God's glorious kingdom for ever and ever.

I repeat the *baruch shem, bless the name*, three times, like a mantra, lingering over each word, as if it were my last.

Then I say *Hashem Eloheim* seven times, *the Name Who is God*, The Eternal Lord is God. Each phrase becomes quieter and slower, as I feel the waters of my mind continue to calm.

Echad. One. Echad. Emptiness. Echad. The void. Echad.

When I finish, I have a feeling of peace and joy, that I truly am encompassed by love.

God, the One. If You are really there, I want to sing to You.

I raise my arms to the heavens. "God," I say out loud, and then I find myself smiling. "I'm going to sing loudly in the voice You gave me. You are the one who has to listen to it, and I'll let You decide, is it revenge or thankfulness? But one thing is for sure, I'll sing with heart and prayer,

I remember Reb Jonathan sharing with us that each Havdalah, the ritual ending Shabbat, is an opportunity for us to once a week consciously experience the inevitability of our death, to consciously turn our souls over to God. Just as once a year, on Yom Kippur, we do the same for the whole day. And one day, for all eternity.

'Into your arms, your loving arms, I commend my soul.'

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I am now ready for the final Chapter of the Book of Life and Death to be written. If God, or the random universe, determines that



as Yom Kippur ends, when the shofar once again blows, this is the time for my death, I am ready. If I am allowed to go forward on the sounds of its wailing, haunting tone into life, I am also ready.

I am now complete, and at peace. I am silent.

Aleph. The first letter. The soundless letter. The world begins with the baby's shriek into the silence.

Then, as the sun goes down, with my final outbreath, I blow into the shofar. The great Tekiah, a single unbroken blast, held as long as possible. But like Rumi's poem, I don't feel I'm blowing the shofar. Or not just me. I am the caller, the called, and the calling, a combination of all the parts and fragments-- Tekiah, Shevarim, Teruah-- coming together as One. The first blast--Tekiah-- to wake us up; the wailing blasts of Shevarim, the sobbing cry of the heart--yearning to connect; Teruah, several quick blasts to summon strength and energy for the effort needed to struggle toward the light. All part of and merging into one long note, the Tekiah Gedolah. I hear its chilling deep sound echo through the hills of Safed.

I sit quietly and watch the hills, listening to the void. I am ready for life to end in silence.

I take a clod of dirt from Reb Luria's grave, and rub it slowly back and forth between my fingers. I remember a saying that we should always carry a bit of earth in our pocket. When we feel too noble, too egoic, we should feel this dirt in our pocket, and remember from dust we came, to dust we will return. Adama. Earth. Adam. First human. When we feel too despairing, we should feel the dirt and remember that we are created in the image of God, just a bit below the angels. We can be like angels, messengers of God.

I shut my eyes, feeling the dirt surrounding Luria's grave, imagining the singing of Lecha Dodi that was born in his

heart and came out of his and others' mouths, praising God. I  
sense Luria the physical person dead in his grave. Returned to dust.  
My grandmother is in her grave. Even if there is a resurrection of the  
spirit and soul at some future date, I miss her actual touch, to be  
able to see her kindly face.

Is the gilgul rebirth of Reb Luria's soul near me? Surrounding  
me? My grandmother's soul? Somehow, I do feel their presence.

Somewhere, far off, I believe I hear the noise of the ever-  
present Safed angels flapping their wings.

I image taking the final outbreath of my life. With that  
outbreath, I want to feel that I have given everything I could to my  
life, that there was nothing left to share, that I carry no grudge,  
that I can release completely.

Breathing out.

Letting go.

A surrender.

Into the void. Into the emptiness.

Into Your arms, Your loving arms.

I feel held and comforted, nurtured by loving arms, as if my  
head is resting on the breast of the Shechina, like a little baby.

Eros and thantos? Beginning and endings?

God as mother?

I also feel the strong arms of God the father holding me.

The father and mother and I united.

Echad.

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s I sit motionless, watching my breaths, I hear echoes of shofars resounding through the hills. Their sound eventually fades. I don't know how long I remain motionless. Perhaps I fall asleep and am dreaming. I feel myself fading away into darkness. Am I dying?

When I open my eyes, it's completely dark. Is the moon covered by clouds? Whether I open or close my eyes, I'm surrounded by darkness. Am I dead? Awake? Living? Dreaming?

I watch my breathing several more times. This must be a sign of life, I tell myself. Do dead people feel themselves breathe? Once again I open my eyes. Instead of pitch blackness, I see a string of candle flames swaying back and forth. They are quite far away, but seem to be moving closer to me. Is this heaven? I count them. Eight. The nearest one is largest; the last one, smaller. Can this be the afterlife? There are still a few echoes of shofars blowing. The candles remind me of a menorah at Chanukkah, on the eighth night, glowing as brightly as they can amidst the darkness. I think back to John nine months ago in that little room in Jerusalem. Nine months. Is this my birth? My death? How do you know?

Minutes pass as the candle flames come closer; the dark clouds part and by the light of the moon, I see my friends walking up the switchbacks, carrying candles in their hands, toward Reb Luria's grave.

Yom Kippur is over, and I'm still here.

What a glorious awakening, what a majestic first sight: the lights of those who care about me coming toward me.

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What a glorious awakening, what a majestic first sight: the lights of those who care about me coming toward me.

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By the light of the first star, and the moon, we sing Havdalah. I remember my excitement at seeing Joie on Easter Sunday at the Mount of Olives, after my awe-inspiring experience in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Now, here she is when I awake alive after Yom Kippur, listening once again to her angelic voice.

Lai lai lai lai lai lai lai, Baruch Atah Adonai Elo-heinu,  
Melech Ha'Olam borei pre hagofen.

We bless the wine, which is actually grape juice, out of deference to Al Hazrumi. We smell the spices; we praise God who makes light from darkness; acknowledge Elijah the prophet. Then we sing

"Into Your arms, Your loving arms, I commend my soul. Into Your arms, Your loving arms, I commend my soul."

We all join in singing the ending words of the Havdalah service, but rather than wishing each other "Shuvua Tov, Shuvua Tov. . . A good week, a week of peace," we wish each other "L'shana tovah. . . a good year, a year of peace, may gladness reign and joy increase."

Joie finishes the song, puts her guitar down, and all of us stare silently at the havdalah candle's braided flame arching, yearning skyward. Yom Kippur is about to come to a communal and official end.

Everyone toasts each other. I take Joie's hand and bring it to my lips. She does the same as we wish each other peace and happiness for the coming year. She dips the flaming braided Havdalah candle slowly into the wine. We all listen to the hissing sound, as Yom Kippur ends, and a new life begins.

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As Joie and I walk back hand in hand, we talk about how amazing it is that a group of wise elders from different traditions have come to Safed to learn about Jewish mysticism, and have been willing to join so wholeheartedly in these communal observances.

I bend down, pick up a few stray branches and put them under my arm. She looks at me askance, and I explain, "I remember Reb Jonathan saying, the first time I heard him speak... his Fall Preview. . .I can't believe it was just over a year ago...that with one's first few steps after Yom Kippur it's a wise custom to start gathering materials to build one's sukkah, thus linking Sukkot to Yom Kippur."

She says nothing, and we walk a few moments in silence, while I think of all that's happened in this past year. "When he said that, I remember thinking 'Give me a break. It's like enough already, and not in the Passover Dayenu sense. After going through Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, how could you want to have your first act thinking about Sukkot and Simchat Torah. Enough religion already!'"

She's silent and I see no smile. Then she says, "And now?"

"Now I see it as a way to maintain spiritual continuity. Last year, the lessons of Sukkot were just too close to home for me: opening to that sense of vulnerability symbolized in the fragility of the sukkah, being exposed to the elements, trusting in a God I didn't know and certainly didn't trust. Then everyone dancing and celebrating on Simchat Torah, while I sat watching with my stitched-up hand. That was a horrible time."

"I'm sorry. How are things different now?"

I can't tell if I'm imagining it, or is her voice clipped and distant? I decide to act as if I don't notice anything, and continue lightly,

"Now, I'm happy to be alive. I'm happy to be here with you. You weren't even a speck in my eye a year ago." I let go of her hand, and put my arm around her shoulder. "Do you know one of the reasons why the passage in Leviticus on sexual prohibitions was traditionally read on Yom Kippur?" She shakes her head from side to side.

"I remember the Rebbe saying it was because of Talmud mishnah Ta'anit 4:8, which talks about Yom Kippur being one of the two merriest days of the year. During the afternoon, many boys and girls, feeling that they had successfully made it through the somber serious Holy Day, would end the temple ritual by having the girls dress in white and run out into the fields to dance. The young men would then chase after them and frolic and choose brides. The assumed forgiveness and absolution of the people was celebrated with dance and courtship. Leviticus 18 may have been read to keep people from being carried away during the dancing."

I drop the bundle of sticks that I've been carrying, put both arms around Joie and give her a little swing. I feel a weight being lifted from me, all my seriousness and intensity and analysis dropped with the sticks, just like in Akishige's story. I feel enlightened and free as I continue to dance and swing her.

But Joie has not put her hands around me to dance. She feels limp and uninvolved, not reacting as joyously to my dancing playfulness as I would have expected.

"What?" I ask, dropping my hands from her body.

"Why did you just leave me this morning?" Her voice is a mixture of sadness and anger. Her lower lip is trembling. I start to put my arms back around her shoulders. "No, don't comfort me. I don't want to cry. I had no idea where you were going, or where you were. You just

left, with no word. How do I know I won't be just a speck in your eye  
and heart a year from now?" I listen as she says in a whisper

*Parce que tout ce que je vais savior  
De cet homme  
Est la mémoire incertaine de sa forme  
Et al poussière de ses cendres.*

"My French isn't that good. What are you saying?" I notice I'm  
starting to feel some annoyance. What a mood killer.

"It's the last lines of a poem I wrote in college. I was  
standing in line, waiting to register, and I noticed a young man in  
front of me, smoking. We barely acknowledged each other, didn't talk,  
and that was all. The last lines say

But all I will remember of  
This man  
Is the uncertain memory of his form  
And the dust of his ashes.

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I bend over and pick up the bundle of sticks. I hear the Kol  
Nidre music in my mind and heart. I'm incensed. She has no idea what I  
went through today, how much pain and suffering I felt facing my  
death, what great strides I made spiritually in my growth and  
understanding and deepening wisdom. How many tears I shed. Even before  
I could share all that with her, she's complaining. And all I was  
doing was being joyous and trying to dance with her.

I then think of my strong intention made during my time alone not  
to cause hurt to others. While I may have been doing great spiritual  
work facing my death, I was not at all sensitive to the hurt I was  
causing Joie. Already there are things I need to forgive and ask  
forgiveness for tonight, and to start collecting and carrying toward  
next Yom Kippur Kol Nidre. But an apology doesn't come easily. I know  
the right words to say. "I'm sorry. You're right. That was thoughtless  
of me. I can see how it hurt you." But something keeps me from saying  
it. We continue walking in silence.

I don't hear any angels singing.

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When we arrive back at our little room, I place a few of the branches next to the building, touch the mezuzah, and enter.

I do my evening ablutions, crawl into bed, and pull out the Rebbe's letter. At least someone still thinks I'm a worthwhile human being.

*Dear Jacob,*

*Dr. Lisbet and I were so happy to receive your beautiful and heartfelt Rosh Hashanah greetings. We, too wish you a sweet year. This is a wonderful time of the year for us, one of new beginnings. Rosh Hashanah (like any time) can be a moment when we hear the call of our higher selves, that links us to the Divine. A time when we feel blessed with life and love, can can fathom deeper attachments to the Godlike in us and in our world. May this be such a time for all of us.*

*We are doing well, and the grandchildren are a bountiful harvest. I don't know if you remember the Channukah Parashat--I believe it was one of the first classes you were in -- where Jacob blesses his grandchildren. I hope one day you can experience that feeling. That feeling of continuity, of life going on, new life being born is one of the happiest moments of my life.*

*You raised several questions in your letter, and Dr. Lisbet and I have had many enjoyable conversations over tea discussing them. In fact, you have been with us at those teas, and I hope you enjoyed them as much as we did. We thank you for your kind words about us and how much you feel we have taught you. We learned from you, as well.*

*So, let me begin with your questions, and share our thoughts.*

Yes, this is what I like. Being treated with respect and admiration. Also, a letter which I can put down when I want, and pick up when I want. Which gives me time to think through each part, and decide how I would like to respond. How different than the back-and-forth of my interaction with Joie. Maybe it's not possible to keep the



spiritual path going and be in a committed relationship. Women and gold. Ramakrishna was right.

I look over at Joie's side of the bed. She's not there. Either in the bathroom, or in the other room reading. Maybe it's time for me to move on to the next step of my journey--to India; and let her go back to society and Stanford to get her Ph.D.

I turn off the light and lay my head down on the pillow. When I close my eyes, and look closely, I am fascinated by all the different shades of gray, white, and black that flash, arise, and disappear before my eyes. Even darkness is not completely darkness.

I fall asleep peacefully

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I arise at first light, and reflexively begin the morning prayer with "Thankfulness." That's when I realize I'd fallen asleep without saying the evening forgiveness prayers. Kol Nidre. Another vow broken. Things are not getting off to a very promising start post Yom Kippur.

I forgive myself; I ask forgiveness from Joie silently, as I look over at her sleeping. She seems so peaceful. How can I be upset with this person? Yet, just as Mery seemed to want to draw me out of my daily life into the world of the spirit, throwing me off track,. Joie seems to want to pull me out of the world of the spirit and back into the "real world" of society, with potentially an equally devastating outcome.

The best I can say is I want to begin the process of forgiving her. "For she knows not what she does." She doesn't understand how her threat to be part of society is such a threat to me. I then segue back into the Modeh, the prayer of Thankfulness. I'm not feeling very grateful. Perhaps that I'm still breathing. There, that's enough.

I'm grateful to have the Rebbe's letter as a comfort. I realize how much I need someone older and wiser to guide me, That's why I wrote him after my experience at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Easter. How do I reconcile the feeling of being forsaken, lost, suffering on the previous Thursday and Friday nights with the experience on Sunday Which is really true? I need a guide.

John can be an older brother for Johannes, and point the way to the person that, together, they can become. I, here in the high plains of Safed, can be an older brother for John. But who is witnessing and observing me? Where is my older brother, the wise father, who can help me answer the question of whether it's worth it to commit to life? I close my eyes and imagine myself as that older self.

What does an older me look like at double my age--44, even older, in my late 50's? Am I still alive? If yes, do I every find a true beloved? If so, do I have children, grand-children? Have I found a way to fit, or feel connected in the world, and to make any contribution to society?

Then, looking back, would that older self, talking to me, tell me that he is glad he took the leap and continued to live? Would he say, on balance, that the suffering is outweighed by the joy? I imagine his as much wiser. Would he once again quote from the Kipling book our mom gave us? The lesson that we need to learn to see joy and suffering not in a battle, a tournament, but both viewed from a deeply calm, soft place, a witnessing mind that creates a spacious context which allows life to emerge.

Yet, knowing the inevitable ending, does he now regret his choice to live, even with all his wisdom? Or would he say, yes, son, take the leap, and trust. It's worth it.

I'm beginning to see that the dilemma of life and death is never really resolved, only consciously addressed.

I wish he were here to guide me.

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I pick up the Rebbe's letter, and continue.

*We are appreciative of your thanking us--at least we think it was thanks-- for the help we gave you to recognize all the dust you'd accumulated in your past, dust which you weren't even aware existed. As you put it, "If it weren't for you, I would have thought I was only a partial, not a complete mess".*

*Of course, you're welcome!*

*But in all seriousness, we were upset, disturbed and saddened by the deeply painful feelings that you experienced the night before Passover. We regret that you didn't actually contact us then, and further that we never got to say good-bye to you in person.*

He's putting what happened in a kind light. And it's not really their fault we didn't say good-bye in person. Five months ago, I told them I'd come to their Passover dinner; I'd see them at the next class. They held open a couple of possible therapy sessions for me as well, but I never contacted them. Was it because I was angry at their abandoning me? Not wanting to say good-bye to them? I said I'll see you soon, and never did. Is that how I want to continue creating my endings and good-byes? By not consciously facing them?

*We were touched by your experiences at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and honored that we became part of your candle lit service.*

*We understand your wrestling with what you perceive to be two different, parallel, seemingly irreconcilable "tracks," represented by those two experiences, one plumbing the depths of despair and aloneness, the other celebrating a unitive Oneness.*

*You again ask us, as you did when you initially came to us in therapy, what our views are of the nature of the universe, and do we feel that life, ultimately, is worth living? Further, you wonder, if we believe life is worth living, what direction we think you should pursue in the future.*

*And I assume you want a short and concise answer, all  
while standing on one leg, right? Oy vey!*

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I put the Rebbe's letter down and search my manila envelope for my copy of the letter to them, which I'd sent them weeks ago. I find the excerpt I'm looking for. "I'm still healing, still raw, and still cry a lot. I don't know if I'll ever get over this pain. It's like I see the rawness and suffering of existence too clearly."

I look over at Joie, and think of her singing "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," and comforting me.

If you need a friend  
I'm sailing right behind  
Like a bridge over troubled water  
I will ease your mind

When she sings, I do feel it's like an angel saying that everything is going to be all right. She's such a strong woman. I'm aware that in spite of myself, I have begun to allow Joie to climb onto my raft--, the one that I'd so carefully emptied. I've even helped her aboard.

I hear her singing, "All the world is just a narrow bridge." It's like I've let her be the bridge that I'm crossing to life. Yet I know that this will only cause me more suffering. Like Grandpa and Grandma. Even in the best of circumstances, if the relationship actually works long term--which is hard for me to imagine since none of my other relationships have ever lasted more than a few months, at some point, the raft will contain just one. I faced death alone yesterday. Isn't this the time to make the break from attachment to another cleanly and completely?

Is it just out of weakness that I've encouraged her to climb aboard? Why did I do that? Is it the pain and fear of facing life alone that propels us to try to connect, to have a companion for the



were leaving, to be with family. Despite their protestations about how much they cared for me, and how parental they both felt toward me, in the end, they, too left me for others. And God took my grandmother from me. Now Joie's going to leave me to go back to America. Isn't it true that eventually there's no one but ourselves, and each of us has to do it all on our own. Maybe Jacques is right.

I feel myself once again slipping into that place of abandonment. Dr. Lisbet called it a combination of my "little boy lost narrative, wah, I-can't-count-on-anyone-to-take-care-of-me," and my "angry, I-don't-need-anyone-teenage-toughness- façade-I'll leave you before you can leave me."

*Dr. Lisbet and I are well aware, from our sessions together, of the hurt and pain you have experienced in life. Your parents hurt you, Mery hurt you, your God hurt you, and part of you feels abandoned by all of them.*

*One part of wisdom, and we hope we have been a catalyst in helping you to see this, is realizing and deciding, at some point, that your problems are your own, not because of your parents, not because of Mery, not even because of God.*

*That wisdom allows you to be responsible for your own actions, deeds, thoughts, and, yes, dust. We admire your efforts to rely on and trust yourself, to act as if you are in control of your own destiny, and the enormous energy and work you put into self-reflection and efforts at self-change. In fact, that's one of the things that Dr. Lisbet and I, at our age, have re-learned from you. You remind us, as our bodies start to weaken and tire, to remember, like the story of Chanukah also teaches, that we have more energy than we sometimes feel and believe. You've shown great resilience under difficult circumstances. That's an important lesson for all of us. It's like the voluntary in-breath. Strong, powerful, an act of free will and self-responsibility. It reflects your-and all of our-inner strength, and determination.*

*What we'd like to remind you of, is to make sure-- as we've said to you before-- that while striving for self-reliance is an important aspect of life, if you only do it to keep yourself from being hurt and abandoned again, it will eventually become a defense that does you a disservice.*

*Remember the second part of Hillel's remarks:*

*"If I am only for myself,  
Who am I?"*

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I set the letter down, in annoyance. Of course I know that line. I'm the one who told it to them. They're discounting all the sensitive feelings I've developed, my compassion for others, the people on Sixth Street, the refugees in the camps. I'm a different person than when Mery first met me. Yet, in this letter I'm getting the same finger-pointing message that I'm not doing enough. I don't need another lecture.

I get dressed, go outside, and see the dead branches I gathered the night before for the sukkah. I pick up a few and place them above the eaves. Sukkot, a time of facing our vulnerability and impermanence in life. Got that. Also a time of ingathering the harvest. Where are the bountiful fruits of all my efforts?

I sit down under the slight overhang I've made, and continue with the Rebbe's letter. Outside, under the empty sky, I hear a baby crying.

*If you keep breathing in, keep trying to be self-reliant and avoid vulnerability, then of course you will die! Eventually you can't take more breath in, self-reliance comes to a dead end. In order to stay alive, the other part of the breath cycle, as you know all too well, is to breathe out. One part of that breathing out, as Hillel noted, is a giving back, a sharing of your gifts of self with others.*

*That is your very wise 'serving water' experience at Sinai. We know you are sensitive to this issue, and again we admire how much your heart opens to those who are suffering and in need. So, the issue is one of balance. Sometimes, Dr. Lisbet and I realize that we give too much, at the expense of taking care of ourselves. It's always difficult to find that balance between self care and concern for others. There's a wonderful Tai Chi dyad exercise that Dr. Lisbet has taught me that illustrates this idea, in a very embodied way. We know you're there with Lin Zscho, and you may want to ask him about it. Please give him our regards.*

Great. I've done it again, jumping to conclusions, feeling myself attacked, when in fact they were about to give me a kind message. More defensive dust. Sigh. Kol Nidre. Samsara. I go back and reread what they'd written. Not only did I mishear the criticism, which wasn't there at all; I totally ignored the compliment they were giving me: that perhaps I'd actually offered something to them.

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*In addition to not giving to others, the other potential danger of self-reliance is that, from a place of anger and tightness at trying to "do it all" by ourselves, we may become blinded through black and white thinking, and not realize all the gifts we are actually receiving. As we've shared with you before, a wise person noted, we often are given more gifts and blessings than we receive.*

*If you believe that no one can or does help you, you may ignore what you are receiving, and, to keep your story consistent with your emotional feeling of being abandoned, feel that "the one thing I really want from you you're not giving me."*

*You may see only all the ways you're not getting what you want, or are feeling deserted and abandoned, all the ways you have to do it yourself, but not acknowledging what life is giving you. As with the example of breath, focusing on the fact that you're having to breathe in, rather than on the trees, the oxygen, your lungs, which allow you to do so. Who made your lungs? And who made them so they can take in breath? Certainly a force--random or divine--that was here long before you.*

It seems that the lessons I'm failing to learn, keep coming back over and over. This sounds like a conversation that Prem Devi, Reverend Noel and Jacques were having. Is the universe trying to give me unlimited reminders? I remember my intro psych class, reading about researchers who changed the placement of a rat's food, to see how many trials it would take for it to learn the new route. Some were one trial learners, some two, some many more. It seems in some areas, I'm not much better than a many-trial rat. I've said my goal is to cut through all illusions, including the one that I've made progress



cutting through all illusions. I suppose I should be grateful to the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet for continuing to do that for me.

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Another way the outbreath can be understood is a letting go of hurts, and moving toward forgiveness. An important aspect of that can be both acts of generosity AND feelings of gratitude. As Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur approach, one way to explore new beginnings and forgiveness is to look at all the blessings you have received, even from those who have hurt you.

The dust of your parents does not negate their caring for you. Remember the stories you shared with us-- your mother lifting the heavy furniture off your head; your father rocking you in your crib; her heading the Parent Teacher Association, his baseball coaching. Do you remember when you told us you used to go with your father every Easter to the downtown Plaza, and climb on the giant bunny rabbits.

Though Mery may have left you, you also told us that she offered you many moments of love and kindnesses, and that in some ways she is the one who started you on your spiritual journey, leading to your experiences at Sinai, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. And, without trying to overstate our importance, wasn't she a catalyst in leading you to meet us; take our classes, meet Joie, and even to your now being in your community in Safed? All of these are symbolic oxygen, gifts of life that allow you to breathe in. These blessings you are being given and have been given--no matter how imperfect, or infrequent--are real, valid, and we ask you not to dismiss or discount them, but to acknowledge and honor them.

As you know, Hillel said, it is wise to be for yourself; it is also wise to realize our interdependence through sharing with others; and we would add, it is further wise to learn to accept and acknowledge how much we receive from others. In so doing, we believe, you, and all of us, would see a more complete picture of reality, a completion of the breath cycle, the cycle of life.

This letter would have been good for me to read before Yom Kippur. Even without it, I did a pretty good job of forgiveness--and I did it alone and myself, with no help, for which, admittedly, I'm proud of myself.

I remember his joke about the righteous person who is being honored at a formal gathering for all his good works. After showering

he puts on his tux, but can't find his cufflinks. He looks in his pockets, the bathroom, under the bed. Nothing. Finally, in despair, he raises his hands to the heavens, and pleads, "God, please help me. I don't want to look carelessly dressed for this honor."

When he lowers his hands, one cuff link was in each hand. He looks back up at heaven, and says, "Never mind, God, I found them myself."

I guess the very act of reading his letter, and learning from him, shows that I don't really do it all myself. Why is it so hard for me to admit that?

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*Let us say a few more things about forgiveness. These are not easy to put in words and admit, but let us try. First, one of the questions that always comes up when we talk about forgiveness, and which you yourself raised, is are there some people, and some events for which forgiveness is not possible? Can you ever forgive Hitler, or any Nazi? Let me speak just for myself in the rest of this letter, based on my experiences. I would never presume to make a universal statement for all people, but let me speak for myself, and some friends whom I know. Dr. Lisbet has read and edited the remainder of this letter, so though now it's from me, please know it's still a team effort.*

*One of my friends was a twin who was systematically poisoned with deadly diseases in Dr. Mengele's lab; her sister was being monitored, so that as soon as my friend died, her sister would be killed and the bodies compared. Miraculously, she survived, and a decade after the war, the doctor working under Mengele wrote her asking for her forgiveness. She went to meet him, heard how remorseful he felt, and did forgive him. Another person I know was a young man whose entire family was killed in the camps. After he was freed, he passed a train full of hungry German soldiers. He reached into the bag of groceries he was carrying, and gave the soldiers a loaf of bread. When I asked him how he could extend such kindness to people who had destroyed his loved ones, he replied "That's the way my mother raised me. It's the way I honor her memory."*

*These stories were hard for me to hear. They felt too kind, too generous. I wasn't ready to forgive. I didn't even want to think about it. For me, I just kept the memories buried, and didn't talk about them. Then, after my wife died, something broke in me. At first there was enormous rage. At the Nazis, at God. That's when I went to India. For some*

people, anger can fuel them to keep going, and can even be constructively channeled. For others, like myself, anger only ate into me. One teacher said it's like trying to kill a rat by eating rat poison yourself. I realized that all people who suffer are hurt and angry. I'd kept this pain in me for fifteen years. I was now forty-five, over half way through life. I had to ask myself how long I was going to carry it. For the rest of my life? Was this the legacy I was going to pass onto my children? To my grandchildren?

For me, the act of forgiveness was a liberation, the dropping of a burden I'd been carrying around that didn't serve me well at all. It was a time of renewal for me. I decided to give people a second chance, to give God a second chance.

Again, I don't presume to speak as to how others should act. I know I hope that God is a forgiving God., because I know that I constantly need God's forgiveness, love and grace. I remember this especially every Yom Kippur when the Kol Nidre is chanted. Each year I vow that I will see a spark of God in every person I meet for the rest of the year. Yet when I sing the Kol Nidre I know that even as I ask forgiveness for the lapses of the past year, I am also asking pardon for the certain lapses in my vow for the coming year. All we can do is ask and offer forgiveness, and keep trying to struggle toward fanning that higher God like spark within ourselves.

**I think of Joie sleeping, and wonder if I should go wake her up to get some breakfast. But what would I say? Ask forgiveness? Offer forgiveness? Then what? We'd have to have a conversation about our future and we'd be right back in the middle of a battle again. I'm not ready to face that conversation yet.**

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So now to your question about our views of the nature of the Universe. You ask how we can believe in a loving, compassionate God, who may give gifts of life, but eventually withdraws them. You are right, again, speaking for myself that I do come from a faith position. I do believe, at the deepest level, in a loving, compassionate God Whom I can trust. What I will also say is that this faith I have does not allow me to get around, dismiss, or avoid the vulnerability, fragility, and sadness that I see in much of life.

I understand how there was a part of you, the night before Passover, that felt taking your own life was the only option left, the only way out of a world of pain and suffering, both within and without. I also understand, at

the time, you regarded it as the ultimate self-reliant act. Beating God to the punch, so to speak.

Please know that I understand those feeling. Deeply. A root suffering is inextricably part of our human condition. None of us can escape pain and suffering, and we often feel forsaken, struggling, doubting, fighting. There is no good response at one level to that frustration, rage, and helplessness. As you point out, sometimes we rage at God, even at times when we are most doubting that God even exists, just to have Someone to argue with, to fight against, to avoid complete existential emptiness.

As you may or may not know, my family died in the Holocaust and I was smuggled to England, where I tried to start over. I married, and we had three children in four years. After the birth of our third child, my wife died of a heart attack when she was just thirty-six. I raised our three children. Never once did I question God. I didn't have time. I just kept going. When my youngest child turned eighteen and left for college in America, the house was empty, and so was I. I broke.

I went to India and lived in an ashram. I, a rabbi, couldn't continue because I no longer knew what I believed. Duty to family had kept me going. Duty to my dead family. Duty to my children. But once they became adults, I needed to get away, to flee really, to my inner self, to see what was left.

That's where I met Dr. Lisbet. And Prem Devi. Only after several years in India, did I leave for Israel, and once again begin teaching.

So, to your question, how do I handle the powerlessness, uncertainty, helplessness and vulnerability in life? At one level, I can say to you, that if I had the answer to that question, I'd be a lot wiser, and a lot richer!

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I never really knew about the Rebbe's first wife, though I'd wondered if he'd divorced her before he met Dr. Lisbet. I'd heard rumors about his family and the Holocaust, but never thought to ask. Maybe I was afraid to, it seemed too personal. Or maybe I really wasn't that interested. His job was to learn about and help me, not mine to learn about his struggles. I'm amazed he can share with me so openly and honestly and caringly. He must think I'm the most selfish, self-

centered person in the world—even as I talked with him about how I wanted to be less self-centered. How does he still find the ability to crack jokes?

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*Sometimes it's just putting one foot forward before the other. Like a plane in a fog bank, arching higher, and hoping that there will be a time you break out of the fog and reach sunshine.*

*I would still say the morning prayer, trying to find something to feel grateful for, asking for the strength to feel thankful. Begging myself to trust that God truly "guides my steps" and "provides for my every need" without sounding bitter as I said it. That didn't mean later in the day there weren't times of despair, anger, rage—at life and at God.*

*I would still do the evening prayer of forgiveness, often asking for the strength to forgive. Asking courage from the very God I was trying to forgive. Asking how does forgiveness of other humans make any sense when they have acted with such cruelty, callousness, and remorselessness.*

*There were times when I don't exactly know how I continued. It's almost like there was something that wasn't me, my "I" that kept me alive. Maybe it's like at night when you sleep. Who is breathing? It's not the "I" that takes the voluntary self-willed breath. We just trust that the body has wisdom to keep us alive when we're not "manning" the helm.*

*We humans, I believe, no matter how strong and psychologically resilient, are also incredible fragile and vulnerable. At first I thought that there were certain horrific events in life that would overwhelm just about anybody. But the more I've talked and interacted with people, I've come to realize that life itself is not easy, even under the best of circumstances. Death, illness, disease, suffering, loss, heartache are all part of our human condition. They aren't all there is, but they are certainly a reality.*

*We are reminded of our fragility and vulnerability every time we bring awareness to our outbreath, which may be our last. There are no guarantees, Jacob. I hear behind your search for the nature of the Universe, some desire for certainty. But, son, either way—whether you breathe out into the void, or into God—, part of life is about letting go and facing the vulnerability. It's an illusion to think you can insulate yourself from that pain and suffering, no matter how much you search or struggle to find an answer to your question. No one escapes life unscathed. All of us are wounded.*

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I think of what Jacques said, as he put his arms around Akishige and Lin Zscho, "Living is not for the faint of heart." I guess that's equally true for those who believe in an indifferent universe, and for those who believe in a loving compassionate God. There doesn't seem to be any easy answers, no matter which track you take.

*That doesn't mean not to try. All of us are seeking to make sense out of this world we're thrust into. Some more than others. You more than most. In your search, a couple of things to try to remember: Humor is one! Yes, it's a deadly serious search, but your grandfather had it right—a little does of meshuginah humor each day can do wonders.*

*That's why Dr. Lisbet and I try not to take ourselves too seriously. That is the real reason I would often crack little jokes in our therapy sessions—many of which didn't work, and for which I apologize to you, and to Dr. Lisbet. I might add, parenthetically, my jokes still often don't work as my children are fond of telling me—although bless the grandkids they actually think I'm funny!*

*What humor does is help us to step back and keep a perspective even while we are living in times of great difficulty and pain, we can keep some sense of lightness, playfulness, even joy, in our lives.*

I think of the Rebbe's mocking comment when during one of our therapy sessions, I complained I was abandoned and an orphan in the world, with no one to help me: "Vat are we, chopped liver?" Though it annoyed me then, now I can understand that he was trying to use a little humorous dig to get me to open my eyes to what was right in front of me—two people who were giving me their full and compassionate attention, and the best wisdom of which they were capable. I guest I'm one of those who are given more blessings than they receive.

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*Another thing to consider is that, if you can keep yourself relatively centered, and not be overwhelmed by, or give into feelings of victimization, there can be a*

positive side to vulnerability. Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean we should seek it. Lord, no. But it seems to find us without our even looking. Yet, seeing that we are not always self-reliant creatures, we can find our hearts opening to and feeling empathy for other people. The hurt can be places where our light and love come through for others also suffering.

If we can recognize that, then rather than hiding from our own vulnerability, we may also learn a greater appreciation and gratefulness for all the blessings that emerge, or are uncovered or more clearly seen. Somethings we are not as sensitive to these gifts if we are only self-reliantly battling, are only immersed in our own pain and suffering, or are feeling ourselves always needing to be competent and masters of our destiny. (Dr. Lisbet pointed out that the above was a very long sentence, but has allowed it to stand. I hope it conveys what I'm trying to share).

Sad as it makes us, the truth is we can't completely take away your pain. You couldn't take away your grandmother's pain. Or Mery's. Or, Mery yours. You can't "fix" your parents pain, which, as you must realize, often caused them to act the way they did. We can't make everything okay for others, or for ourselves. All we can do is come from the deepest place of healing love within ourselves—what you so beautifully called "serving water"—to be present with them, and support them as best we are able.

We give our gifts, in love, whatever those gifts might be. Again, to use the breath analogy, we see it as a cycle of life. We breathe out, and literally provide what nourishes trees, while metaphorically offering our gifts to nourish others. We breathe in the oxygen provided by the trees, and the generous gifts of other people. Through giving our gifts to others, in our outbreath sharing, they are given in-breath blessings that can energize and heal them in a way which, they in turn, have the strength to give to and heal others. That is the healing cycle of life that we want to nourish and strengthen in ourselves and the world.

I see that the letter is almost finished. I set it down and close my eyes. I realize I feel sad. I don't want his letter to end. Somehow I feel safe with him next to me, talking to me. I am sad at all the things I didn't say to him and Dr. Lisbet when they were in front of me. I'm sorry that their class came to an end. I wished I

could have found a way to keep it going, asking more questions, doing another exercise.

I don't want to acknowledge that life involves impermanence. The class ends. The letter ends. Relationships end. Our life ends. Necessary suffering. That's hard. That's sad. The final outbreath. Just twenty-four hours ago, I thought I'd come to peace with all this. And now I'm once again struggling, under the beginning of a make shift sukkah, feeling sad and vulnerable.

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*Well, dear Jacob, this letter is about to end. I hear the grandchildren calling "pappa, pappa" and I want to make sure I send it so you receive it in time for the Days of Awe. As you know, I treat the Days of Awe, and Yom Kippur in particular, as if it is the time of my death. So, I'm writing to you as if this is the last letter I will ever send you. As I come to the end of it, I want to make sure I have given you the best wisdom I'm capable of, and answered your questions, which I promised I would do, as best I can. You ask about my view about the nature of the universe. You ask if a spiritual life is possible which includes the ways of the world: a committed loving relationship, involvement in work and society.*

*I don't know, at your age, that my answer is or should be your answer. At least at this phase of your life. Remember the story in the Bible of Jacob, who, as you know, as a young man, wrestled with an angel, and saw that "God was in this place and I did not know it". He saw the ladder to heaven.*

*But even after seeing God, and wrestling with the angel, he proceeded to Haran, which, as you know, in Hebrew means crossroads.*

*You, a modern day Jacob, are at a crossroads. Which path do you want to choose in your life? Which belief system?*

*The Biblical Jacob still had to live his life, get married—twice (deceived by and struggling with his boss and father-in-law Laban); raise children, who also fought with and deceived him. He had to feel the ache of his sons' departure, and the fear that he'd lost Joseph forever. He had to meet and reconcile with his brother, Esau, whom he had deceived as a young man. The householder path in the ways of the world is not a simple one.*



You are, as Dr. Lisbet has shared with you, also a modern day Buddha, who has come out of his castle, only to discover the suffering of the world. Remember when Dr. Lisbet discussed the story written by her countryman Hesse about Siddhartha? Siddhartha had lived the life of an ascetic, had learned to "think, wait, and fast." With that knowledge, he returned to the world, falling in love with the beautiful Kamala, and learning business with the shrewd Kamaswami.

Amidst the demands of householder life, however, Siddhartha wasn't able to maintain his spiritual practice, and felt like a 'rotting tree.' Once again, he left the ways of the world, and continued his personal spiritual journey, "I have heard the bird in my breast sing, and followed it."

In some ways, as we've discussed, I'm not sure that it is necessarily a black/white, either or choice. Siddhartha and Jacob both had times in the world, and times of contemplation. For Siddhartha, the path ends by the river, but there he experiences all the emotions of humanity. For Jacob, the journey ends in Egypt, blessing his grandchildren.

You can't run away from emotions, which are part of life, and although they can be painful, can also bring exquisite joy and happiness. Remember Wordsworth? "My heart leaps up/when I behold/a rainbow in the sky"? The only question is what is the best way for you to experience life, and in turn, contribute your gifts to it. You remember the statement we discussed, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears"? One day you will be that teacher, and students will appear for you. The teacher also has to be ready. And I'd add a further variation, which I learned from Dr. Lisbet, "When the heart is ready, the beloved appears." We feel your heart is ready. Of course that is up to you to decide.

Either way you can and will be connected. Either way you will feel the sorrows and joys of life. Alone by the river. Surrounded by family.

The latter path is the one I chose.

As is embedded in the Shema, I have wrestled, like Israel, with God; and toward God. I have struggled, as you are, with the God I believe in. I have struggled to find the me that I believe in. If I die this Yom Kippur, I can say Yes, I have made peace with both. It was a journey worth taking. What I would say to you is that for me, the answer is Yes. Life is worth it.

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I feel tears welling up within me. Am I sad? Happy? There's no label I can put on it. I'm not able to continue reading. I set the letter down and look at the hills around me. I am raw, open. I am truly at Haran, the crossroads, in Safed, surrounded by Reb Jonathan's wisdom, Reb Luria's presence, all the invited guests, wings of angels.

I have no idea what to do. Maybe there is nothing for me to do.  
I let my body breathe.

A long period passes.

I pick up the Rebbe's letter once again.

*Recently, when my kippah was off, one of my grandchildren commented that I had a bald spot on the back of my head. Ah, out of the mouth of babes. I made a joke:*

*It's a natural progression, gray hair, no hair, no me.*

*I realized by Dr. Lisbet's face that I had made one of my poor jokes. He looked bewildered. I said, "Go get your crayons. My bald head is just a canvas for you to color on."*

*Ah, impermanence of the body. In that regard, let me share with you a letter that I have written to my children and grandchildren this Yom Kippur. I have not yet sent it. Why? On the other hand, I know it would be hard for them to hear. They aren't temperamentally inclined to talking about issues of mortality and death. I want to be sensitive to how we talk about the Book of Life and Death during the Days of Awe, and don't want to create unnecessary pain for them by overwhelming them.. On the other hand, we cannot avoid these topics, and I feel it is important and necessary to discuss these topics. What is the right balance? I'm still discussing the best way forward with Dr. Lisbet. Certainly what I write below is part of my living will to them.*

*I'm sharing it with you, Jacob, because, not only have you become part of my extended family, but also because these are topics that we have explored in depth already.*

*Dear Loved Ones, I am writing this to you during the Days of Awe. I want you to know that I feel complete, whole, Echad. If I were to die today, I can look back at my life and say I have in my own way fulfilled my potential, my piece of the cosmic puzzle, as best as I was able.*

*I have given the gifts to life that I was able to give; I had an unbelievably precious, loving relationship with your mother and grandmother. We gave birth to you three amazing children, who are now giving their gifts to each other, and to the world; and to six adorable loving grandchildren.*

*So, physically, emotionally, relationally, work wise, spiritually, I feel fulfilled and ready to go if this day is my time. You, my children are already flying. If I may quote the American Ralph Waldo Emerson,*

*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*

*I like the idea that I as a bridge only extend so far. Guidance is not the same as a road map - everyone has to live their own lives. But also know that who I am is deep within each of you. That is a great feeling of completeness and joy that I want to share with you.*

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**There is more, but I cannot see the letter through my tears. I once again put in down. I am sobbing now, like a little baby. I let the tears come. My heart is breaking open. Is it God speaking to me?**

**Finally, breath calms me. I wipe the tears.**

*Jacob, I share these thoughts and feelings with you now, and not my family here, not only because I have a deep connection with you, but also because I know you will understand at the deepest level what I am saying. For my own children and grandchildren, this sharing would perhaps be too raw and painful.*

*I also share with you that I am greedy. I want more, and hopefully when the Book of Life and Death is written, I'll have another year before next Yom Kippur. But it's also quite a comforting feeling to take a snapshot of where I am, and say, yes!!! Job well done. A good life. Thank you, beloveds. Thank you, God.*

*I find myself at this phase of life increasingly drawn to the Psalms.*

*Let everything that has breath and every breath of life praise the Lord!*

And I also remember rare moments of pure heartbreaking joy. I will share one with you. It was Shabbat. My daughter was lighting the candles. Later, after the meal there was singing and the grandkids were dancing. We were all singing Lech Lecha. Our five year old grandchild, sweet baby James and I were dancing, and both of us singing. I thought of my deceased wife who led our little family in song. She had an angelic voice, like your friend Joie. And as I had this thought, I saw her face in the room. Her face was happy and joyful, and yet also gaunt and sorrowful.

She saw her children singing, and the grandchildren she'd never met also singing and dancing and laughing. I smiled at her as James and I twirled around the room. She nodded, almost coyly, and smiled back.

James was singing fearlessly, though a bar or two behind with each phrase...lech ...you blessing...He sang with such joy and innocence. We were all being guided to a place we did not know. So much had to unfold in my life to get to this one moment, and I thought if my life ends right here, this is the crowning moment of happiness of that life, where all the pieces come together in unity.

This is where the story can end. A moment of such rare grace and beauty and joy. I knew, as it was happening, that I was feeling God's presence and the Shekina was there, embodied in my wife and her song, and in our children, and our grandchildren. And the candles were aflame leaping skyward, even as tears of wax dripped down them. I saw all of us in reflected in the mirror and window dancing. Like a multi-sided crystal, many forms, yet from one form.

Echad.

Yes, this how I want the story to end.

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**I close my eyes. Unable to see the pages. I take several slow breaths until my breath calms and my eyes clear.**

And thank you, dear Jacob for listening and hearing. As I've shared with you, you've been a teacher to me--in many ways, you bring to mind my younger self, and remind me of the strength, courage, determination, idealism, and yes, suffering, with which I began this journey. You are the next generation, the one to whom we are passing our world.

I hope that in some ways, I have been able to be a teacher to you. Know that my limits have only been one of lack of skill, not lack of caring and love. I have tried in my life, to the best of my ability, to address, transform, and channel my dust and keep it from hurting others. That way those who walk over the bridge that I am, will be offered only what is best in me to carry through their life. I ask forgiveness for any times when I have not been successful, and have thereby created hurt, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by my thought, word or deed.

All I can say to you, young man, is you have the potential for a long and glorious and giving life ahead of you. You too are a bridge that the next generation will cross to hopefully find a better world, at least in part, because of you. I hope for you, one day, that you can look back, like the Biblical Jacob, and have grandchildren to bless. And that all those who pass over you, one day, will look back at your life and remember the best in you, the gifts you were able to give.

My letter to you can perhaps help you build your bridge to faith and God. But my bridge can only go so far, and I'm sorry that it may not be as far as you would like. You knew, when you wrote me, that I'd eventually say the choice of your life is of course yours. With life, and with relationships, there are no guarantees or money back offers. Each step, each day is a leap of faith. A choice to choose life. A choice of belief system; a choice of thought, feelings, behavior.

You are now creating your own story. Given that you know the ending--your physical death--how do you want to create and write it from this point forward? Who do you want to include in the story? What perspective do you want to take in addressing the inevitable difficulties, obstacles, and storms that will come? How willing are you to forgive those who have hurt, and will hurt you? How willing are you to forgive yourself for your imperfections? The answers to all those questions will determine the story of your life, and will help influence the answer you would give to your younger self if you were older and wiser and speaking to him.

Dr. Lisbet and I are now reading together Gabriel García Márquez's 100 Years of Solitude. Some of the villagers are losing their memory, so they write signs saying "God exists" so they won't forget. I want to know not just that God exists, but to experience God. The difference is between reading a menu versus tasting food.

One of the challenges is translating between Channel One and Channel Two—a topic we have discussed. You have experienced and tasted Channel One, and have a superb intellect. Dr. Lisbet and I, in discussing your letter, shared with each other that you may be able to be, what her teacher, Carl Jung, called a Gnostic intermediary, a person who can help translate for others, and communicate and bridge the two channels. Dr. Lisbet also referred to you as a potential Bodhisattva in the making. Of course, we don't want to create too lofty expectations for you—even as we do so!!!

When we parted in Jerusalem, we never really had a chance to say a conscious good-bye. I want to do that now. Jacob, if I had the power to release you, I would. You are more than ready to venture forth. So, all I can say, for now, in gratitude and love, is good-bye.

Fly, young man, fly like the angels.

With love and blessings, to which Dr. Lisbet adds Namaste,

Your friend, Reb J.

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oie and I are holding hands as we, and all our invited guests, the ushizin, sit under the sukkah that we have built together. Looking through its fragile shelter, we can see the glorious full moon's filtered light and the flickering candles' flames illuminating the feast we have jointly prepared.

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Sukkot, the time of ingathering of the harvest before the oncoming winter, is, for me, the culmination of a time of internal ingathering, during which I've been trying to write about and symbolically harvest the lessons I've learned these past nine months.

Interestingly, and seemingly coincidentally, I heard from my creative writing professor a few days ago. After five months, he'd finally had a chance to read my play. He wrote that not only did I pass the course, but that if I hadn't taken it pass/no credit I would have received an A.

I'm now an official Stanford graduate. He even encouraged me to consider a career in writing.

*"You have a keen, ironic mind, and I urge you to think about applying it to the writing life. Consider specializing in a genre such as 'autobiographical fiction' for which you may be well suited. That gives you the freedom to draw from your experience, which you did movingly in your play. But since you are struggling with the deepest truths of life, and you don't want to be confined by having to render a completely accurate, historical account. Fiction allows you the lie that reveals the truth. Also, by writing fiction, and telling a story, we get to choose how that story ends. Unlike life. Good luck on your journey, and, though I never thought I'd be saying this to you, I'd like you to keep in touch. When you are ready, please send me your next work. And I even urge you, if you are interested, to think about applying to the graduate school writing program here. Till then.*

I'm so excited when I get this letter, I immediately ran and show it to Joie. I'm like a little kid who is celebrating that he's just won a prize, or received a good grade, a gold star. She's the first person I wanted to tell.

"Yeh! great news. Look." I hand her the letter.

But while she's reading the letter, I notice myself becoming embarrassed. The play didn't end with my ending my life. But it did end with my grandmother's death. And I'm ashamed that I am taking pleasure in being rewarded for writing about my grandmother's death.

She looks at me, and I could see that she is happy for me. She starts to give me a hug, but squirm away, and tell her what I'm feeling. She says,

"I understand what you're saying, that you could feel that your joy is callous, because it's based on writing about your grandma's her death. But I disagree. I've read your play. In it there is heart and feeling and pain and joy. It is a celebration of your love for your grandmother. It is an honoring of her and she would be very proud of you."

I become like a little kid again, so thankful for her wisdom. I give her a big hug.

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"After a moment, she pulls back and asks,

"If you do take your Professor's advice, and decide to write a book of fiction about your life, how would you want it to end?"

"I've never really thought about the endings, much less being a writer. In some ways it seems kind of solitary, observing life rather than living life. On the other hand," I smile, "living life sometimes seems vastly overrated."



She gives me a poke in my arm, as I continue "Do you remember when you helped me with my crossword puzzle on Easter Sunday?"

"Shit, do I?! When I was accused of a potty mouth?"

I smile sheepishly. "In some ways, I wish life were like a crossword puzzle. Knowing that there is an answer, so we can trust that our search is not in vain."

"Sounds deep. You so enjoy playing with words, don't you?"

"I love words. Their sounds, their textures. Sometimes they seem like the only thing I have to cling to. I'd like them to help me build a bridge to the future."

"That's very poetic. But again, I ask, what future? What is the ending of the story toward which you want to build a bridge?"

"That's hard to say. My journal is not a story. It's a journal. It helps guide me toward an unfolding end, it doesn't predict or describe the end. I'd always figured my journal writing would end when my life ended."

"I understand that. But if it were a story, then you could choose the ending. You must have some thought, or dream, about how would you want it to end?"

"I hear what you're saying. But like I said I've always though the journal would just stop. Sort of like the play was going to end with my killing myself. Life just ends. But you're right. That is a choice of endings."

"Exactly. Your professor is saying with a story, you can choose the ending, what you would like it to be?"

"I'm not sure. I guess I'm still in the wilderness, huh? It's interesting, his advice is kind of like Grandpa Dave's at Passover: 'Make the story your own.' How do you think it should end?"

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"Simple. The final chapter of the book should have two intertwined themes. The first should be your best thoughts and wisdom about the nature of the universe, based on your understanding of and encounters with the wisest people from all wisdom traditions--religious, spiritual, philosophical. And interspersed with that wisdom should be a love story, where two people get to know each other, fall in love, and decide they want to commit themselves to each other for the rest of their lives. The final chapter could both share wisdom and be a love letter to your beloved."

"Is that the way it will end?"

"That's the way I'd like it to end. But I don't know. It's up to you how you end your story, isn't it? This is not a play. We're not actors at the mercy of the written word with no choice in how our actions and life unfolds. How do you want it to end?"

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At this time of Sukkot, of ingathering, how do I want the story to end? How do you decide when and where to stop?

I guess where you stop the story also is influenced by where you start the story.

If the story were just a solo quest, I would begin it with "J" as John, the one who points the way, writing in his journal, having just returned to Jerusalem from Bethlehem on Christmas Day. He hasn't been able to write since Sukkot and Simchat Torah, but now, for the first time in months, at the darkest time of the year, with just a little light from the Chanukah candles to help guide him, he begins to tell his story. He's wrestling with the nature of the universe, not in an abstract way, but with his life on the line.

From his vantage point, John is fighting to overcome, even to kill the reflexive, flesh-oriented life of his past self--"J" as

Johannes the seducer--in order to seek the spirit. As he reviews his past, he grows in the present, and seeks to evolve a new, deeper, spiritual self, to point the way for him, and for others.

But what is he pointing the way toward? Should the story end on Good Friday with existential death and despair? Does the story end on Eastern Sunday, with rebirth?

Is the truth flesh? Or spirit? Existential meaninglessness or an omega point of love?

If I stop the story in Jerusalem, there are two possible endings.

If the story were just about me, and I wanted to emphasize the existential despair and suffering in life, and how one person tried to break through all the illusions of life--family, friends, society and the law, even God -- I could stop the story with the play, and my dark night of the soul on Thursday night before Passover.

If I wanted to show a rebirth and redemption, I could end it in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Easter Sunday, with a healing, forgiving feeling in my heart toward all that happened in the past.

Which ending do I believe is "correct?" The "truth"? "A" truth? What if I were trying this case in court, arguing both sides of the case, and serving as judge and jury. What are my criteria to guide my decision? Clear and convincing evidence? Preponderance of the evidence? Beyond a reasonable doubt? Absolute certainty? And what counts as evidence?

What I realize here in Safed is that, at this phase of my life, before I make a final choice, I need to look at each choice, each path one more time. I need to consider whether they necessarily have to be either/or. Is there a way to nuance each further given what I have learned interacting with all the wise people here, and from my time with Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan, including his recent letter. Is

there a way, given my desire to see the Rorschach test as a whole story, that I can combine the two?

If I take Joie's advice, and end the story with what I now think is the best wisdom, what would I say?

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In essence, there are two conflicting views of the nature of the universe with which I still wrestle.

One track is existential. There is no God, the universe is indifferent, unknowable, and with no true meaning. When I see the world in this way, on this track, I hear the profound plaintive words of Ecclesiastes--read on the Sabbath of Sukkot-- vanity, vanity all is vanity. The despairing words of Shakespeare: the world is full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. There is no denying these feelings of meaninglessness, vulnerability, even helplessness. I know them well, have immersed myself in them, and know they are, for now, a part of me.

But suicide as an act of defiant existential choice is not the only option , even within this worldview. One can also defiantly, yet joyfully, choose to live life even while facing extinction and indifference. I can go forward, renewed, reconnected, healed of the past, not with hope of any certain outcome, but to do the best I can on this journey, regardless of outcome. It's ok to fight the battle, push the rock up the hill, even if there is no ultimate meaning or goal in that task. There is nothing but the journey itself.

I recall the words Prem Devi shared from the Bhagavad Gita about "non-attachment of the fruits of one's actions." It's like playing the notes of the flute, practicing hard to get each note right, with as beautiful a tone as possible, knowing that the notes disappear as soon as they are played. It's writing words for sharing a journey that may

or may not be read, may or may not be helpful to me, or others. It's Johannes having to learn that foreplay counts, even if there is no orgasm. Job coming to peace with his life, even if his children and fortune are not restored. One needs to "imagine Jonah happy" after his transformative meditation in the whale, even if he doesn't reach Nineveh, or the people there don't change their ways.

In this view, John's life has value although he may only be there to point the way, to another human struggling to create justice in an imperfect world. Moses does the best he can, overcomes his demons, although he doesn't get to reach the promised land. Jacob continues to seek to try to become Israel, to wrestle with God, to fulfill his higher self, even if there is no god, and the dust and flaws are never completely removed. Jesus' life makes a contribution even if he isn't reborn.

We are bodies. We can become more than bodies. But in the end, it's from dust and ashes we are born, and to dust and ashes we will return. The value and meaning of life and our story is not determined by the ending, but by the journey.

From this perspective, I've learned that we do not need to give into despair and hopelessness. We can attempt to deny our nothingness, learn to be self-reliant, find moments to taste the strawberry, and develop an equanimity--xujing--about coming from and going back into the cosmic void.

I play the notes of my flute, letting the sound of my life disappear with each note.

With this worldview, I would want to act for the process, not the outcome. On my last outbreath, I want to make sure I've given everything I can to nurture life. Even if there is no ultimate meaning. I remember hearing a poet say, if he knew that this was the

last day of earth's existence, and certain destruction and death of all he knew and loved lay just ahead, on that day, he "would plant a tree."

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I imagine presenting the above material to Jacques, or my Camus professor at Stanford. Or Akishige and Lin Zscho. They would be able to provide constructive criticism and feedback. I also believe they would be proud of me, telling me that I have not only begun to learn their teachings, but have even begun to digest them, applying how I would use what they taught me to live my life.

I then imagine the reactions of Reb Jonathan, Reverend Noel, and Al Hazrumi, who would ask me where is God? What about their deeply held belief of a loving, compassionate God?

That is the other choice about the nature of the universe. As I experienced at Sinai, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one can believe that, at the deepest level, we live in a sacred, compassionate universe, where eventually we all are resurrected into a state of light and grace, a place of divine love and energy. We have free will to overcome our "sins, dust, evil inclinations." We are able to learn from our mistakes, forgive ourselves and others, be forgiven. As Martin Luther King said, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." And De Chardin: We are all part of a divine holy plan, moving toward an omega point of consciousness and love.

This view gives a framework, coherence, and meaning to human caused suffering. Without such a view, then there is just suffering. But with a belief in One God, One without a second, I, we, are all waves in a vast oceanic cosmic unity. We taste that Oneness on Shabbat; and there may be rare moments of grace, when we feel God's presence, and know that God is in this place. We are each a piece of

the cosmic puzzle, and it is up to us to fulfill our piece as best we can. In the end of days, everything will fit and make sense.

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Which one do I choose as true?

The question is not an academic exercise for me. It feels like the view I choose will be the fulcrum, the foundation from which I will live my life. It will also determine how end the story.

I think of Joie. I think of Grandpa and Grandma. If the world is existential, then, no matter how hard you strive no matter how stoic and wise a view you have, no matter how many authentic choices you make, how many delicious strawberries you taste, you end up dying alone after an ultimately meaningless life.

If you want an uplifting ending, you end the story with grandpa sweeping grandma off her feet, as they kiss and laugh and head off to elope after borrowing \$150, he with his law degree in hand, and hope in both their eyes. Like the ending of the movie the Graduate. Adversities overcome, a bright future ahead.

If you want the existentially true and inevitable ending, the last scene of the story involves fear, tears, pain, and death, Grandma fading away and Grandpa alone holding her hand, she no longer able to hold his. No matter how much love and joy they had in life on the journey, this is the way it ends. Period. Intellectually honest to that world view, but not emotionally satisfying.

If I choose this world view, why would I want to start a relationship that I know is going to end? It will either end in divorce, like my parents; in an uncomfortable break up, like Mery and me; or, at best--if we can overcome all the communication problems and challenges and differences inevitable when two people try to live together--at best it will end in the death of one of us. The very

effort to create an interconnected web with others to ease our aloneness and suffering during life, ends up causing us increased anguish, loss, suffering, and aloneness. Is it worth it?

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I know Joie wants the ending of the story to be a love letter to her, a commitment to our life together.

I ask Joie if I she would read the above page. She agrees, and we move to a corner of the sukkah. I want her to realize that for me, choosing a view of the nature of the universe, and choosing a relationship are intertwined.

"If you believe in an existential world view, how can you begin a relationship knowing it's going to end?" I ask after she's read it. "Especially after all of our discussion of death."

Her face tightens, and I see that she is trying to hold back tears. Both Rev. Noel and Prem Devi notice, come over, and put their arms around her, to comfort her. She quickly wipes her eyes, with a handkerchief that Al Hazrumi gives her.

There is an awkwardness in the sukkah, overriding the joy that we were sharing only a moment ago. I feel sorry that I didn't act quickly to embrace and comfort her. What is holding me back? Knowing that she's going to be leaving in less than two weeks for America? Knowing that even if I were to follow her back there, and it all worked out, eventually she would leave me like Grandma left Grandpa? Is there a part of me that still fears the physical body? That fears emotions? That fears relationship?

After a few moments, Joie picks up her guitar and starts to hum a niggun.

This is not the way I want the story to end. In awkwardness. Confusion. Distance.



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It would have been better to have ended it with the strength I felt at the end of Yom Kippur, with shofars blowing tekia hagadol, and echoing through the hills of Safed, seeing a string of candle lights coming toward me.

I was at peace with my life, with my death.

Or to end it with the Rebbe's letter. His belief and trust in me. His releasing me to "Fly, Jacob, fly like the angels."

I reread the lines that open this section of my journal, beginning with a capital **J**. J for me. J for Joie and our togetherness, holding hands. That would convey love, yet also acknowledge the fragility of life--symbolized by the sukkah. There would also be hope--the glorious and full moon--and being surrounded by wise people. That, too, would have been a good place to end the story.

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"Make the story your own," Grandpa said. "A man does best when he is most himself" Thoreau wrote in his journal.

How do I know how to end the story if I don't know who I am--what is most me-- and what I believe about the nature of the universe?

To end the story in my dark night of the soul on Thursday before Passover is too despairing. If there is a sad ending to a story--his life ended in poverty, isolation, despair, and hopelessness-- we use that ending as the glasses through which we look back to see, interpret, and judge a life. Then, even good happy events seem somewhat blemished, made sadder, more tragic.

To end this writing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on resurrection Sunday would give more uplift. When there is a happy

ending, it creates a favorable perspective, a lens through which we look back at past events that help render the trails, trials, suffering, pain, and mistakes that came before more understandable, more bearable, more meaningful. The only trouble with that ending is that it's too pat and simplistic. We have to live on Monday. And daily life once again becomes more complicated. The personal and global suffering, too real.

Yom Kippur would have been a good place to end the story, but I am still alive, and yes, after facing death, life is still complicated and challenging.

The ending of the story determines how the story is viewed, just as the view of the nature of the universe determines how life is viewed.

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What about ending the story on Sukkot? That idea has a lot going for it. I might, if not reconcile, at least articulate and illustrate these two different views of the universe.

On the one hand, Sukkot is about existential vulnerability, fragility, impermanence, not reaching your goal. The ever wandering Jew, still in the desert, creating temporary shelter for themselves. The traditional usphizin--invited guests under the sukkah-- were all wanderers or exiles. Abraham left his father's house to go to Israel; Jacob fled to Laban. Joseph was exiled from his family. Moses fled Egypt for Midian, and later with Aaron led people for forty years in the desert. David fled from Saul.

Winter lies ahead. There is a reading from Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, on the Shabbat of Sukkot, telling us that worldly possessions are vain and transitory. Seeking after knowledge and

wisdom is vanity of vanities. Nature is nature, part of an indifferent, amoral universe, and the rain falls on all, rich and poor, good and evil. The world runs in cycles. There is no progress. A time to build, a time to tear down. Jacques would be right at home with these views.

On the other hand, we also read Deuteronomy, which says that nature is a reflection of the moral universe and if you follow the ways of the Lord, rain will fall and crops will grow. Looked at historically, or as a psychological journey, Sukkot is the third and final pilgrimage holiday, when we can look back and see how far we've come from Passover and the Exodus, leaving the bondage of Egypt, our narrow places, encountering God and receiving divine wisdom at Sinai. This week's Parashat describes the Jews about to enter the promised land. So, there is progress, and we can celebrate that progress.

The mood is one of rejoicing--Z'man Simchateinu--the season of rejoicing. Just like Miriam taught us to dance after we crossed the Reed Sea--to celebrate each step of progress on the journey--Sukkot, though not a final arrival, is a time of ingathering of the harvest of the year, and is also a time of rejoicing-- whether because of a successful completion of the harvest, or because of finishing the process of repentance from the Days of Awe, and still being alive. We are to feel fulfilled and secure, trusting in God as our permanent shelter. Sukkot is also a festival about the future: it is prophesied in Zechariah (14:16) that on Sukkot, the messianic period will begin, when all nations will come to Jerusalem..

Maybe Sukkot is a perfect time to end the story, a dialogue between Kohelet and Deuteronomy, between the two tracks that I am trying to choose between regarding the nature of the universe.

What lies ahead?

The hope of the promised land. Also winter.

How does the story end? How should it end?

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I want a narrative that has a happy ending. Who wouldn't? Perhaps Jacques. I smile. But imagine saying to him "Even Camus posited 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'" So how to address all the suffering? Some challenges you can learn from, and come out better. My creative writing professor called these "Transformative narratives." Or come out wiser spiritually ("Transcendent narratives.") Akishige's Zen three stanzas appeal to me because it suggests you do that by going "in and through the second stanza. You learn to receive all the blessings you are given. To endure the pain and suffering and emerge on the other side with positive lessons about love and life.

What's wrong with that? The simplest problem is trying so hard to get to the third stanza that you don't really go in and through, but try to achieve a false sense of closure. A type of "redemptive narrative." That can be a true possibility, but it can also be a premature Panglossian "All's well that ends well" glossing over and minimizing the pain and suffering. I also believe that not every situation allows a neat ending (the chaos story). Isn't it possible that sometimes suffering is just meaningless suffering.

And even if you do achieve third stanza closure, which is what I would like in an ending, I don't really believe it is once and for all. There are repeated challenges, additional "second stanzas" that have to be addressed. And memories and scars from the past don't all seem to forever disappear. At least not yet. Yes, the intensity of the sadness, grief, and loss is less with the passage of time, but I'd be dishonest to say it doesn't come back unbidden into memory.

Hopefully, lessons learned will help make going in and through each time better, wiser, more compassionate. And, why wouldn't I want to create a narrative of healing and cleaning dust--inside and out--breathing, forgiving, and seeking to move on in joy and gratefulness?

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My relationship with Joie began on the second day of Passover, which was also Easter Sunday. It began on the first day in the wilderness, chesed, chesed, love within the context of love. And now we are in the sukkah's fragile shelter.

"You know I'm leaving in ten days to begin my graduate program. Do you know yet what you're planning to do? What your next chapter will be?" The question is asked with seeming nonchalance.

I respond evenly: "No, I don't. But, without knowing the future, I can say with all integrity and focus, the Shehecheyanu,

Praised are You, HaShem, for keeping us in life, for  
sustaining us, and for helping us reach this moment.

I'm glad the past is over. I have no idea about the future. But I am happy and grateful to be here, to have survived, and to be in the here and now."

"That's beautiful. I, too, am happy to be in the here and now with you. But you realize that unless we talk about the future, it's unclear whether we will be together in that future." More of an edge creeps into her voice.

I mirror her tone and escalation: "How can you ask me that now? You know I'm trying to figure out who I am and what I believe about the nature of the universe. I'm still at the top of the hour glass. I see the outlines of the vision of who I want to be. But I can't figure out the question to which I am the answer. I want to serve, in some form. But is the world existentially random, and I just choose whatever form

appears; or is there a piece of the cosmic puzzle that is uniquely me that I need to discover. I just don't know. That's as far down the hourglass as I can go right now."

"I understand that. I respect that, even admire your reflective efforts. But what I don't understand is why those efforts can't be done as part of a shared journey." The edge in her tone has softened.

"Do you remember when the Rebbe told that joke from Huston Smith? 'Be careful of climbing the ladder of success, for when you get to the top, you may find you're leaning against the wrong wall.'"

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She smiles vaguely and nods. "Well, these questions have everything to do with climbing the relationship ladder. Look, it's not personal. I know you can end the story at a happy time. Like with my grandfather and grandmother eloping, feeling hopeful and joyous. But what I'm trying to answer, before I follow that path and climb the rungs of that ladder, is would my grandfather have loved and eloped if he had known how the story would end--in death and sadness and aloneness."

"You have to answer that question for yourself. But I have already answered it for me. Even if the world is existential and ends in aloneness, that's not going to stop me for wanting my life to be a shared journey. I want to grab the love wherever it exists."

"Are you going to try to convince me that relationship is worth it by the 'better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all' cliché?"

"I'm trying to share my view." There is a tightness in her voice, and I realize that my own anxiety, fears and vulnerabilities caused me to speak more sharply than I would have liked.

"Sorry. That came out meanly. I guess I'm pretty afraid of risks and uncertainty."

"And loss of control."

"Yes, right. But you've got to admit that by definition, relationship--in fact, any human contact at all--involves risk, uncertainty, and loss of control. I sometimes wonder if permanent love can exist in a world that is so ephemeral. But that's my issue. Please, I do want to hear what you believe. You were saying even if the world is existential, and relationships ultimately end in aloneness, you would still want to share the journey, right?"

"Yes. And I want you to know I hear your fears. Sometimes I have them, too. But for me the only thing that makes existence worthwhile, no matter how fleeting, is love. I don't say that to try to force you to do what you don't want to do, it's just what I truly feel."

When she says that, I initially feel more in control. But then I begin to feel like a rat or a dog in a laboratory experiment. She tells me she's not trying to control me, so I feel more in control. She's trying to counter the reflexive freedom response of Pavlov's dogs. But is she really just being a wise puppet master controlling me? Am I merely a puppet who, as soon as you tell me I'm free, feels better even though I'm still being put in a harness?"

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"So you do believe the world is existentially indifferent and random?"

"No, actually, what I was saying is that if that were my view, I'd still want to risk love. But in my view, love is forever. I have two favorite stories that reflect my hopes and beliefs. Do you want to hear?"

"Love to."

"One is the story, *Short Friday*, of the tailor Shmul-Liebeles and his wife Shoshe, a couple who loved each other with a great love. They, too, talked to each other about death, what if one should die before the other. I love this story so much, I actually carry it with me. Let me read it to you."

She thumbs through her backpack, pulls out several pages, then reads. "When Shmul-Liebeles says he fears ending up in hell, Shoshe tells him...

'Bite your tongue, everything is possible under God... you'll live until the Messiah comes...or it's possible I'll die before you and you will marry a young woman.

He replies, 'God forbid. You must remain in good health...' And later, after coming back from Shabbat services, he tells her that if she should die, 'I would simply perish from sorrow. They would bury us both on the same day.'

"On the Sabbath, they make love. Afterwards, she notices something burning in the oven, and asks Shmul-Liebeles if she should open the flue, to which he replies, 'You're imagining it. It'll become too cold in here.'

"That night they both dreamed that they had passed away, and upon awakening, realized that they could not move, and were in their graves for good.'"

Joie looks at me, with tears in her eyes, and then continues reading:

'Shmul-Liebeles, they've buried us already. It's all over.'  
'Yes, Shoshe, praised be the true Judge. We are in God's hands.'  
'It's a good thing we're lying side by side,' she muttered.  
'Yes, Shoshe,' he said, recalling a verse: lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided."

Joie is not able to continue. Tears are rolling down her cheeks. And mine. I put my arm around her. How can I not? I caress her, and place her head on my shoulder. I take the chapter from her, and read



the last lines

Man and wife grew silent. In the stillness they heard the flapping of wings, a quiet singing. An angel of God had come to guide Shmul-liebele the tailor and his wife, Shoshe, into paradise.

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We hold each other for a long time. For a while I am able to be still and just hold her. I listen for the Safed angels' wings.

I remember last night. She reached over to take my hand, while sleeping. I liked it, and felt like her protector. But soon I begin to fear it. Can I really protector her? How long should I hold it? I start to feel trapped. I realize my mind is beginning to stir, and all I can hear is flapping thoughts. I think what beautiful words Singer has written. I think maybe I will send Grandpa this short story. It seems a kind thing to do, and perhaps could provide some comfort to him. Then, without a blink, I wonder if I should add a couple of the lines from *Short Friday* to what my grandfather says in my play, to help console my grandfather.

And with only a small pause to condemn myself for making art out of grandpa's suffering and for thinking about writing about reality as much as, or even more than living it, I think that Shumul-Liebele, during life, was a tailor. That was his identity. What am I? Can I really become involved in a relationship when I have no idea what I'm going to do with my life?

"That was beautiful. I understand why you told me that story. You believe love is eternal, love endures forever. You want me to believe that, too. How can I love someone, commit to someone when I don't even know who I am, or what I want to be? At least Shumul-Liebele knew he was a tailor."

Joie puts her arm around me. "I think you can be whatever you want to be."

"You sound like my mother. Or Thoreau." I quote from his journal 'A man does best when he is most himself' But let's we be a little more specific here. Shumul was a tailor. You're going to get your Ph.D in education and teaching. I've just barely limped over the line to get my Bachelors. Not that I'm comparing or competitive or anything. But I want to be something. What is my piece of the cosmic puzzle, if such a puzzle exists? Do you think I should be a writer? Apply to the program my professor suggested at Stanford?"

"It sounds like you're trying to work on several different levels at the same time, aren't you?" Her voice is calm and clear. "You're trying to figure out your view of the nature of the universe; how you view death; where relationship fits; and what is your professional direction." She looks at me and smiles. "I can just hear the Rebbe saying to you, 'And why don't you do all of that while standing on one foot!'"

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What a remarkable woman. Here I've just told her that I'm afraid of committing, that I have no direction, that I'm not sure what I want to do with my life, that it makes no sense to make plans for the future until I am clearer. And she is not only able to hear it calmly, even empathically, but add a touch of humor.

I feel my entire mood change. It's like Basho's poem: the dark sea and the shrill voice are still there: but now rather than threatening and fearful, they are just water and sound. Yes, I am unclear about the future. Yes, there are still unanswered questions. But I don't need to panic over them, or be so dreadfully serious. I

can see them not with fear, but perhaps, in soft white, or at least with a bit of humor.

I pick up the lulav, the long curvy palm branch. On its left side I place two willows, and on the right side three myrtles. I hold them in my right hand with the spine of the lulav towards me. I pick up the etrog in my left hand, and turn it upside down. Then, standing on one foot, I turn the etrog right side up and, facing east, I shake the lulav in front of me, then draw it back to me. I do this three times facing east. Then I perform the same motion, with more energy and agitation, with the lulav pointed to my right, the south. I chant:

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam,  
shehechehyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higianu laz'man hazeh.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all who,  
has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

As I do this, I feel like I'm engaged in some Native American rain ritual, and find myself chanting the syllables of each word passionately. I notice sensual and even erotic sensations in me, as I wave the lulav over the etrog. I remember Reb Jonathan telling me that there is a mystical interpretation of this ceremony, a striving toward union with the lulav representing the obvious phallic male energy, and the etrog the breast and feminine energy. Sexuality is everywhere. Maybe the flesh and spirit don't need to be either/or.

As I've been dancing and shaking the lulav over the etrog, while standing on one foot, our group of ushpizim, led by Joie, have been vigorously clapping. Even Jacques has joined in.

I raise the lulav over my shoulder, pointing west, and make the in and out motion; then to my left, then above me. As I do so I look over at Joie, and smile. Finally, bending over, I lower the lulav before me, making sure that it not pointed downward. We must keep the

erection pointed skyward, even as we bend over. The smile turns into laughter.

*and you shall rejoice before the Lord (Lev. 23:40)*

\* \* \*

"Was that a fertility dance?" Jacques asks, bemused. "Pretty spicy, I'd say."

"What is its meaning?" Lin Zscho asks "other than showing you've learned your tai chi lessons of balance well?"

"It's something to do with the male and female energies, I think, what you'd call yin and yang. Maybe joining them, interconnecting them. It also has to do with recognizing seeming paradoxes. Like Sukkot. As Jacques rightly said, Sukkot can be seen as part of existential meaninglessness—wondering, rootlessness, the difficulty of making anything bloom in the desert. But the four species—the lulav, Etrog, myrtle, and willow—can only be cultivated when one is settled on the land, so there is intimations of fruitfulness and fertility." I turn to Akishige. "All within the big mind game, eh?"

"Sukkot reminds the Jews of the desert period. But, really, if you're honest, though there may occasionally be moments of joy, life is a desert, period." Jacques notes, with a sly smile. "And we have to create that joy by our own hands. The Jews in the desert were like little babies, fearful of being abandoned, no matter how many times God reassured them or gave them manna from heaven. But how are they ever going to grow up and provide for themselves, to experience any morsel of joy, and become mature adults while they sit and whine and the big Parent God provides for them?"

"Look up at the sky," Rev Noel responds. "I've celebrated the holiday of Sukkot for years with Jewish friends and colleagues. It is one of my favorite Jewish festivals. What it teaches me is that we

have to occasionally leave the security and comfort of our homes. The walls of our house that protect us, can also be walls that literally wall us off from the vulnerability and hurts of the world, entombing us in a castle of privileged safety. When we look at the sky through the sukkah, we see the vastness of the universe; we realize our tiny tiny role. And sometimes, in the fragility of the sukkah, or in the desert, when we are vulnerable, we are able to realize the majesty that surrounds us.

"What I realize in the sukkah, is that this is a chance for me, for all of us, to come out from behind the walls of our houses, and to look up at the sky through a temporary roof, that is open to the heavens. Yes, Jacques, I feel the existential vulnerability, in the here and now, and try to imagine what it must have been like then for my Jewish brothers and sisters to wander in the desert.

"But the difference for me, for those of us from a faith position, is that we are reminded that structures will never shelter us, no matter how big or strong. It is only in God's presence, under the shelter of God's wings, that we find true protection and security."

"And this shelter that you build is portable, too," Akishige adds. "I like that. A sanctuary in the desert. Something that we can create wherever we are. Like a sanctuary in our heart. Also, a sanctuary without walls, that allows us be open to all that comes, that keeps us from being walled up, walled off to others around us. Good holiday."

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*Endings and beginnings.*

*Sukkot is an ending, the culmination of the harvest, the final pilgrimage holiday. When we shake the lulav and etrog in the six*

*directions, we are drawing into ourselves God's presence, trying to gather our resources for the coming cold winter. For the next two months, the world will only get darker. There are no more holidays until Chanukkah, which starts on the darkest night of the year.*

*Sukkot is also a beginning. The stern, harsh judgments of Yom Kippur are over. We have wiped the slate clean, apologizing and asking forgiveness for the ways we have failed God and others. Now we are able to start again, experience a new beginning, a time of rejoicing. It's the end of an old year, the start of a new year.*

\*                     \*                     \*

I hand these words to Joie, and ask her what she thinks of them as a way to end my story, if I were to turn my journals into a novel. We are now alone in the sukkah. The guests have returned to their abodes.

After she reads the short page, she notes, "I like it as a story. There is a sense of hope and optimism, a renewed energy." She pauses, then adds, "But it's ambiguous, isn't it? There's no commitment as to what will happen in the next phase."

"But isn't that perfect, just like the contradictory nature of Sukkot. On the one hand, it's about universal brotherhood—it is prophesized that all nations will come to Jerusalem on Sukkot to worship God.

And it shall come to pass that everyone that is left of all the nations. . .shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles (Zechariah, 14:16)

"Isn't that exactly what we've created here, with these guests from all over the world. Okay, it's Safed and not Jerusalem, but isn't it still a vision of universal brother and sisterhood, the door and

roof open to all. A house of prayer for all nations. We're getting ready to cross into the promised land."

"I like that hand. And the other hand?"

"And on the other hand, this is a fragile, temporary structure. Winter is coming. We know we are going to have to take the sukkah down and move on. Look at the experience of the Jewish people over the last 2000 years. We are always the outsider, the wandering Jew. We are, with few brief respites, always in the desert."

"There's still ambiguity, isn't there, about how one takes the journey, alone or with a beloved. One can wander in the desert, always alone, never making a commitment, because there is no security in a nomadic existence. As Reverend Noel said, one can wall oneself off in a house, and live alone, using the walls as protection to never let anyone else in, either.

"Or, one can rejoice in the journey, in a fragile shelter, in the desert, with a beloved. We live in the stories that we create. And we can live by the stories that we create. I guess it all depends on how you want to live the story, and end the story, doesn't it?"

\* \* \*

Without looking up from my journal, I hold my left hand up, asking her to please speak more slowly as I busily take notes. When I look up I say, "I like what you just said. That's excellent. I want to find a place to incorporate that in my book." I smile. "You'd be a great editor, and more. Don't worry, I'll give you credit in the acknowledgment. Your name will live on in immortality."

She gives me a vague thank you, which doesn't seem all that appreciative. I realize I'm not really saying anything concrete about our future, and perhaps her desire for immortality through my writing

is not as significant to her as my desire for immortality through my writing is to me. I try a different tack.

"You said you had two favorite stories. Want to tell me the other one?" Like a little boy, I snuggle against her. "Please, tell me a story."

She pats my head, and begins to speak,

*Once upon a time, in a far away place, there was an evil step-mother queen, who was jealous of her husband-king's beautiful daughter. She kept all suitors from the girl, for she was afraid that she would marry, have a son, and that son would challenge her for the throne once the king died.*

*A young Jewish boy, with a voice like an angel, who was studying to be a cantor, saw the daughter and fell in love with her. For three nights, he walked beneath her room and sang to her from the beach. His voice was like a nightingale, and she fell in love with him, too.*

"Well, I guess we don't have to worry about that particular method of my trying to win you over, do we?" I look up at her and smile, and cuddle in deeper. She once more gives me a little pat on the head, and continues,

*Discovering their love, the queen, has her guards watch the princess' window, in case she is planning to elope. On the night she does, the guards catch her and the young man. The queen, with hatred in her eyes, orders them to be put to death. As they were are blindfolded, they cry out to each other that their love will last for all time.*

*At the moment that the sword of the executioner descends, the princess turns into a dove and the young man into a nightingale and they fly away together. They sing in perfect harmony on a tree, outside the queen's window. She has her guards capture them in a net, and orders their throats slit. But at the moment the swords pierce them, they each turn into two fish, and swim off together.*

*The queen, enraged, sends her guards to capture the fish. Using a net, they catch them, and bring them back to the queen. The queen has them killed and cooked, but as she takes her first bite to eat them, the bones got caught in her throat and she dies.*



"The mean evil person gets her comeuppance. There's something satisfying about that. Though I guess that's not a very charitable view of the 'enemy,' is it. Is that where the story ends?"

There is silence. I look up and see that she's trying to hold back tears. She arches her eyebrows, frowns, and looks heavenward with a sigh. "I know this ending by heart." Joie sniffles, and seems to have difficulty continuing. I reach up, stroke her hair, and wipe the tears that are beginning to stream down her face. Her words are beautiful. Her face is beautiful. And her heart is beautiful. She's such a strong person, and yet so sensitive to hurt and pain, the sadness and grief that goes with loss. She's like the sabra, the cactus that Israelis claim is symbolic of their nature--tough on the outside, but softness within. I'm touched. What a lovely old soul in such a lovely young person. I start singing the words from Dylan's song,

And she aches just like a woman  
But she breaks like a little girl.

That seems to do the trick to help her compose herself. She says, completely straight-faced, "Have you ever thought, like the young man in the story, of studying to be a cantor?"

\* \* \*

We cuddle for several moments. Then Joie says, "let me finish the story."

"I thought you were done."

"Do you think a story should end only with the removal of the negative? Isn't that what Passover and Sinai is all about. You need to leave the bondage of the narrow places. But you also need a vision and goal, a mountain worth going toward."

"Clearly you would get a better grade from the rabbi than I would." I give her a playful tickle on her ribs. "Onward."

*The king's minister buries them, and the next day, a carnation and a rose bush are found growing from the grave of the princess and the youth, so closely together that the beautiful flowers stood side by side. Eventually the two plants became so closely entwined that they could not be separated from each other at all.*

Joie, with tears in her eyes, adds

*"You could not tell where one begins  
and the other ends."*

\* \* \*

I take my index finger and catch a tear from my eye, and place it on the back of her hand. She does the same to me. We sit wordlessly, letting the ending of the story entangle us, as our tears mix and intermingle.

I wish I could be strong enough to just stay in the present. If I could take a picture, a snapshot, to arrest the action, this is how I would like the story to end. With our hearts open, cuddling and protecting and loving each other, entwined, our tears mingled so you could not tell where her tears begin and my tears end.

But I know life is a motion picture and the film is continuing to run, and soon I will become restless and we will not be able to stay in this position. I still have a future to decide--what I want to do with my life professionally. And she wants us to decide if we have a future together. And maybe part of our tears are that in three days, after Simchat Torah, she is leaving for America.

While I'm thinking these thoughts, I wonder what thoughts Joie might be having. I ask her.

"That's a story my grandmother told me, many times. She said it comforted her when her husband--my grandfather-- died at such a young age. I never got to meet him, except through his writing and her stories about him. I miss not getting to know him in person. Sometimes, I guess I have to agree with Jacques.

"No matter what your view is of how the story ultimately ends, life isn't for the faint of heart."

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"We agree on that!" I gently squeeze her hand. "But don't all life stories end in death?—except in your fairy tales? Do you think how a person dies—the end of their story-- makes a difference in terms of how you view their life? It seems to me if you look at life through the prism of death, it's not a very happy experience."

"I don't think you should judge a life by how a person dies. We all know our lives end in death. But that doesn't mean all stories need to end in death. Yes, we all physically die. But the story of what the life meant before one's death, is not yet written for any of us. The story, in fact, is incomplete while we live, and includes how we interpret our and others' lives, how we view death, and even what memory of our life lives on after our death. The ending of your story may affect how the story as a whole is perceived, but that's because you're choosing how you want to end it." She is speaking calmly, but forcefully and authoritatively. Then she squeezes my hand back, and says, "The ending you choose will reflect what you believe and want. What is important to me in my story, is that the life journey be shared with someone with whom there is a mutual, trusting, loving commitment."

Although I feel she's once again treading on that awkward territory between us, she's also looking very pretty. I still have some erotic feelings from the lulav dance. I put my arm around her and try to gently pull her toward me.

But she resists, "You say you need a framework about the nature of the universe before you can commit to the next stage of your life. I'm beginning to wonder if that isn't just one more roadblock you're throwing up to keep you from making a commitment to us. You've also

said that you fear relationship might interfere with your spiritual growth. Then you add that you see the pain of divorce your parents experienced and want to avoid that possibility for yourself. You have told me in great detail how wounded you were by Mery. And you have also described all your dust, pointing out that you may not be worthy of relationship with me, and were once such a lascivious cad.

"Look, Jacob, this is not a court room, and you do not need to argue your case against relationship. I hear all the wounds and pain. I do. But at some point those no longer are wounds that need to be addressed, they are scars that you keep scratching to sabotage yourself and keep you from healing.

"For me, life is pretty simple. I trust the universe, think we should help others as much as we can, and think we shouldn't think too much, but be more trusting. What I do need is a framework to understand our relationship's future, before I can let myself open up any further. I'm leaving in three days. I'm beginning to feel too vulnerable for intimacy without a context."

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I'm hurt and annoyed by her hesitation toward more physical intimacy. All I wanted was a deeper cuddle. Instead I get a catalogue of all my relational fears. But she is making a good case. She should be the lawyer. And what if she's right, that what I think are ways to heal, are now just picking at scabs. "Maybe these are all just excuses. I know that once I was a different person than Johannes. When I liked a girl in sixth grade, I used to create fantasies in which there would be a harrowing attack by evil forces; or destructive chaos in our school from a tornado. I was never worried for myself. I trusted I was always going to turn out fine. She, the girl of my dreams, was the one who needed rescuing. I was her savior, who always knew what to do,

did it calmly and with perfection. I had a basic trust of myself and the world. I was one who could save others.

"One more childhood story, and you'll see that they are connected. When I was a little boy, a dog bit me from behind. Now I have some distrust of dogs. I can't scold it out of me. That's where I am right now. I have been bitten by life. I don't feel I can completely trust the universe, and so am having trouble committing to life. I no longer am the person who can rescue the cute girl. I can't even rescue myself. I'm not a trustworthy person relationally, because that distrust holds me back from committing to anything—including you. No matter how much I care about you. That's not in question. I care about you more than any other person in the world. Maybe even more than myself. But you deserve more than me. You are a loving, sweet, gentle person. I truly don't believe I will find anyone better for me than you. But something holds me back. I just don't feel ready. I'm sorry."

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As the sun begins to set on the last day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, I circle the sukkah seven times while carrying the four species. I move with slow, deliberative steps, like the Zen walking meditation that Akishige has shown me. I know that according to some strands of the Jewish tradition, this day represents the absolutely final conclusion of the High Holy Days. A harsh judgment in the Book of Life and Death can still be changed, the final seal has not been set until this day ends.

I feel like the circles represent my life. Like the earth revolving around the sun. Or the moon revolving around the earth. No matter what the ups and downs, or changes of season, I always comes back to the same place. I don't seem to be going anywhere. Just walking in circles.

Tomorrow, actually tonight in a few hours, is the start of Simchat Torah, when we read the last words of Deuteronomy, and the first words of Genesis. Another circle. Endings just begetting beginning back to the same place. The process starts again, trying to push the rock up the mountain, only to have it fall. and it's time to start over. Is this what Akishige meant by samsara? History is realizing you keep making the same mistakes over and over.

Maybe this is a time for me to try to break out of the circle.

I've seen my story as breaking through illusions to find myself: the illusions of family, relationship, society, law, nation, God, leaving just me alone on the pinnacle.

But what if that, too, is just an illusion? Or what if that is just a phase, a stage of development I needed to go through, to prune away all the aspects of life around me so that I can see me. Maybe the next stage is to start rebuilding myself by reentering back into life, to see with fresh eyes, to allow new growth to emerge. I feel like I've gone as far as I can go alone.

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Joie is a person who is willing to commit to spending her life with me. I trust her. It's really me I don't trust. I also don't know whether I'm worthy of her. And I guess I really fear that I won't be able to give her the love and commitment she deserves.

For some reason, last night's dreams emerge into my consciousness I am with my brother and sister on a magic sled riding through the streets of Kansas City. We are going to go to the Toddle House for chocolate cream pie, and we are all laughing and giggling. There is almost no traffic, but then a storm arises, and branches from trees start to fall. As we look right and left, we see workers on the road. There are now cliffs on both sides of us, and we are on a narrow strip.

The workers are trying to shore up the stones, making sure our part of the road doesn't collapse into the awaiting abyss. I look over the side and see that a train has derailed and crashed below. A bus is hurtling at us from behind, out of control. For the moment, we're safe. Then I see a sign from the neighborhood, torn from its moorings, blown by the wind

Caution....children at play.

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As soon as that dream ended, a new one began. I am swimming underwater near the bottom of a pool. I am by myself. No one is there, and I feel safe. Then I begin to worry that someone may come, not notice me, dive in me and crush me. I also worry that if no one comes, suppose I don't have enough air to get to the surface by myself. What if I drown, and there is no one to save me. I awake, gasping for air.

I look outside the sukkah and see that the sun has set.

The final last chance has passed. The fate written into the Book of Life and Death is sealed.

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inding their way toward the sukkah, with their bags packed, I see the ushpizin coming to celebrate our last evening together. Tonight is supposed to be a night of festive dancing and celebration on Simchat Torah. What a wonderful ending that would make for a story. The story could begin on the darkest night of the year, at Chanukah, and nine months later give birth to an ending of joyous dancing on Simchat Torah. An arc of darkness to joy. Hallelujah.

Unfortunately, just like the arc of beginning on Christmas and ending on Easter re-birth, a true story also has to face the day after the Hallelujah.

Tomorrow all the ushpizin will be leaving to the far corners of their worlds. So tonight is also a time to say final good-byes to them. And tomorrow Joie is going back to America. What am I supposed to say to her?

I feel like the Sisyphean rock pushed up the mountain from the darkness of Chanukah, one candle at a time. Having reached the joyous summit of Simchat Torah, the rock is --sorry, Dr. Lisbet, I am-- only going to roll back down again toward increased darkness of winter once again.

I look through the vulnerable, insubstantial roof of the sukkah, and notice the moon is now several days past full, and beginning to wane. Life will now only become darker and darker, climaxing in the darkest day of the year. I think back to Simchat Torah last year. What was supposed to be a time of joy, was, for me, a time of anguish. My fingers cut and bloodied, unable to write, directionless. What has changed a year later?

In spite of all my efforts, I feel myself being pulled back into the darkness that I felt a year ago. All I'm doing is giving myself the illusion of progress. I climb a mountain, only to fall back to the bottom. Life, and



the world, will only get darker.

I'm going in circles. Prem Devi would call it samsara. Just like On Simchat Torah—we finish with Deuteuronomy and immediately begin again at Genesis. There is no progress. We will once again find ourselves enslaved in bondage in Egypt, our narrow places, once again be faced with time in the wilderness, once again see, but not reach the promised land.

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I remember how I had avoided saying good-bye to the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, and realize this is an opportunity to correct that by learning how to consciously practice leave takings. But I am not able. I feel in too much pain. I sneak stealthily out of the sukkah, and walk at a fast pace toward the hills, away from the sukkah and its lights.

After several minutes of rapid climbing, I stop.

I need to pee. I go behind a large rock. I think back to my Sunday School conundrums that I asked my teacher, what I guess Akishige would call a Jewish koans. "If God is all powerful, can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift?" Or "If God is everywhere, am I going pee on God when I go to the toilet?"

I shared this exchange with Lin Lin Zscho, asking "What do you believe?"

"'The Tao is omnipresent, even in excrement.' So said Chuang-Tzu, a great fourth century poet and student of Lao-Tzu, when asked by Tung-kuo Tzu where the Tao is. So, as you can see, we believe that, at the deepest level of the universe, there is a unity of all. From the void, comes form. From the one, many."

I finish peeing, and glance back. I see my friends enter the sukkah. By the light of the candles and the moon, I see that Joie is greeting them lovingly. There is something both magical and heartbreaking about their final embraces.

I turn my back on them, and continue walking.

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Although I know I'm walking away from the sukkah, it's not clear what I'm walking toward. Am I just running away again? But where is there left to hide? I remember when after dinner, mom would make us clear the table and do the dishes. I would divide the task into fourths, one for each person. Then I would do my part really quickly--both the clearing and the dish washing-- and then sit and watch everybody else. Though technically fair, it didn't create good feelings. Everyone resented my not pitching in. Was what I did fair? Yes and no. But the end result was that I didn't really fit. Then or now.

If we are really pure souls, as Judaism states, or a lovely empty mirror as Buddhism says, why do I focus so much on the "dust" that covers the mirror? Maybe it's because I feel, no matter how much polishing I do, I will never get enough dust off me. Maybe it's because I see the dust both in me and others too acutely.

It's Like looking through a window at a beautiful view, clear sky, almost cloudless, bonsai pines, pink blossoming peach trees, white plum flowers, an ocean backdrop. But the night before it has rained, and the window is covered with water streaks. Maybe others can look at the view and say how beautiful, but I notice all the streaks and want to clean the window. Yes, it would make the view better. But I may be in danger of always cleaning dust and forgetting the larger picture.

I like that analogy. But it seems only one truth. I am also aware that there is another side of me, which wants only to look at the beauty, and deny or ignore the dust.

Is this another example of my either/or black and white thinking? It's so hard to hold both in the mind at the same time. Dr. Lisbet once said I have the problems of both exceptionalism and reverse exceptionalism. Either I think I'm so great, the tall tree, who sees more clearly than others; or I'm so bad,

one of the worst people ever. I can't just be covered with some dust, I have to be the plague incarnate.

I realize I've been making my way toward Rabbi Luria's grave again. It looks like it's time for us to have another talk. Is my life once again coming to an end? I feel myself in a fog. A flight I once took from Washington D.C. pops into my head. After take-off, the plane was bouncy and bumpy and going through dense fog. I knew there would be sun and smooth flying if we could get high enough. Is there sun on the other side of this darkness? Or is this where it now ends, the way it will always be, endless clouds and dense fog?

Why do I always seem to find myself returning to darkness? Is this how the story ends?

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As I'm walking, I notice that my hearing seems acutely sensitive. I hear all sounds, the tap of my foot on the soft earth; the whirring breeze of the wind. If I'm going to eventually go deaf, before I inevitably die, I want to make sure I've heard all the sounds that exist. I remember Mery talking to me about the tone of the piano. The hammer strikes the string, a vibration develops, then dies away. A good pianist, she said, doesn't play the piano like a percussion instrument, but creates the illusion of growth in sustaining a note, making it sing. I listen to the vibrations of sound all around me, rising and falling, trying to notice where the vibrations are activated in my body, too, how I hear not just with my ear, but feel the sounds.

When I reach Reb Luria's grave, I sit. I image the maple tree at Stanford, its leaves now bright red and ready to fall. And in the spring the little oak leaves will bud at the Kansas City house. A time for every season. Plants and flowers emerge in glorious colors each year, when they are ready to bloom, and though we can fertilize the soil, there is nothing we can do to force them to open their buds until they are ready. The message for me? Patience and trust. I will bloom as I'm supposed to. A Leopold Bloom, the Jew, blooming

forth? As Anias Nin wrote "When the bud is too painful to stay closed, it starts to open." I feel I'm beginning to bud, or rebud, but I know I can't force it.

What to do at those times in life when things are foggy? Maybe that's just part of the process of life, the way things are. As Akishige said, in Zen, "When you walk, walk; when you sit sit,' above all don't wobble."

"To which he added a footnote, "When you wobble, wobble well." Sometimes life involves wobble and fog, and that's just where things are. Can I live with that?

And can I live with the realization that one day, even if I do bloom, I will end up in a grave like Reb Luria? I will fall as a leaf from a tree, when I'm supposed to. Beginnings and endings.

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"Well," she says, "Shalom," and gazes at me directly for several seconds as if she's thinking about saying something else, but then turns and begins to walk away.

I'm struck once again by the blueness of her eyes. They remind me of grandma. Is she a reincarnation of my grandma--can she be someone who can also love me that unconditionally? There's something about her face that I find myself drawn to. Her full, dancing smile. Joyful. Joie. Joy. A shy, soulful, look, open, with no make-up. Yet hidden and mysterious. A heart-shaped face with a broad forehead, long lashes and pointed chin. Even though I now can only see the back of her head, covered with long reddish brown hair, I feel I'm also seeing through her to her face.

"Is that shalom as good-bye, or hello, or peace?" I call after her.

She walks a few more steps. I'm not sure she heard me. Then she turns and says saucily, even sassily, "It's your story. I guess that's up to you, isn't it?"

I watch as her long lean body, with its narrow hips, turns and she sort of skips off with that lilting walk of hers, climbing toward the crest.

She has a playful, gliding, almost sensual walking motion, with those long blue jeaned legs and hips swaying back and forth,. Her shadow, even longer, follows her.

As I watch her walk up the hill, in my mind I hear her singing "Hava na shira. Shir Hallelujah." Let's all sing Hallelujah. A round that I couldn't learn. I couldn't find and stay with my voice. "Lech lecha", go forth to a place you do not know. Another song I couldn't learn" And you shall be a blessing." Where is my place to go toward?

Near the crest of the hill, she turns, and waves. Then, as she starts to walk down the hill, her legs disappear, her shadow shortens. Finally, like a sunset reflected in the water, there is a suctioning-like poof as the shadow of her head and the head itself simultaneously disappear over the horizon's crest. I have a feeling of ache and yearning at her disappearance.

Everything will eventually disappear; is it worth it to get on the roller coaster and follow her over the crest? What roller coaster? There are no tracks that I can see. Why try to reconnect with life? Why not stop here? Wouldn't this really be a good ending--the least painful one possible?

Shalom as hello or shalom as good-bye? Will this be the beginning or the ending of the story? It's up to me, she said. Make the story your own, Grandpa said.

But what is my voice?

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DA CAPO. I think of my discussion with Joie about this musical term which means to go back to the beginning and repeat the same passage. Until you reach the final bar line or double bar line "fine." I seem to need to keep repeating and reviewing my journals to come to some kind of self-understanding that I'd like literally to be "fine." It also implies that I need to keep

reading and rereading what I've written because I don't seem to fully appreciate it the first time through. We laughed at its literal translation from the Italian, "from the head, " which conjures up vaguely mafioso images of the "head" of the family making pronouncements of one sort or another (often with rather bloody denouements, which we both said we hoped would not be the case here. Does it also suggest, she asked, coming from the intellect, the "head" both with the positive and potential challenges of that?

I can't keep my part of the round when I sing with her. But, like gravity, I'm pulled to her voice.

How do I find and maintain my voice? One grandfather says be a lawyer; Mery says be spiritual; Mom says I don't even know who I am. How can I trust my voice when I don't know it, can't find my tune? Do I value my own voice, my song?

And when I seem to find some goal, I don't seem to be able to stick with it very long. I think of Johannes chasing women. Once achieved, it's onto the next. Nothing committed to, nothing sustained. Reality is always better from a distance. If I get too close to anyone, or to any reality, it is never good enough. The Kibbutz is perfect, then it's flawed. The Rebbe and Dr Lisbet in Jerusalem are wise teachers; they are imperfect charlatans. Move on. Swing. Eilat, a paradise, a model U.N. Perfect. Then, filled with serpents, insensitive people. Isn't, or wasn't it like that with Mery? Another dream failed.

It's said that you can't reach new lands unless you let go of the shore. But why do I always seem to be letting go of each new voice, each new meaning. Isn't there a danger in always leaving behind what I've found? Is that a snake shedding new skin, and growth and evolving, or is it running away, and never satisfied, afraid of being stifled and trapped,, unable to commit to and stick to anything.

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And even if I could find it, how much control do I really have in projecting it forward into how the story turns out?

Maybe I have, or can learn, some little modicum of control over how my life turns out.

But isn't my journal mainly after the fact reporting? Here's what happened. What can I learn from it? Maybe I can learn to use all that writing and reflection not merely to describe what is happening, but also to help clarify and point the way to what I want to occur, who I want to be.

But I guess a story is different than a journal. Maybe I do have more control in a story. I smile to myself. Why does it have to be a beginning or an ending? Like shalom, why can't it be both?

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I sit staring at the crest.

A shiver of fear spreads throughout me, and I think of dogs and roller coaster rides. I was bit once by a dog. I was a little boy, ringing the door bell of a neighbor to see if they wanted to buy tickets for a Boy Scout Jubilee. The next thing I knew, I felt was a searing pain as their dog came up behind me, soundlessly, and bit me. He was tested for rabies but thankfully was healthy. The physical wound healed within a couple of weeks. I've never been bitten again, but I've always had a fear of dogs. I've tried to understand them. Dad has said you can never let them see your fear, and have to show them who is master. But I don't feel I can control them. Especially when they come up from behind when you're not looking. Just like the unknown that lies beyond the crest.

The crest also reminds me of the top of a roller coaster ride that I have always feared, yet also been drawn to. I used to love riding the roller coaster with my brother and sister at "Fairyland." We'd slowly be climbing up this steep mountainous hill. My parents in the back of the car were calling out, "Oooh, what's coming? Ooooooh," like a ghost chant. I'd have

chills all over my body. Then, slowly we'd edge over the top. The car seemed to stop in a type of suspended animation, then whoosh, a drop. Fear and giggles intermingled. Sometimes if we were being especially brave, we'd hold up our hands as we let go into the unknown.

Yet it was letting go within a structure. My family was around me. We were on safe tracks that the car had to follow. It was all pre-tested and safety certified, exciting but predictable. Now I'm facing going over the crest, and taking a plunge, where there are no tracks. What lies on the other side? What comes next?

Yes, there is fear. I can't deny that. But there is also a feeling of readiness. Like when the training wheels came off my bike, and dad was holding me, pushing me, then disappearing. "You can do it, son, keep pedaling!" When I would fall he'd pick me up and embrace me in those strong arms. I felt safe. And at night, he'd tuck me into bed and would tell me one of his great stories about Kokomo Land, where I would be able to conquer and defeat all the monsters and demons.

One day, after many falls, I was able to ride on my own. Now, metaphorically, I'm supposed to be riding on my own. I know there have been and will inevitably still be times when I fall. I wish my father were still holding me, or there at least to encourage me, or to help pick me up.

Where's daddy now to embrace me? Daddy, tell me a story.

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Make the story your own. It's time to now write my own chapters. Today, Easter Sunday, today, the second day of Passover,

I'm once again working to leave the narrow places within me. To begin a rebirth. Something has shifted, and I feel another Reed sea is being crossed. Sing Hallelujah. Dance with Miriam. I know that this is not the end, for, in some form the desert, Bemidbar, again lies ahead. But so may a Promised Land. I've been in the wilderness before, I've wandered in the desert before.



This time feels one or two degrees less scary. The feeling is one of letting go into an unknown. I'm being baptized, reborn.

As I look at the crest, I have the feeling of newness, like the opening game of a new baseball season. A time of renewal. The first little buds on the acorn tree are growing outside my house in Kansas City. My grandfather Dave is cleaning out his birdbath after the winter darkness and cold. I look around for a rock to throw the first pitch, to commemorate this new season. I like that I want to reown my body and its athleticism, though I imagine I'm not too coordinated after my weight loss and lack of physical activity.

I see a stone and start to pick it up. Though the image has a beautiful symbolism to me, I realize that the symbolism for others-- Christian, Palestinian, Jew-- throwing stones in the Mount of Olives might not be so simple or innocent. Oh, the universal/particular lives even here on Passover's second day of love love, chesed chesed, even on Easter.

I decide to just imagine myself at the start of a new season, in a new playing field, here at the Mount of Olives. I place the stone, as if it were a baseball in my hand and look toward home base--the crest and what lies beyond-- for a signal of what pitch to throw.

I take an inbreath of gratefulness-- thankfulness-- shehekianu-- for having reached this season. I breathe in, gathering my strength. Where will I be this fall, at Rosh Hashanah? Will I be gathering strength on an inbreath listening to the sound of the shofar's nine blasts-- to prepare to fight the battles that are comin?. I pause at the end of my inbreath, then allow the air to exhale, surrendering to the unknown, to home, to the next phase?

I realize how much dimensionality and depth of understanding I have developed about breath since my father first coached me as a pitcher. I hear mom saying, "You don't even know what you don't even know." She's right.

Whereas once I heard that as condemnatory, I now feel it as wisdom. I'm just starting this journey of self-discovery, of knowing myself.

I feel lulled into dream-like state by the final warmth of the waning sun mixed with the shade's coolness. The image comes to mind of the cover picture on the program of the church where I first went with Mery. The father holding his hands protectively above the son, as they both stand before the totem pole.

Now the figure I sense is indistinct, more formless than form. Almost a vessel of space, and into this vessel is poured and appears the presence of my father, and the Rebbe, and my lawyer-grandfather and my cardinal-loving grandfather.

There is a female energy, too, behind me. Again, it's indistinct, but into the vessel of this form, I feel the energies of Mery who helped birth me into the spiritual quest, and my mother, and Dr. Lisbet, and my worrying Nana, and my blue-eyed grandmother.

The energies are sheltering, protective, yet vital, urging me forward, in a direction away from them.

Before me I sense a new, unknown home. Lech lecha, a calling to leave the home of your father and mother, for a new land, a land that God will show you, a new inner land and home, a new outer land and home.

I am not unaware of the fear as I look up toward the crest and the unknown beyond it. Yet I also feel joy and anticipation, even awe, as I feel myself drawn toward the crest. I am doing it of my own free will.

I am also aware of a presence ahead, an energy, Melech Haolam, the Shekinah, the Ein Sof; sacred male and female energy; stillness, silence. Something pulling, urging me forward. I feel like I'm being drawn closer and closer to that crest, to the roller coaster's summit.

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**Do I really want to find a base, or is this writing just a means to hide in the past? Is my retreat into the past going to be a permanent exile?**

Here I sit...  
Legs crossed yoga-style on the hard  
dirt ground  
The ground, once wet, now molding  
two tire tracks in itself; until  
the rains come again

I see the root of some  
limb cut off at earth  
Only its uppermost part,  
right at the surface, lies  
exposed.  
The rest of the limb is  
below the ground...in darkness

The top, which pushed through  
the sod was broken,  
while making an effort  
to reach the light

Does the branch under the ground even  
know there is sunlight above?  
And if unknowing, can it be content in darkness?

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As I grasp a clump of earth, containing a stone, from Reb Luria's grave,  
I feel myself falling into a dream-like state. I feel a baseball in my hand.  
I vaguely see my index and middle fingers running over the white leather  
and finding the brightly stitched, raised red seams of the baseball. I  
feel the young boy in me, from mechanical muscle memory, going through the  
ritual on the mound. I stare at the home plate. The signal is hard to read,  
but I trust I will know the right pitch. My father is telling me to  
breathe; Lin Zscho is saying find your stillness, your xu-jing; trust from  
there the dongjing--the right assertive/yielding wisdom for the moment will  
arise. Zeke is there coaching me, too. "Become one with the ball."

I go into the wind-up, almost as if I am pitching in slow motion. I  
take one more look toward home, and instead of the plate, I see the earth---this  
Mother Earth, this planet---rotating like a vast ball in space. I can't see the  
other side of the horizon, but I know that some future me lies over the crest.  
With a final outbreath, I let go, and release the ball. I hear the

Rebbe teaching that everybody needs to exhale, the final outbreath; Jacques, advising saying let go into the emptiness. Akishige and Lin Zscho telling me to let go into the isness. Prem Devi and Al Said and Reverend Noel telling me to let go into the One.

As I release the ball, it begins to spin rapidly, the red seams turning in flight, faster and faster, with such force that they seem to fray right off the ball, vibrating like red strings. The strings coalesce into wings, and the outline of a cardinal redbird.

In this dreamy haze I feel and even indistinctly see the redbird, taking flight from its recuperation at the bird bath. As it begins to soar toward the crest, water dripping from its wings, I hear my grandfather's words, "It's flying in its own direction."

I hear the bird singing its beautiful song.

I hear the song mingling with a disembodied voice

Shir hava na shirha. Let us sing a song of praise  
Sing Hallelujah.

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I awaken to a song. It's dark. I'm not sure where I am.

I look around me, and by the light of the still nearly full moon, I see the Temple Mount.

It's still Easter Sunday. A time of rebirth. Spring buds.

A new beginning.

It's also the third day after Passover, the second day in the wilderness. Chesed Gevurah. Strength, boundaries in the context of love. It's time to go forth.

These new spring buds, so fresh and innocent, if properly attended to, and nurtured by the warmth and light of the sun, will, in turn, provide a new fall harvest. New gleanings, new wisdom, that will allow the revolution to continue to cycle and spiral.

Then the plant returns to a hibernation in the darkness and cold of winter. Spring and fall, light and dark, blooming and harvesting, are connected. Intertwined.

I know that these buds will inevitably lead to more time in the wilderness, more searching. There will be efforts to climb mountains toward deeper understanding, wisdom, and meaning...wrestling with and toward God. Seeking God. There is a chance for a new harvest.

Sitting under the shadow of the olive tree, I feel the insubstantiality and impermanence of each moment, like a flute note that sounds, then disappears into memory. I am that note, impermanent, caught up to my now. Naked in the present.

All of us are born into this world naked, bare, alone.

All of us have our crosses to bear. But I no longer feel that life is too much for me. There will be dark times. And those dark times will create feelings of chaos.

If we can see our common suffering, our common vulnerability, we can embrace our common humanity. I--we-- have a chance for a new beginning.

A cycle ends. I turn over the page of the crossword puzzle. A new page.

A cycle begins. In the beginning. Bereshit.

I arise and begin walking toward the summit.

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I open my eyes and stare at the scattered lights below. I once again run my hand through the soft, now cold dirt atop Reb Luria's grave. Another choice point. The fall harvest has come and gone. There are dark times ahead. And those dark times have again created feelings of chaos.

But isn't the lesson of Rosh Hashannah that from this chaos, creative new births can occur?

In the beginning (Bereshit) the earth was unformed and void, and a wind, ruach, spirit, breath, swept over.... and God said let there be light, and there

was light.

Isn't a lesson of the Days of Awe that the seeking and offering of forgiveness is a continual process?

I remember sharing with our group how the rebbe taught that the letters "aleph, vav, resh" means "or" in Hebrew, light, and formed a unique vibration when chanted. We all hummed together, swaying gently back and forth, arms around each other, watching the fire in front of us. Particular paths, universal light.

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I'm on the crest. Are there tracks that I can follow back down the mountain, toward the sukkah? The moon is waning, but still full enough to provide enough light. Yet I'm not sure what I see ahead.

I continue to run my hands through the dirt. I feel like I'm in Kindergarten, finger-painting. There is something reassuring about the solidity of the earth. Adam, the first man. The word is related to adamah, the earth. Is this where the story ends, a man holding earth with his hands, indecisive?

I know that if this is a journal, unless I end my life now, something will happen. I won't just sit here forever.

What I need is a catalyst to propel me forward, a framework that allows me to descend down the mountain. I think of the song the choir sang at Mery's church, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder, children of the Lord. Every step goes higher, higher."

But I don't know how to climb upward. I'm at the top. In Safed, the land of air. I don't know what comes next. Maybe going back down the hill is rising higher? I just don't know.

Dr. Lisbet said you can't pull the flower bud open, it has to unfold in its own time. I have to have the patience and trust to allow that. But isn't there anything I can do to help fertilize and nourish it--me?

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If I were to use a metaphor to say where I am now, what would it be?

I feel like I've reached the end of my rope, and need to let go to swing to another tree. To swing back into life. Or I'm at the end of a long walk, a long journey, and I need a touchstone, something to touch--like Reb Luria's grave-- that says turn around and go back. I'm at the end of swimming a length of the pool. I need to find a way to do a flip turn and push off against something solid as a way back into life.

That something solid has to be making a decision about the nature of the universe. From the lofty, airy overview of Safed, I need to complete the task that John began in Jerusalem, nine months ago. I need to give birth to a view that I can live with. Like the man in the railroad picture, I need to take the leap over the puddle, and decide. No more going in circles.

I continue to write these notes in my journal, and then, I'm struck by an idea so simple and clear, and which has surrounded me the whole time. I guess like fish in water, it's hard to recognize that in which you are so immersed. I am surrounded by words, journals, reflection.

What if this next phase is taking all these journals, looking back one more time at the narrative of my life, and in so doing, shift it from a linear journal, into a consciously crafted book, looking through and catching up with my past, being a participant-observer living in its present, and trying to create a foundation for my life's future. I don't know the future, but I do know the past. And I can learn from it.

I could call it the story of Jacob, the person who seeks to become Israel, the one who is "wrestling with and toward God." I could write about his struggles with all the different parts of my self, some appalling, some

less so, all flawed, yet all with some redeeming qualities I could explore his/my efforts to face himself as directly and honestly as he was capable. I could conceptualize this not only as a search for personal identity, but as an effort to understand the nature of the universe at the deepest level.

Make the story your own. To do that is really to create a story, rather than just continue to record notes in a journal. A journal simply ends when the person dies or is no longer able to write or loses interest in writing. A story, as my creative writing professor said, is a conscious choice, it has a beginning and end point, a narrative arc. Once a journal becomes a story, it shifts, and there is a chance to be, like Joyce, the omniscient writer, crafting behind the scenes. There is a chance to choose the beginning, middle, and ending.

This story needs to end with me in Safed choosing a view of the universe which gives me a framework, the solid structure I can use to once again go down the mountain, to return to life.

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I remember one night looking through art books with Mery. There was a triple portrait of Norman Rockwell. The picture was taken from behind him, so you simultaneously saw him sitting on a stool, his back to you; his face in the mirror; and the portrait he was drawing on the canvas. He was rendering his own likeness--with some embellishments: sans glasses, a fuller, more youthful face, bland wide-eyes, a black and white sketch-- while staring into a mirror. Attached to the canvas were self portraits of Albrecht Dürer, Rembrandt, Picasso, Van Gogh, presumably for inspiration.

We laughed as we cuddled and studied the picture. Although I liked the reflections upon reflections upon reflections style, I felt something was missing. Perhaps the limitation, for me, was the medium. It was more of a snapshot than a narrative. What was the arc of the story? I wanted to see a



bigger canvas. What was his intention? His feelings as he observed himself? I wanted a beginning, middle, and end.

Perhaps that is just my own visual limitation, and/or my high cognitive preference. I remember Dr. Lisbet sharing how the roots of Art Therapy go back to Jung, the first known psychologist to have clients draw as a means to interpret dreams and fantasies. A visual self-portrait can be a form of self-discovery, perhaps analogous to my journals. It was supposed to help a person reach beyond censored and conscious feelings to a deeper understanding of personal motivations in everyday life. Another means of communication, when words cannot express secret turmoil. Dr. Lisbet noted that art produced by an individual can be raw and honest, looking into our innermost fears, obsessions, motivations, and personalities. Every creative endeavor can produce a type of self-portrait that can be interpreted and used to aid in further insight and personal growth.

Maybe one day I will give visual art, my weak muscle, a chance.

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Thinking of Mery and art leads me back to the afternoon I spent with her listening to pompous Pierre's lecture. I pull out my Mery journal and turn to the handout he gave us as a supplement to his lecture. At the time I thought it pompous and overall irrelevant to me, and merely glanced through it.

**ART, REALITY, AND LAYERS OF MEANING.** Is a painting merely something inserted between us and reality? On the one hand, yes. Art mediates reality, it can only be a representation of reality, and is never reality itself.

But can it not also help us see reality—and ourselves—more clearly? In observing a painting, the artist asks us to reflect upon reality, and can help those who are willing to take the journey to examine their own experience.

And might not art, in holding a mirror to and observing reality, also influence reality. Think of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Bohr's (not to bore you!) cat. The very act of consciousness and observation can influence reality. The reflective artist, moving beyond modernism, seeks to find a way to have all of us reflect on how we experience, so we don't become trapped by our non-

reflective assumptions about reality. If we are willing to enter the artist's work, we will see it as simple (non-reflective consciousness), then complex (as we seek deeper understanding). Is it possible that art can be more real than reality itself?"

**LOOK CAREFULLY AT VELÁZQUEZ' THE MAIDS OF HONOR.** At first it seems a simple painting, with a group of people talking and looking at each other, an accurate representation of reality. But it is, after all, a painting, and Velázquez makes you realize that by painting himself into the painting, and looking at you, the audience viewing the painting. He makes you face your own (reflective) consciousness (like tearing down the fourth wall in the theatre). You can't just be a passive observer. He makes you reflect on what you are reflecting on.

Further, in the background of the painting there is a mirror that reflects the upper bodies of the King and Queen. Are they more or less real than the others in the picture? Where are they actually? Is there a "deeper" reality?

**PENTIMENTO.** Think of the term *pentimento*-- an alteration in a painting, evidenced by traces of previous work, showing that the artist has changed their mind as to the composition during the process of painting. The word is *Italian* for *repentance*, from the verb *pentirsi*, meaning to repent. The painting has layers and layers, some covered, some with traces of previous work showing through. What about the artist's life? What about our lives? Are our lives like a painting that we create, in which we keep adding new layers to the underlying work, often having to repent and ask forgiveness of past mistakes.

Ah, nothing is simple to the reflective mind.  
Artists, and viewers, beware!

Apparently I was intrigued enough by his lecture at the time that I looked up the equivalent term of *Pentimento* for writers, which is *Palimpsest*. Did I do this because I certainly wrote a lot in my journals? Did I even have an inclination then of myself as a burgeoning writer? Not consciously at least. But perhaps I wondered what I was trying to repent in all this writing, what I was trying to rewrite and cover over.

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I certainly learned story telling at a young age. I think of dad's stories. They were always filled with vivid visual images. Both the ones he'd tell of make believe lands, and also the ones he'd tell that were make believe but told as truth. Of course, his stories were always exaggerated, but I smile

wondering if maybe his stories weren't big enough. He didn't fight in the war. True. Grounded because of a bad back. True. Yet, according to him, he was a bombardier pilot in Germany. That's bigger.

But why not go further, and make it really big? Why not that say he wasn't just a bombardier pilot, but THE bombardier pilot, the best America had. One day General Eisenhower called him to say he and Patton had been arguing over who would get to use dad and where he was most needed, in Europe or Africa. It was clear that only dad could save the Allies and bring Germany to its knees. Ah, daddy.

But then what may be really interesting is why did he feel the need to exaggerate who he was, rather than face it honestly? What is the kernel of truth in the very telling of his life story? That he wanted to be special. That he felt he could only be loved if he were more than he felt he was?

Is there a part of me like that, too? If I'm honest, in spite of my fears of tall trees being cut down, my ego is still sufficiently large that I want to believe that my story is a significant one. Every tradition has a story--an historical narrative and a moral narrative. So does every person. I want my story to be a grand story, a heroic journey, a search for identity, a search for meaning, a search for the nature of the universe at the deepest level. And yes, even though it's often a lonely journey, a search for love and connection and belonging.

This story can be my chance to step back from myself and, like looking at a Rorschach, to examine the work as a whole, to see all the different parts within me, and everything outside me that has contributed to who I am: the country where I was born; my family's economic status; my birth religion; my gender, my race and my search for what it means to be a human being seeking meaning, connection, a place in society and the universe.

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As I re-read that last line, I feel like I'm trying to be academic and scholarly. Is that because I'm no longer in school and feel fearful I won't be taken seriously if I don't sound erudite? Is that because I want to show how intelligent I am so I can once and for all dismiss dad's statement that I'm merely a pseudo-intellectual? To show him, and yes myself.

But there's more to it than that. I want to show a respect for the complexity of life, a nuance that enriches rather than obscures the heroic journey all of us face. Have faced. Will inevitably have to face.

In some ways, just as I attempt to see my life as a Rorschach, seeking unity, I seem to be a Rorschach for my teachers. "Dr Lisbet sees me as a naïve young man coming out of his protected castle, not unlike the story of the young Buddha, shocked by the suffering in the world. The Rebbe once told me that my compulsive journal-keeping, always examining and re-examining every detail, reminded him of Talmudic scholars creating a living Torah through constant commentary. Prem Devi tells me I'm like a Hindu seeker trying to cut through Maya to find God." I see some truth in each of these metaphors, but not a total truth. I don't see god as clear and simply as Prem Devi thinks I do. And its too easy to dismiss all the suffering of the world as just illusion.

I think of my blue-eyed grandmother. No matter how hard we try, there is no way to escape life without going in and through.

And that in and through is not just an intellectual journey, it's an emotional one. There is suffering, pain, fear, rage, and yes, love, laughter, joy ,compassion. I guess I'm also trying to prove to mom that I'm not just a cold, emotionless automaton. That I have heart and humanity too.

I need to show her. And yes, me.

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I remember Joie sharing with me an old Yiddish proverb her grandmother had told her:

"What's truer than truth?"

"A good story."

Stories are made of words, which spring from and also create plot and narrative.

What I like about words is both their permanence, and their erasability.

I'm not a sumi-e painter, as Akishige described, where you draw the lines once, with no erasures. Or like in playing the flute, if you trying to record something, and you make a mistake, you need to redo the whole piece. On the next attempt, it's possible at any moment to make a mistake again. In writing, if you get a section right, you keep it, and you can work to polish those sections that need more work. You can add additional layers later, like oil painting, so you get increased depth and dimensionality.

I know that words, and journals will always be part of my life. That they will be the vessel that will help create me. Maybe in another twenty five years or so, I'll look back once again, and try to write another book, another story, to see how far I've come, if at all, from this rung of the ladder. Then I'd be writing from the perspective of what from my vantage point seems like old age. As the Rebbe said, it appears I'm trying to create a Talmudic dialogue with myself. I'm sharing where I am now, my struggles, as honestly as I can, and also offering the best possible wisdom I've discovered at my age to my older self. I also can look back from this vantage point and talk to my younger selves, trying to see how we can learn from each other in going forth.

For now, I am at the summit, the highest rung of the ladder I have yet reached.

I know there must be higher rungs, a wiser vantage point from which to see what is happening within and around me. But I never seem to realize that larger perspective until some period of time has passed, and I can look back. Now, I can view with more clarity Easter Sunday, and see that I have indeed made some strides forward. These past several months in Safed has been a great blessing and opportunity: to further explore the different world religions, to

get to know and deepen my relationship with Joie, to get to know and further heal myself. I hope one day I will look back with more clarity on today, Simchat Torah, and understand myself and where I am now from a larger framework still.

All I can try to do now is write words and a story which I hope will, like an architectural design of a house, create the blueprint and foundation for the house that will be me, and in which I can be sheltered.

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The bare story of any persons' life: we are born, we live, we die.

We have no conscious control over our beginning, at least that we are aware of. As my grandfather used to joke with me, "You're a wise grandson. You chose your grandparents well."

And, like the story Lin Zscho told about the novel of the dissolute nobleman, unless we choose to end our life by taking it, we have no conscious control over how and when death comes.

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Contrary to Jacques, assertions, I sometimes even wonder how much conscious control we have over the middle section, how we live our life. But by choosing to write a story, I take control. I can choose the beginning, the ending, and what I put into it--the lived part of the story. By writing, I create life. I, the author of life, grant the characters life. Words are the midwife.

I am the god who determines who is allowed to be born, to develop, to live. They are in my control, I am their life, their god. Like a playwright, I can put words into the mouths of others. I order their experiences, and by ordering them, I give them meaning if I so choose. I can create order and meaning for the characters, and they, in turn, will help me create my order and meaning.

Is this one grand illusion? Is the task of writing only a means to hide from life, to keep the words between me and reality, allowing me to be like a

camera which observes, but doesn't enter the scene? Or is that distance from life the very thing which will help create me, give my life meaning, and allow me to enter life? Perhaps it is the fiction which gives way to the truth. Perhaps the story will be truer than the truth.

But even if it is an illusion, it's one that I now need to believe in. A belief I am growing and there is progress, an evolution in who I'm becoming.

I can see how the self-imposed order of writing can help me create a framework to stare directly at the chaos and uncertainty and suffering within and around me.

And at the end, after I've finished the story? If I truly believe that writing is only an illusion of progress and meaning, and that the universe at the deepest level is meaningless and random, then I should be able to say that I could accept with equanimity my life's work destroyed, met with indifference, and the words crumbling like Oxzymandia's monuments and buildings. Accept without blinking. I would have to content myself with knowing I'd done the best that I was able, and existentially, that's all that can be asked.

If, on the other hand, the universe is spiritual, unitive, and compassionate, then my task is find my piece, and to make myself the best piece of that puzzle I can, and leave it to the benevolent universe to figure out how my work is supposed to be received and contribute to the overall whole.

In either case, I have the freedom to take an inbreath of strength and direction, and know that I can let go of the product on the out breath with a certain amount of peace.

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I reach into my pocket and pull out the last letter I received from Mac, just a few weeks ago. It was written over nine months ago and had been forwarded from Kansas City to Kibbutz Ha'on on the Sea of Galilee, to Jerusalem, to Eilat and now has found me in Safed. What a journey his letter's been on, trying to catch up with me.

He told me that he had been diagnosed with liver cancer, but "instead of dying, I've bought a motorcycle and am going to ride down to Mexico to visit my friends in Oaxaca. We will watch the Zapotec Indians in a half-pagan devotion at an ancient Cathedral. All day long people walk in from the countryside, silent, happy, serene women with red flowers in their black hair, carrying palm fronds and chanting six thousand years old incantations for the peace and beauty of the sun and cloud spirits and fertility and all humans' love."

I feel both sadness and joy. Somehow Mac seems to have found a way out of the emptiness, so that he could go anywhere, and feel welcome and at peace. An old man who tells his own story "Instead of dying I've bought a motorcycle to ride to Mexico..." And where his story stops is with "all humans' love."

Adios, Mac. Vaya con Dios.

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Mac was always so open in his writing, sharing his journey in "The Big Sickness" the monograph he wrote and gave to me when we first met. How open do I want to be about my story? How much do I want to share,

Words are ephemeral, like the sukkah. But they can also be permanent. I remember my ever cautious grandfather saying, "Junior, writing lasts forever. Never publicly commit to words what you don't want someone else to see, or what could be used against you. If you do commit something to writing, make sure you always keep a copy, so no one can spring something on you that you have forgotten you wrote, or try to distort it. Always protect yourself in all ways."

When I write in my journals, I'm just writing for me. It is a necessary part of my mental health. I never show it to anyone unless there is a compelling reason. But if I write a story, isn't the purpose of that to communicate and share with others? Maybe I could just "write for the drawer." Put the story down as I want to tell it, and decide later what to do with it.



Supposed at the end I decided to destroy both the story and my journals? Wouldn't that be like destroying me and my life? Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, worrying about what I'll do when I complete the task as a way to keep me from facing my fear of even beginning.

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And what authorial voice would I want to use?

When I look back through my journals, I realize that one of the initial reasons I wrote in them was to have a "written" photograph of events in my life. Perhaps I wanted them to be like a verbal scrap book where only the good pictures go in. But I've learned that life isn't just composed of good pictures. No, Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore. My sense is that during our time on earth, at some level for everyone, life gets shattered into pieces.

In rereading my journals, I can begin to see where that shattering started to occur and the lengths I went to try to avoid realizing that it was taking place.

Writing provides me with a way to detach from a scene, and now, in looking back, to learn from what happened. In some ways, when I write I am involved in a constant transcending of myself, and thereby creating some distance. I also see how I experimented with several "techniques" that my creative writing professor talked about to further create "distance" from the scene. Sometimes my point of view is first person, but sometimes third person to create more authorial distance.

If I felt I was too close to the scene, too involved, I'd write about it in the past tense. But, sometimes, if I felt relatively comfortable and peaceful, but a bit too outside of a scene, detached, I'd write about it in the present tense. In the donut shop scene, for example, I am feeling good and happy just watching the grandfather and grandson. I am a spectator, so I can cast myself into an event and write about it using the present tense to create more immediacy and even write myself into a scene. Nevertheless I was still

writing, still observing, rather than just experiencing, and the words removed me one step further from an event in which I was already only an observer.

When I found myself directly involved in an event, feeling confused, lacking a framework, I'd shift to the past tense to once again regain an objective detachment. I become the omniscient narrator watching the event. When I left my cloistered room at the YMCA, I felt fearful venturing forth, so I shifted to the past tense, in order to remove myself from the scene. After I started feeling more comfortable, observing the event, drawing limits around it, developing a framework, then and only then would I shift to the present first person.

It seems like a delicate dance, creating this role of "participant observer". I use writing to help me when I get too far off, too detached, too hidden, so that I can find a way back into existence, and be part of the event in some form. And writing to remove me from an event that is uncomfortable and from which I want to escape. So the only question is how far am I from an event, not whether I am ever fully present.

I also wonder whether writing about events made them more real. Was there, is there, any reality other than the reality I created in writing about them life? Or was I really burying them in words?

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I remember in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I was chosen to assist the choir director in the school musical. Because he decided I couldn't sing, he created the role of assistant for me. I was, he told me, a leader. But I was also set apart, watching the play from the wings. Within and without.

And now I'm placing myself in the same position as in that musical, except that I am also writing the "musical," as well as directing it and creating the major role for myself within it. I bring to life the characters I write about, including myself. I am their animator, their god. I structure their experiences, and by organizing them I create order and meaning for them; and they in turn

create my order and meaning. By taking a step back, I can become more objective about myself and my experiences, treating myself like any other character.

Is that really true? Does not the very act of observing and writing about myself not have an effect? On me? On those around me? I wish I understood physics better, but it is beyond me. Einstein believed that an electron exists in a particular place regardless of whether it is being observed. Bohr and his disciple Heisenberg believed that until an observation or measurement is made, an object like an electron does not exist anywhere and that "it was no longer possible to make the separation that existed in classical physics between the observer and the observed." Can this apply to writing? To create the observed takes observation. I write, therefore I exist. Reflection makes the self exist.

And now it seems increasingly the observer and the observed have become one, and are giving birth. But to what? Somehow there are more parts and sides and complexity to me than I have ever been aware of, and at same time there is less sense of self than I have ever experienced. There seems no there there, no core to me. Do I have a self at all? Perhaps just an embryo, starting a new beginning.

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Authorial voice is important, the role of observed and observer is important, but perhaps more important is what kind of story do I want to write? I look at all my different journals spread before me: golf, tennis, courses, family, emotions, spiritual seeking, women; even trying to create a journal of journals to keep them all organized. Perhaps that's what I should tell the guard at Kafka's castle: "I'm a self-examiner."

I'm trying to learn about my self, all the different parts and subparts, the range of emotions, the way I am with different people. I even want to explore the contradictions and complexities that make me uncomfortable and ashamed, to honestly confront half truths and self-deceptions. I remember my professor saying that Kafka believed we are all responsible for our own

fates. In his life as a writer, Kafka unflinchingly described his personal struggles with family, with women, with moral law, with his Jewish heritage, and with his unconscious.

And me? What is the narrative arc of my story? What is born from all this reflection?

Innocent, naïve, sheltered young man. Leaves the castle where signs protect "children at play." Boy meets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy leaves home and searches, has conflicts and adventures-- inner and outer--engages in a spiritual quest for meaning and identity, how he fits, if at all, within society, and yes, how he fits, if at all with a beloved.

All the while he must face his own inner dust, his own inner monsters. I think of Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth and the realization that a monster, must be slain along the journey through the maze, in order to escape our delusions and save ourselves. In our inner labyrinths, the Minotaur fulfills a necessary role; it represents that part of ourselves that needs to be conquered--for me dust, self-deceit, in order to create, or reclaim my authentic self. Perhaps my story is that battle, and what self emerges.

At our center I want to believe there is a pure, undefiled self that will emerge in the course of the voyage of self-exploration and self-discovery. So at one level, my narrative is a bildungsroman. At another level, it is an attempt to seek out shades of color, nuance, perspectives on what it means to be human, the nature of the universe, identity, and yes, how and if true relational love is possible.

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The story can be one of self-discovery, a forward looking book from the perspective of looking back. I could write about my past, not to recapture it, but to learn from it, to forgive myself, and to move beyond, to evolve from where I've been. Given who I am, it will have to be a self-reflective story. Who are models of self-reflection? Of course Joyce, Proust and Henry James from

literature. But there is also psychology. In William James' classic *Principles of Psychology* the first eight chapters are in conventional third person terms, but with Chapter 9, he switches to a stream of consciousness first person narraton. The study of the mind can begin from within.

I know I want to believe that my story involves a grand scheme, a universal message, a hero's journey. The journey involves a fall, brokenness, suffering, chaos exile. So far so good. A story which hides nothing and faces everything. Again, ok. And what about the ending? At my most upbeat, I would like the hero's journey to have a healing redemption.

I also want a narrative which, though specific in its particularity, has a universal relevance to all consciously lived lives.

Ah, the tall tree still resides within.

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But why would I want to share this writing with anyone else? What am I seeking? Others' recognition? Fame for the tall tree? Universal relevance to all consciously lived lives"—what does that even mean? And is that self-aggrandizement really worth it as a motivation? What about my right to privacy, the Fourth Amendment? Is it worth being this vulnerable to an unknown public? The tall tree, standing out, is easily cut down.

But what if this book could, in some small, modest way help another person? Like the tall tree becoming the shelter of a cabin, the warmth of the fire in the hearth? Perhaps this writing could help someone else. Is it self-serving to wish that it could show others who suffer that they aren't alone, to give other people ideas about coping, about introspection, about self-honesty, give them some sense of shelter, some warmth, even hope?

And what is there to hide? Why be defensive, when this is who I am...my insecurities, foibles, shortcoming, and I want to believe some green shoots and gifts that emerge. John (8:32) said, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." And Freud wrote in a letter to William Fleiss, his

friend and colleague, "Being entirely honest with oneself is a good exercise." Aristotle too noted: "The aim of the arts is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." Going through my journals, I can see what is concealed, revealed, and hopefully exorcised through the writing. My task is to put the pieces together to make it as meaningful and as whole as possible.

I suppose all I can do as be as honest as I can about what I see, and how I write about what I see. To ask myself, like God's question to Adam: "Where are you?" His answer, like mine, is "I'm hiding." I've been hiding in a womb--my family's, society's, - in a castle of privilege and self-pleasure, even behind my writing and journals, and I didn't even know it. I was able to keep everything at arm's distance by always watching and observing. Coming out of the castle to pursue my pleasures, then returning. Using people, as characters in a story, then running back to my comfortable distance.

Can I do better now?

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We are born. We live. We die. Those are the events.

The story is how we interpret events, which ones we emphasize--hear, feel, see--which one's, while living, we act on; what we learn from these events about the world and ourselves; the meaning we ascribe to them. According to my creative writing professor, Virginia Woolf said that the task of a novelist is to examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day ... the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sigh or incident scores upon the consciousness. I want to see the daily and ordinary, but for me it has to be connected to some larger understanding of our place in the world.

For me, the ending of my story will be critical. Given my recent quest, it must reflect my world view about the nature of the universe. That is first and foremost. Then I have to decide whether I believe it is of worth to others--do

I want the story to be read? If I decide that my answers have no relevance, that I'm doing nothing but passing time, filling emptiness by hiding behind words, like doing a crossword puzzle for my own enjoyment, then there is no reason to ever show this to anyone else. Then this all may be just a narcissistic exercise, disconnected not only from the outside world, but also from others' real lived experiences. Then I'm truly just writing for the drawer.

But if I believe there is something worth sharing in all these words—even if it is just an account of one person's struggle with existence—then I would want the story to be read. I would want to share it with a reader, and hope that it would have a helpful influence. Maybe I would feel less alone knowing I'm trying to share and communicate. And perhaps readers who are undergoing similar struggles and questions, would feel less alone. Maybe it's like putting a message in a bottle, casting it out for whomever is meant to receive it.

But why writing? When there is so much pressing problems in the world that clamor for attention. Writing seems like an act that has to justify itself. People are hungry, fighting, suffering. Does writing about a person's individual searching, from the relative comfort of a room, actually relieve any pain for anyone?

I think of what books have given me. They have been an oasis, my friends and teachers. I have had conversations with books, thanks to those who wrote about their life and experiences, suffering transmuted into art. Stendhal's *Julian Sorel* shared with me the struggle of how to make one's way into the world, to enter society. Joyce's *Portrait* was also a bildungsroman struggle—and of a writer, yet—teaching me what we have to leave behind to make our way. Goethe's *Werthe*, revealed the pain of unrequited love. Camus' *Sisyphus* offered as a view of the universe as random and indifferent where we can still imagine happiness. Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz*, argued that if we still dared to believe in God, we need to create a different understanding of God. Kazantzakis'

Zorba showed me that amidst all the struggles and suffering, we can still dance.

So many friends from so many perspectives teaching wisdom on so many levels. They have given me so much. I'd like to think that one day I might be a link in this chain, contributing to these conversations, in the hope that my words might help someone as I was helped..

I must believe that ideas matter. That words matter. Revolutions occur in people's minds before they happen in the world.

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There can be such a lovely connection and sharing in writing. I've finished the book *A Thousand Cranes* by Yasunari Kawabata that Akishige gave me. There was a passage he wrote of such magnificence and depth that I felt it deserved my "Brilliant Scene Award". Kawabata writes of a character in the novel:

The sun sets for him and he closes his eyes. Therefore,  
he can't see the fresh clean cranes flying by.

The perspective appears authorial and objective. Symbolically, he has lost his lover. The sun has set, no cranes for him. No hope.

But even with closed eyes, he sees the sun "which was still in his eyes."

So, maybe there is hope. Perhaps the sun has not yet set within. Maybe, even with eyes closed, he may visualize in his imagination the cranes flying past the sun, trying to see beauty amidst the setting sun.

Or perhaps, in his mind, the hopes of the cranes' beauty set with the setting sun, recalling "dying embers in her eyes."

Inner reality; outer reality. Reflecting each other? Multiple levels of understanding?

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I came to Reb Luria's grave once before-- for wisdom about how to face death. Now I need wisdom about how--or whether-- to face life.

For me to enter life and head back down the hill--or even whether to head



back down the hill--I need to stop vacillating about the nature of the universe, and make a choice. Do I choose a spiritual track of life which says at the deepest level the universe is loving and compassionate? Do I choose the track that says the universe is existentially random and indifferent? That choice determines the ending. Grandpa said to make the story my own. How do I want to end the story?

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Actually, at one level, the answer is simple. I want a happy ending. I want to believe in the spiritual track. If I believe in a loving compassionate, all powerful God, as do the Rebbe, Reverend Noel, Al Said; or One without a second, as does Prem Devi, then the ending is ultimately happy. I want the story to end with light coming through the Church of the Holy Sepulchre on Easter Sunday, and people holding and sharing candles of light, singing hallelujah and love being shared by all toward all. I want an ending that creates a world view of hope, a cessation of suffering, our hearts filled with beauty, uplift, and joy. I want to end it with Joie saying "I always believe there is a second chance."

I want to end it at Sinai, with a revelation from God about the direction and purpose and meaning in my life. Why not end the story in a happy, peaceful, blissful place, like Safed, surrounded by wise companions with a vision of universal brotherhood and understanding realized and actualized, reading fairy tales with a wise, compassionate, beautiful woman, Joie, for whom I have been longing. We can read stories about lovers reunited, arm in arm, watching their children dance around the Golden Tree; stories of lovers embracing throughout eternity like vines entwining, so you couldn't tell where one ends, and the other begins.

Or why not end it during the Days of Awe, on the Great Shabbat, in the Promised land, with the Book of Life and Death open, with angels singing

hallelujah, wings whishing in the background, as they climb up and down Jacob's ladder. "And even in death they were not parted."

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On one track, the spiritual track, I have experienced the profound truth, as Jacob realized, after wrestling with the angel, that "God was in this place, and I did not know it." There are moments when angels sing and climb Jacob's ladder to a hallelujah chorus. I see so much beauty in the world, and I have felt moments of a sublime and harmonizing presence, a joy in just being alive. The beauty of the flower in blossom, a bird in flight, eyes filled with tenderness, people working together for the common good. There are moments of rebirth for each of us within this life, seeming miracles that go beyond our understanding of ordinary reality, that let us see, feel, hear God's presence in this place.

That's the way I want to end it.

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But I can't. Or as Dr. Lisbet taught me to say, "I won't."

Why not?

Because I know those feelings don't last. There are also many many times in life where it appears that God has forsaken us and we are alone. That is the existential track, where the universe feels indifferent and random.

On the Monday after Easter Sunday, all we have to do is open our eyes and look at the suffering that still surrounds us. We know that that there are old people lying on the street because of poverty and homelessness; that there are young people dying from hunger and preventable diseases; mothers and their toddlers begging in the streets; hate-filled wars going on right now resulting in incalculable injury, suffering, death. We know that there is anger, jealousy, greed, sloth, hatred, indifference-- impurity, dust, husks, evil--whatever you want to call it, within every human heart. And most people are too defensive and self-deceiving to even acknowledge it.

Even those who are able to overcome these obstacles and find love, are inevitably physically separated by death.. Those who spend their lives struggling toward the light, also die. The rain falls on everyone. No matter how we try to soften and mitigate its reality through ritual and ceremony, by reciting "May their memory be a blessing," or by creating belief systems about alternative non-physical realities, there is no denying death's sting.

So why not end the story in darkness? In despair. End it the night before Chanukah--the darkest time of the year? Or on the Thursday night before Good Friday, with the desperate forlornness in Gethsemane, the dark night of the soul? Can't a compelling and articulate case be made for the truth of that reality? Why have You forsaken me? Where is God? If you look at the world, God seems more absent than present. There are many more moments of ugliness than the few sublime ones.

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Seeing this reality, what are my options?

One is continued vacillation. Well, I see good moments in life. Yes, there are a lot of bad. Can't you do better, God? I think of my play, Devarim, Words.

But aren't my words really a way to hide from the reality of the ugliness and emptiness of life? Isn't the only reason I persist in addressing God to have an illusion of hope, or to have Someone against whom to be angry? Isn't the play, my fighting with God, only a way to keep me from facing the more painful truth, the frightening, and lonely realization that there is no God? Then whom do we blame? Then I would have to confront the emptiness and heartbreak and meaninglessness of life and death and see that I, and all of us, are completely on our own on this fragile, small, planet which spins in circles as it rotates around a sun, going in imperfect circles?

With that bleak view, I have to ask, not just intellectually, but from my heart, as Camus did, isn't the only important philosophical question for a human being to decide the one of suicide?

But I can't end the story there, either. And not just because that thought is so frightening that I need illusions to keep away the despair, pain, and doubt, to keep me from feeling completely depleted and hopeless. It is also because that perspective, which I, and Camus, Jacques, Job, Jesus, and so many others have felt, though true, is not the whole truth, either.

So where does that leave me?

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I once again pick up some dirt from Reb Luria's grave, and roll it in my hands. Here I was able to face death. What I now need to do is find a framework from which I can face life. I am tired of endlessly trying to figure out my life by writing about it in my journal. If I were a reader who found that journal, I'd be unsatisfied with a story that just stops while the protagonist sits at a grave in confusion and withdrawal. Having come this far, I'd want something more definitive.

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If I choose the existential track, believing that we are born alone and die alone, one ending would be a heroic, lonely journey which sees that truth with clear honesty, and does not flinch.

The story could begin with Johannes, a self-absorbed, narcissistic, ambitious, intellectually sophomoric young man who fancies himself a sophisticated Kierkegaardian seducer of women. His mind is his entrée into society through the law, and into women, through his charm and wit. His version of Descartes "I think therefore I am" could be I succeed and conquer, therefore I am."

The story could begin on Purim, where God is never mentioned, and Johannes, though a Jew, isn't even aware that the holiday is occurring.

The story could be a bildungsroman of his maturation and coming of age, becoming more emotionally sensitive and open to the importance of human intimacy

and relationship, to the suffering in the world around him, and to the possibility of a spiritual dimension. The end of his relationship to Beth catapults him into Job-like suffering and questioning. "I suffer, therefore I exist." The cruch a sign of aliveness.

As John in Israel, the story could begin at Chanukah and Christmas, where he seeks light in the darkness, a rebirth, tries to face the wilderness within and around him, and point the way to a wiser person beyond himself. "I point the way, therefore I am."

The story could end with his struggles with God during the week before Easter, realizing that God is all that remains since he's relinquished the illusory bricks he's been hiding behind: his family, country, interpersonal relations, career trajectory. He refuses to accept a Job-like palliative answer, and after his wrestling in Gethsemane, on Good Friday, a Jesus-like secular Nietzschean uberman, commits suicide as an existential act of despair, recognizing that it is only a false hope that his death and the journals he leaves behind will awaken others to their callousness and inhumanity. Satisfying to a reader? No. But it is an ending with integrity and courage consistent with his belief system. "I search, I struggle, I break through all illlusions, therefore I am."

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That story could also end with a dream-like sequence on Easter Sunday where he seems to be reborn, like Jesus, and sees the kingdom of heaven. Only, in this case, he is not a particularistic Jesus, but a universal one. He could envision the ecumenical reconciliation of Passover and Easter, Christian and Jew and Arab, family and friends, his grandmother and Judke still alive. On awakening, he could realize that even if this dream were true--and not just a fairy tale with the Red Queen turning into a bespectacled sheep with knitting needles-- and that everything would eventually work out, that answer is not sufficient to justify the current suffering in the world. The end does not

justify the means. Mercy, mercy you shall pursue. Just means, just ends are required even for God.

This version of the story could involve early on him/me, as Johannes, remembering an encounter at the church with Mery, eating a piece of bread and looking into the wine, seeing the reflection of Jesus hanging from the long, narrow cross.

He watched the dark colored wine swirl around the sides of his cup, coating it red. As the wine settled, Johannes saw the reflection of the wall at the front of the church.

How symbolic, he thought to himself, laughing softly. A classic case of impanation. Within the wine he could see a quivering mass of red flesh suspended from the cross.

He drank the wine, and handed it to Mery saying, "Pass this cup from me."

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And now?

I, the red King Johannes, a Jew, a catholic, son of god, as are we all, son and daughter of the universe, an impanation of Jesus, the alpha and omega to whom John pointed the way, stand before the abyss. Is the leap into the abyss, through the abyss, or across the abyss? Is the leap life affirming, death defying, or death embracing?

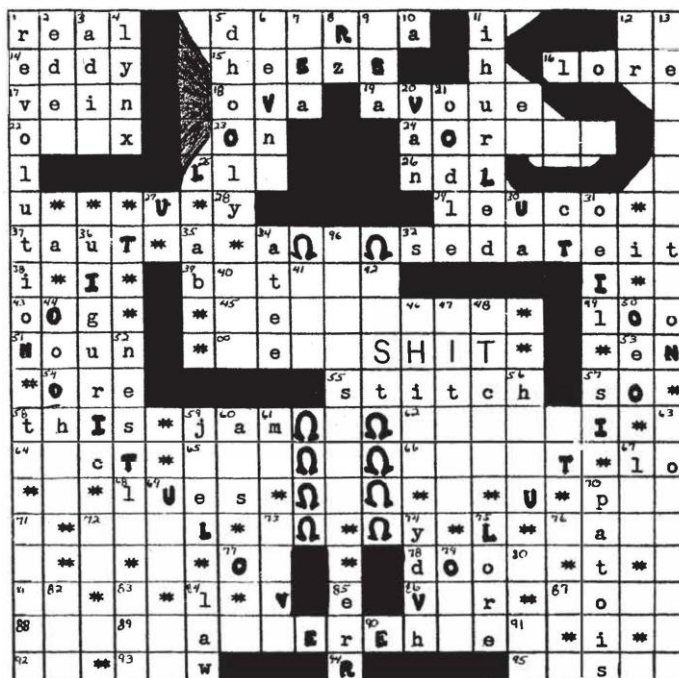
I look at the page before me. A partially completed crossword puzzle. The upside down horseshoe forms in the center are the upper case omega, the last letter of the



Greek alphabet, signifying the ending. I've been working so hard to construct this crossword puzzle, this game to hide me from reality.

It's time to move forward. Enough game playing.

Enough of this SHIT.



#### DOWN

1. Overthrow or renunciation of established order of government
4. Genus of wildcat
5. Variation of Dooley
8. Revolutionary Zionism (initials)
10. First letter of Roman alphabet
11. If one speaks of himself as having thrown an object, he says: (two words)
20. In military formation, the leading unit
21. Lots (colloq, sing)
30. United Army (initials)
31. French word for eye
34. That upon which one places a golfball
35. Latin prefix: away from
36. adj. for members of Turkic peoples powerful in 8th and 12th cent. AD
50. Abbr. for Office of Economic Opportunity
57. Spanish for Yes
58. Proposition expressing motion in the direction of
70. Dialect; jargon
74. You Don't Vote Here: 1st letter of each word
75. Folk legends
84. That which people say is necessary for the just maintenance of the state: (callous, unfeeling)
85. Make a mistake

#### ACROSS

1. True, not illusory
15. To raise, hoist (Scottish)
16. Folk legends
17. Vessel carrying blood to heart
18. Female egg cells
19. Fr.: one who swears as witness in courtroom
23. Opposite of off
26. Initials: National Defense Legislation
29. Weakly colored cpd.
32. If something is hysterical, one must (2wds)
37. Tense, tightly pulled
38. me. nominative case
49. Game at cards
51. Interacts with verb
53. French: in
54. Material that's mined
55. To sew a
57. Homonym of sew
58. Not that one... one
59. Pack tightly (colloq)
67. Behold! Look!
68. Syphilis

I turn the crossword puzzle over. A blank page. A second chance for a new beginning. A page on which I can begin writing words, a novel idea, letting words become flesh. Cedit veritati ficta. Fiction yields to truth.

"The abyss beckons. I alone, relying on no one, needing no one, having left everything behind, from this pinnacle, choose to take a leap and tell my story."

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There's a lot I like about this ending. It's true to the feelings of a young man who has tried to open his heart to life, and been overwhelmed, believing the entire burden of life (and death) is his alone to bear. It doesn't flinch from his reality, but pursues it to its logical and emotional conclusion, hiding from nothing. In and through. He takes responsibility for his life (death), and stops blaming anyone, even God. He faces himself and the world without excuses or veils.

The ending is ambiguous, which I also like. Does he choose life or death? If life, this can be seen as a secular rebirth into living, the end of a journal, the omega, and the start of a novel. Alpha and omega--beginnings and



endings-- coming to terms with himself up to that point, and ready to create anew, plunging back into life as flesh and word.

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But there's also a lot I don't like about that ending. If he actually kills himself, his death will be the triumph of emotional pain. In some ways showing his biological mother and "mother" Mery that he's not an unfeeling automaton, almost as if he's shouting, "Look what an emotionally sensitive person I am. Too sensitive for the overwhelming pain of this world. Is this really how you wanted my life to end?"

On the one hand, he's overwhelmed by an overflowing gushing of negative emotions. On the other hand, a problem with this ending, is that whether he kills himself or whether he lives, the way he analyzes both choices seems intellectual, almost theoretical. By actually killing himself he would prove to his father that he's not a pseudo-intellectual. "Look dad, see, I can use my intellect to juxtapose and interweave fairy tales, Latin, heretical Christian theology, Jewish images and holidays, and all of this in the framework of a crossword puzzle. But that ending has no emotion." It's too analyzed on the one hand, or too much overflowing negative emotions on the other.

With this ending, here's still a disconnect between intellect and emotion, each pushed to their apogee, but not integrated. Just as there is still the disconnect between adolescent and child. Even as he's trying to reach and prove the heights of maturity as an adult, there is still the little boy crying out in rebellion and antagonism to both his mother and father. "Look what you made me do. Never mind. I can choose life or death without either of you. I don't need you. I don't need anyone." If he dies, it's because he rationally believes there is no other authentic alternative to facing unmitigated suffering alone. He has trapped himself into becoming the Uberman by his belief that all other interconnectedness in life is illusory hiding.

And what about the momentary uplifting feelings of joy in the world? Are they just discounted, found wanting because there are not enough of them on some scale he's created?

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The message is still not clear. Yes, there is the sharing of one person's journey. But is the main message that the journey itself is too hard? Do I want this story to say, as in *The Iceman Cometh*, we need our illusions, we can't become the Uberman without killing ourselves. But even if he lives....is that the point...it is survivable, we can choose life? For what purpose?

Is that a sufficient ending...sharing that a journey, no matter how difficult, is survivable? Joyce's *Portrait* describes a journey beyond the stifling imprisonment of family, country, God, that ended with realizing his task is to return to be a writer to create the unformed conscience of his land. But I have no clear vision. Is it enough just to reject the bondage and narrow places, like Passover, without positing a vision of what might be?

The message of that ending is existentially tough. We're on our own. You either kill yourself, or, agreeing with Sartre that hell is other people, you break free from the prison of others, and endure life. Alone.

If I were in a court of law, I would say "I believe, Judge, that is a truth. But not the whole truth."

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My time in Safed since Passover and Easter has also taught me that once breaking free from the narrow places, more is possible. Not easy, but possible. Certainly the wisdom of the invited guests is an example of that, as is the deepening relationship with Joie. And here I sit at Reb Luria's grave. Maybe I do better talking with dead people, or conversing with people through their books, or invited dream-like guests, or even feeling closer to Joie as I'm hear on the crest while she's down below in the sukkah.

But I do feel a connection with others. I can learn from them, and even have a desire to share what I know with them. It may not be a conventional path, but it is authentic and true to who I am and who I'm becoming.

I could end the story with Joie walking over the crest at the Mount of Olives on Easter. Shalom. Good-bye? A feeling of yearning, knowing I want the connection with others, feeling my heart beginning to open on the other side of suffering. Do I have the strength to make that ending a Shalom, hello, a beginning?

A cycle ends. A cycle begins.

I arise and begin walking toward the summit.

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I like that ending a lot, too. It's ambiguous about what will happen, but it offers the chance of a rebirth. New beginnings. Alone on a quest? Maybe. Shalom as good-bye. But perhaps also the start of a relationship with a potential beloved.

Does the book end as hello, or good-bye? Or in some strange way, can a book be both the goal of an endpoint, and the journey itself. Like a good meal, you enjoy the taste, texture, flavor, color, smell of the food as you eat. When you realize that the meal is almost over, there is a sense of sadness.

The same with a book. The closer you come to the end, you both want to go forward, to discover what comes next, yet there is the poignancy of knowing that once you finish, once you reach the goal--no matter how it ends--you must say good-bye to this good friend. You put the book down having read the last page. The meal is over.

Shalom. Good-bye. A start and an end.

If the book has touched some part of your heart, mind, and soul, an afterglow, an aftertaste can linger. The meal can give you nurturance and sustenance to keep going. I guess, in some ways, a book doesn't need to end.

The friend can become incorporated within you, and lead to a new way of seeing and being, a new connection, a new consciousness. In that way, endings lead to new beginnings.

Shalom. Hello. Good-bye. Peace.

One word that encompasses all. And on tonight, Simchat Torah, we celebrate both the ending of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Genesis. Bereshit. In the beginning.

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As I look down at the dim lights below, I now know a partial answer to That question. Yes, a deepening intimacy is possible. But now Joie is far down the hill from me. Tomorrow she leaves for America. Didn't I learn from Grandpa and Grandma that good-bye is in fact really inevitable? Is an ambiguous but hopeful Easter ending just an illusory pipe dream in which I am merely trying to postpone the inevitable goodbye that I know is coming?

It also doesn't solve the issue of what do I believe is the nature of the universe at the deepest level. And I don't feel I can truly enter life or relationship until I resolve that. So, that Easter ending, that 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Passover ending, would be a dodge, a cop-out. I can't come this far, and not decide.

I still don't know how I want it to finally end, or don't feel I can finally end the story until I have decided the nature of the universe.

Am I just procrastinating because I'm afraid to make a choice. I think of the French photograph at the railroad station, a man leaping across a small puddle of water, caught in mid air, his reflection in the water. It's like I'm trying to create tracks, as a bridge, to guide me over the water, to help me in my leap.

Last chance. At the start of this quest, John set out to make a choice about the universe's deepest nature. I gave myself nine months to birth an answer. Now it is time to choose. What is the nature of the universe, to the

best of my intellectual, emotional, spiritual knowledge? I give myself one hour to decide.

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I imagine I am in a court of cosmic law. I am the lawyers representing both sides, as well as judge and jury. The rules of the court are to make the most honest possible case for your side. The issue: is it an existentially indifferent universe we live in, or a holy, compassionate, loving one?

Let me begin, your honor, with the argument that seems most obvious. I submit to you that we live in an amoral universe where nothing is guaranteed. There is no "cosmic" helper. We are alone, and the universe is indifferent. What evidence do I have? Fortunately, or unfortunately, the evidence is all around us. Look at the world. Look at nature, where you see the battle for survival going on every day. Look at floods and famine. Look at humans battling other humans. The world presents my case for me. The world is filled with cruel, amoral, random suffering.

My valued adversary and colleague will say yes...but. He will point to acts of kindness and the majesty and intricacy of nature, arguing that such goodness and beauty stem from a loving, intelligent, guiding Hand, not amoral indifferent evolution. Let me say in response, that an indifferent universe doesn't always mean an evil, ugly one. There are fruit-bearing trees and fertile soil. But there are also poisonous plants and barren rocks. But good or bad, beautiful or ugly, it is all random and meaningless.

Under those circumstances, we need to take what is given and do the best we can. This is not a nihilistic position. Quite the contrary. Our nobility lies in trying to envision, and then create a life on earth which embodies the highest values of which we are capable, depending on no one but our own ingenuity and wisdom.

This also doesn't mean the task is easy. First, there is the nature of the universe itself, which sometimes randomly supports, but at other times randomly

undermines our efforts. We are hampered in this endeavor certain unskillful habits we develop, such as egoism, greed, jealousy, as well as an enormous self-deceptive defensiveness and general lack of awareness. And yes, our very minds create challenges, as this view can easily cause self-doubt, such as is the task worth it, can we succeed, do we have enough will and self-discipline to do it on our own. We may feel helpless, inadequate to the task, despairing.

Sometimes suffering can help us become a better person, more empathic, help others, give a depth to our life. And sometimes suffering is just meaningless suffering. To see this reality and face it head on takes extraordinary courage. To deny our nothingness, to create meaning where none exists, to reach out to help others when there is no cosmic justice, to make choices to lead an authentic, wise life when the rain falls equally on the good and bad is both challenging and overwhelming, but also can be heroic and even inspiring. Our nobility lies in facing this truth honestly, and still having the courage to go forward. And imagining us, as an act of defiance, happy.

I rest my case. Thank you for your time. Now, I turn to my esteemed colleague, my worthy opponent, to make the case the best he can.

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Before saying anything, I take several slow deep breaths. I try to find my xu-jing, as Lin Zscho would call it. To feel myself connected to and coming from the cosmic void. I want to remind myself that my "enemy," my "adversary," is a form that emerged from the same Oneness, or emptiness, as I. Therefore we are not enemies, but part of the eternal, and as such, even when there are disagreements, they should be approached as part of a tai-chi dance, in a context of respect and caring, even admiration. We are all brothers and sisters.

Your honor, I have heard and respect the position just offered to you. I am going to take the opposite position, and represent a coalition of interests

who have filed amicus curiae papers in support of what I am about to offer. This group, at first, may seem too disparate to be unified under any one umbrella. I am speaking on behalf of those—theists and non-theists-- who believe in an underlying unity in the world, whether that be God, HaShaem, One without a Second, the Tao, Ein Sof, Echad. Yes, there are differences, but our position, as a whole, provides a stark contrast to the existential, meaningless, random position that you have just heard.

My strongest arguments are experiential, emotional, and intellectual. Experientially, I have felt the Oneness of the world, and God's presence. Emotionally, turning myself over to a belief in the Oneness of the world, "God's loving arms" helps me when I feel I can no longer go forward on my own. And intellectually, I am astonished at the similarities among spiritual mystical traditions, whether theistic or non-theistic. In Zen, emptiness sunyata, is fullness, tathata. If God is One and fullness and everywhere, and if formlessness, the void is infinite and everywhere, might we not say that these are the same worldviews only stated as two different sides of the full (or empty) coin. Whether you call it the void and emptiness--xu-jing, sunyata, Ein Sof; or call it fullness, One without a Second, No God but God, could they all, at the deepest level, be experiencing the same thing, only interpreting it differently when they once again try to put it into words?

I know my worthy opponent will want to point out that his existentially indifferent nothingness and emptiness and void is much different than Zen's emptiness, and the Tao and the Jewish Ein Sof. I would grant that point. I also agree that just because there are commonalities intellectually among spiritual traditions, does not mean they are true, or that it's a majority wins situation.

Further, let me admit that there are problems with each of my positions. Experientially, feelings of oneness do not last. Emotionally, though this position can be helpful, it may be just a crutch. And yes, as Tillich, said, faith involves doubt, and there are times when I'm uncertain. Finally,

intellectually, there are also many differences, some perhaps irreconcilable among traditions, at least on the creed and belief level, though I don't believe those invalidates my overview umbrella position.

I pause, trying to prepare the next phase of my arguments. How am I going to address the issue of evil? The suffering that exists in the world? I'm at a loss where to go next. No words come.

Yet I am not discouraged. In fact, I admire my openness. I don't know how many attorneys would advocate being this honest about their position before a judge. Why raise potential arguments that might undermine your position. On the one hand, I'm reacting to and arguing against the existential track. But I also want to be honest and there are challenges with the "alternative" position. I would hope that in this "court" both sides would be open to critiquing their own position in the search for truth. A different type of lawyer, a unique courtroom setting.

I close my eyes and pray for guidance. To whom? God? The wise guests in the sukkah? An inner advisor? All of the above? I listen carefully to the answers I receive.

I'm surprised at what is said.

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It's time for me to write a letter putting down what the message I'm receiving.

I take out a file of letters that I've sent, and find the drafts of the ones I prepared for my Nana nine months ago, when she asked what she could tell her bridge "girl friends" that her grandson was doing. I look at the first one:

*Dear Nana,  
Looking for the nature of self, the nature of the universe,  
and life's meaning....  
Details to follow.  
Love "J"*

I wrote her another brief note about six weeks ago.



*Dear Nana, The "quest" is going well. I'm up in Safed, where I've met some amazing teachers from many traditions, and a special woman named Joie. More details soon! As the Days of Awe approach, wishing you and all the family a "sweet year."  
Love "J"*

It's now time to provide the details of what has been born. The nine months that I gave myself are over I remember wrestling that morning at the Y with how best to write Nana, so she wouldn't be overly concerned. While eating my shemenet, I alternated between drafts of the letter to her, and working on my crossword puzzle. I guess you could say the drafts of that letter to her represented what Lin Zscho would call a tai chi dance, trying to find the right (write?) dongjing way to respond.

I'm now writing another letter, the details, as part of my legal brief. But I'm not sure to whom it's addressed. Nana? The Rebbe? I realize that I don't want to address it to anyone in particular, but just to write it. A letter for a bottle, to be cast into the the ocean, where in a way, this quest began. If it's an existentially indifferent universe, some random person may find it; if it's a cosmically ordained universe, then my task is to cast out the letter, and it will be found and read by those for whom it is meant.

These are the seeds that I've received--seeds as ideas and experiences. These are my plantings, and I'll have to see how and if they grow. Maybe I'm just writing them as reminders to my future self, tossing a rope into the world, hopefully a lifeline, for whomever it is meant for, including my future self.

I want to articulate my philosophy and the lessons I've learned based on what I've been taught so far from the wise men and women sages I've met; and learned from the different parts of my evolving self--I'd hardly call them sages--maybe teachers in the kindest sense of the word,

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To Whom It May Concern: I realize that sounds impersonal, but it is not meant to be. I am writing with affection and compassion from the deepest place in my being. I hope you can hear me, and feel that in me.

Here is what I believe.

Writing in the "air" of Safed, sitting by Reb Luria's grave, facing death, I am aware that there is a sacred, holy dimension to life. I have been blessed to experience this several times--in meditation, after Sinai, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; in Safed with holy men and women and the whooshing of angels' wings. I realize now that even a few of my experiences with my former girlfriend, Mery, and at times when I was canoeing in nature, before I had the words or understanding of what "it" was, also were moments of the numinous, the sacred dimension to life. When I have those experiences--no matter how few and far between--, I know there is unity, purpose, meaning, belonging in life. I fit and am part of a larger cosmic piece. At those times I experience a felt truth and trust that God (or the cosmic void) is everywhere and we all already are where we're supposed to be.

I am astonished how individuals from different cultures and upbringings have come to similar worldviews about the deepest nature of the universe. The emptiness and fullness of Zen; the cosmic void of Taoism; One without a second in Hinduism's Advaita Vedanta; Judaism's Ein Sof; Christianity's the Father and I are One; Islam's There is No God but God. I believe these understandings of the world arose from experiences--mystical, unitive, sacred--have been felt in widely disparate cultures. I call this track, whether theistic or non-theistic, the spiritual track. When I am on it, I feel myself a piece of the cosmic puzzle. Sometimes even more, in the same way that Hinduism's atman (the individual self) is Brahman, the Universal self. I am a wave dancing in an ocean of water. Separate and connected and the same.

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I wish I could stop there. But I cannot. Intellectually, emotionally, even spiritually, I cannot. There are several problems.

I look back at my earlier summation, and try to summarize and clarify.

One problem is that those experiences do not last. And I inevitably return to daily living, and get recaptured in day to day activities. I believe most of us live lives propped up by such activities, which, though necessary for survival on one level, also hide and prevent us from developing a larger perspective on our lives, and also keep us from knowing ourselves at a deeper level. We get caught in trivia, and act in ways that are not consistent with our higher selves.

It takes work and effort to maintain that highest wisdom before us. All the psychospiritual wisdom of the world's religions have particularistic ways to help remind us--prayer, meditation, rituals--of the deeper wisdom that exists. We need sacred rituals, pauses, spaces--around words, around life--to interrupt our daily activity and allow for the chaos of creativity, a glimpse of the mystery, a time of being, and appreciating.

Yet sometimes those efforts don't seem enough. I often still feel a sense of otherness, missing "home", not quite belonging or fitting. Rituals help, but don't always work. Sometimes nothing happens. The practice is boring, and feels ineffective. I do the ritual, but the outcome, the feeling doesn't come. Sometimes that's ok. What I tell myself is that it's about doing the process, like spiritual exercise, and that's good in and of itself. Other times, I do doubt--deeply. It's frustrating that I can't recapture the experiences of Oneness, and the ritual seems empty, just going through the motions. Here is where I tell myself to trust, to remember the experiences I have had, and to keep on the path.

I know I need to learn to accept when I'm not in a receptive mood, when it doesn't feel like I'm growing, when the sacred feels far away, no matter how much effort I'm making. This is where the wise teaching of Prem Devi's yoga lessons is so important: to come from a centered place, to seek to stretch and grow, and to return to a centered place. This is where I need to remember Lin Zscho's xu-jing, even as I act with forms. To hear the message of the Shema,

that even as I struggle and wrestle with and toward God, all is Echad, One. I need to trust, as Ramakrishna said, That God's winds are always blowing." Just because my particular efforts on a given day don't feel a strong wind, doesn't mean the universe isn't sacred. Just hidden at times. Also, when I truly open eyes each day in gratitude, I indeed find examples of amazing beauty and joy several times throughout the day.

I enjoy saying the morning prayer of thankfulness. I like the feeling that God is guiding my steps and providing for my every need. I become happy taking a pause in the afternoon to sing the Ashrei, and feel "how happy I am to be in the house of the Lord." I feel comforted and more at peace after the nightly prayer of forgiveness, and saying the Shema, where my struggles end in Echad. As Akishige shared about the Samurai warrior who said, "With a sip of tea, I stop the war."

At times I need to retreat from the fray, to pull back and gain a perspective. The climb up the mountain. Meditation. Writing in my journals. The everyday world becomes too much for me. The cry of an Arab woman, the mortar fire. These are some of my daily sips of tea.

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These past nine months since Jerusalem at Chanukah and Christmas has been such a time, re-beginning, to write about how to re-create my then fractured life.

I know this time of reflection and efforts at self-healing have been critical. But I also know that one challenge for me is not to pull back too much from the world, become too detached from life and problems, too disengaged, almost floating away.

Is it now time to be re-born and return? Am I ready to reengage with the world, with others?

I also know that another challenge for me is that in my effort to learn about myself and my dust, my darkness, my foibles, I must be careful not to

dwell there. Just as I can rise too far above, drifting away from problems and engagement, I can also go too deeply into dust and negativity, and get lost, going "in" but not "through."

I recall the shofar's many sounds, calling, opening me to wake up, take time to reflect and gain a larger perspective on where I am. Then the short blasts, to recognize the challenges that need to be addressed; followed by long blasts to summon the strength to return and fight and wrestle with those challenges. I need to learn the skills to move between withdrawal and return.

How do you know? Nothing seems simple. The fire that lights the Shabbat and Havdalah candles has its complexities. Fire can bring light and warmth, but untamed, it can also burn and destroy. How do you cultivate what is good but not be consumed by it?

As Lao-Tzu said

Keep sharpening your knife  
and it will blunt.  
Chase after money and security  
and your heart will never unclench.  
Care about people's approval  
and you will be their prisoner.

How do you find or create the balance? Maybe it's like the sefirot, balancing love and boundaries (chesed and gevurah). Or the yin and yang of Taoist philosophy?

Or as La-Tzu offered:

Do your work, then step back.  
The only path to serenity.

I need to explore darkness as a way to lead to light. To engage in the world during the week, and withdraw in the monastery of time for Shabbat respite.

I image the Shabbat candles that bring light, inner and outer, into the darkness. Maybe it's the withdrawal and return. The Sabbath is all about trying to feel and experience God's Oneness, and the other six days, with pauses for

small sips, feeling the slight breeze, and dedicated to healing the world and ourselves.

The braided Havdalah candle, the intertwining of all traditions trying to find and create light in the darkness, emphasizing warmth and shared humanity over despair.

Alone on the mountain, with so many thoughts, nevertheless I feel a certain safety. I know if I go down the mountain, where there are others, it will become more complicated. I know I can't control how people act toward me. But I've learned and can continue to learn to better control how I act toward myself, with scrupulous honesty, as well as with kindness and compassion. Then I can take that burgeoning love of myself and shine it onto the world, reflecting the increasing beauty I'm feeling within.

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Even if I could constantly experience the bliss of Oneness at the deepest level--what can be called a "Channel One" view of reality-- when I look around the lived world, --Channel Two-- I must acknowledge that everything is far from blissful. At its worst, Channel One, "Oneness" can become an excuse for non-action, for insensitivity to real suffering. There are not only problems in the world, but within me. It can be both too simple and too callous to say "Everything is perfect, this is always enough." This view can be misused as a defensive strategy to keep from looking at our own personal imperfections and struggles. What struggles? What self? It's all perfect and One. Just as people can hide behind daily lives, they can hide behind Oneness.

Looking around at the world--the violence, the pervasive inhumanity--and even looking within myself and seeing much the same inclinations--it's hard to remember that I've had experiences in which everything makes sense, when I've trusted it's all going to work out. Or even simply that everything in that moment is perfect and filled with God's presence, the healing way of the Tao. Even if it could somehow be proved that this is true-- that everything will

ultimately work out for the good, is part of the large good, that seems too glib and insensitive a view in the face of human suffering.

How can I know that my belief about God being within and without is true, especially since the feelings of the One do not last? Prem Devi says that Ramakrishna told his followers, that even a taste of the divine should be enough to convince them once and for all of the truth of the One. But isn't it fair to ask, given that most of our experiences are on the plane of duality, when suffering is all around us, rather than everything we see being illusion, and the brief glimpses of the One the reality, whether that brief glimpse itself is the illusion?

Maybe it's like watching *Waiting for Godot*, way into the second act, before the barren dying twig of a tree puts out one leaf. Is that the glimpse? Are we then supposed to say, Ah, God was in this place and I did not know it? I know that doubt doesn't need to preclude faith and belief. But given the world, it seems hard not to at times at least have doubt. I sometimes feel that those who preach the loudest "doth protest too much," using an evangelical hammer trying to beat us with proclamations of the Oneness.

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How does this viewpoint account for evil, or sin, or dust, or husks, whatever you want to call it. Let's start with the premise of one unity, whether wu wei, xujing, the void; no God but God; Echad; One without a second; no mirror, no dust, sunyata is tathata. Then how do we explain the suffering and dust we see and feel? This is the Israel that needs to wake up, and strive toward and with God. But where, if all is One, does that striving and struggle come from? Reb Luria and the kabbalists talk of God withdrawing, then into the empty space left behind a vessel of unity broke in to pieces. There are shards of God within all these pieces, and there are husks, which cover God. Our task is to put the vessel back together. But where do the husks come from in a

universe of One? Where does dust come from? Isn't that God, too, part of the One? How can you both have One and relative degrees of not One?

Intellectually, this position simply doesn't hold together literally or metaphorically. And experientially, to pretend everything is light is both disingenuous and defensively sugar-coating life and reality and myself. Injunctions to address a dark room by just "turning on the light"; or "all is One without a second"; or Candide's platitudinous philosophy that "it's the best of all possible worlds" may be accurate at one experiential level of reality, "Channel One." In this channel, God's doing it for a reason. Bad things happen, but it's all good in God's eyes. But to overlay those views on Channel Two, our lived reality--to say it's just God testing our faith, Job-like--can seem both glib, harsh, and unempathic--even if they aren't meant to be.

Maybe in a William James sense, it might be helpful to look at what we can learn from each event that happens: what is the spiritual message of God? And I'd like to believe that in a world where God is in control, everything makes sense--a wisdom that surpasseth understanding. But I also believe that's too simple as the only response. I believe we can't avoid the existential struggle, can't absolve ourselves of the human effort to try to heal the world--to do everything as if it depends on us.

I do know I like the Jewish view that at the deepest level the souls God gave us are pure; that, as in Zen, we each have a Buddah nature, like an empty mirror. I also like the idea that our bad habits are not poison, but dust that can be cleaned away, or husks that can be removed to find the inner light.

I don't like the idea of original sin, which can never be removed, not matter how hard we try. Freud, in a psychological argument echoing Christianity's concept of original sin, maintained that our problems are in our genes, that our amoral id.



Which is true? I have to be careful to be honest and discriminate between what I'd like to be true, and what I believe to be true. Maybe there are inborn tendencies that are dust, and inborn tendencies that are holy. Joie told me a story, which her Grandmother told her, about the battle between two wolves. An old Cherokee grandmother is talking to her granddaughter about two wolves who reside inside each of us. One wolf is filled with bad habits: evil anger, envy, jealousy, regret, self-pity, greed, arrogance, self pity, resentment, lies, false pride. The other wolf has good habits: joy, peace, love serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, trust, compassion. The granddaughter says it seems the wolves are engaged in battle and wonders which wolf wins.

The grandmother replies, simply, "The one you feed."

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I remember Reverend Noel's saying that all traditions involve a balance of self-control/self-power AND other control, Other power. The egoic part of me says I can make changes. Things aren't perfect and I shouldn't accept them. On a personal level, I don't like to view myself as just a product of my genes or family upbringing. I like to believe with a great deal of effort, I can overcome those parts within me that reflect the sadness, even the depressive suicidality, anxiety and panic attacks of mom and the anger, impulsiveness, and physical abusiveness of Dad. Right now, there is dust, if not plagues that need to be overcome to create an internal healing.

For me, at this stage of life, it feels most honest to see the work on myself as a developmental journey, like the ox-herding pictures. I'm still in the early stages. I have bulls to chase and try to ride. Parts of myself to corral, like cats, and see if we can't harmonize and pull together. I find myself both attracted to those who believe in Channel One, but also suspicious and even judgmental that some may choose that belief as an excuse for doing the self-homework necessary to cleanse their dust and unskillful habits, saying "It's all One, there's nothing to learn and no progress to be made."

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Is there a way to reconcile the Channel One belief that all is one, and perfect as it is, a unitive mystical experience, with nothing to seek, nothing to accomplish, nothing to learn with the everyday reality of Channel Two challenges, dust, human foibles and imperfections? Rumi says be the soul of the place. I hear that as aspirational, something we work and grow towards from a Channel Two perspective. Yet he also talks of a joyous field "beyond right and wrong."

Ramakrishna, in Channel One, says there is nothing to learn, no university for the soul because the soul already knows everything. We are all already the souls of the place in the cosmic ocean of Oneness. Rama also told his students, you must climb the ladder, and then, when you reach the roof, you realize that the ladder and the roof are the same. Yet he felt non-dualists could learn from the yearning of dualists.

When describing the ox-herding pictures, Akishige emphasized the importance of "chasing the bull"—trying to tame our emotions, cleanse our dust. He went on to explain that, at the end of the series of pictures, both ox-herder and ox disappear, and we realize there is no bull, no self. With this realization, the Bodhisattva can then choose to return to the beginning pictures to help others clean their dust, and they too will progress through the cycle once again.

The Rebbe talked of the Shema as a journey of waking up and wrestling to be our higher self. The Shema ends in Echad, One, like the oneness of the blank page of the ox-herding pictures, like Rama's realization that the roof and the ladder are the same.

Apparently others, far wiser than I am, have sought to reconcile these two channels, these two tracks. From where I stand, it seems it may be possible. I also have had experiences---like at Sinai---where I do see and feel the grandeur and awesomeness - the Oneness - of the world.

But I'm also aware that in a photograph, or a picture, if you have two tracks of a railroad in front of you in the foreground, they look wide. As they recede into the distance, they narrow and seem to eventually merge. But there is just an illusion--a *trompe l'oeil*. Although they appear to merge, the tracks really remain parallel. I need to admit I can't see what lies ahead that well. Perhaps all I can do is trust that the tracks, although they never really merge, will be strong enough to carry me into the future.

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Maybe one day I'll look back, and agree with Prem Devi, or the last ox-herding picture, that all is One, that there is no self, no bull! But now it feels like the time to go forward in the world of form to ride, harness, create. Otherwise, it would feel like I'm trying to skip "cards" or stages of the journey.

Yes, I do see glimpses of the Shema's Echad, the One God; in Al Hazrumi's declaration of faith: "No God but God"; what Prem Devi calls "One without a Second." Though part of me likes the view of ultimate Oneness, another part of me is more drawn right now to the "Shema Israel" part of the journey: Wake up, Israel, Wake up you who are struggling with and toward God. There is simply too much suffering, too much dust in the world, for me to declare everything, One. For me, to accept the philosophy of One, creates the danger that of accepting uncritically things as they are: that's just the way it is, it's all One anyway. I hear myself and others saying, "Not only can't I change, but there is no reason to change. I'm perfect in all my 'imperfections' and so is the world. In fact, you could ask, "What 'imperfections?" for they too are simply part of the One."

I know the One can be the context for returning to the world, for picking up the bundle. Some may want to push off from the struggle into the One. At this place in my life, I want to push off from the One back into the struggle. I

realize this may just be my ego talking, but that's ok with me. And, maybe that's the way the One wants me to develop.

That's the journey I've embarked on. Then I, that hopefully more evolved person, can make some small contribution to healing and repairing all the external dust and plagues that I see in the world, the suffering of those in poverty, the homeless, those fighting, those in bondage. To somehow find a way to serve water to those who are thirsty, to bring fire and warmth to those who are cold and alone. To act as if everything depends on me.

If not now, when?

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I know there is dust in me, and I need to face that darkness, even though I don't completely understand what it is or where it comes from. Is this dust embedded within us--biologically or theologically, an original sin, part of a genetic heritage that we've outgrown, but seem helpless to change? Is the dust sometimes helpful? Can anger, jealousy be cues that something is not right? But then doesn't it depend on how we act on those cues, learn to address and "control them" so they don't add additional harm and suffering? Is our dust unskillful habits we have learned and need to unlearn so we can relearn more positive ones?

I believe we-- at least I-- have to face the dust, the shadow, the darkness, looking in and at anger and wounds and sadness. I don't want to just dwell in shadow and dust, for then that would be all that I would see. I don't want to pick unnecessarily at wounds that are beginning to heal, and reopen them. But I believe I have to go through them, through the abyss, to open wounds to the light, in order to heal them. Rats in the lab are labeled by how often it takes them to learn something: one trial, two trials, etc. I'm not always that quick a learner. I usually have to look at my dust more than once often, and from different angles and at different times, in order to fully understand and try to address it.

Maybe my need to feel in control is part of what causes me to be so willing to look with almost obsessive attention at all the dust within me. If I am criticized, I want to learn from that so in the future I won't be broadsided by others' criticism about some part of me that I haven't already looked at and wrestled with. I don't want to hear Mom saying ,you don't even know what you don't know, or that I'm unemotional; or Dad telling me I'm a pseudo-intellectual; or Mery telling me I'm too intellectual and ambitious, and not compassionate enough; or the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet pointing out all the areas I haven't even addressed about my family and myself, without having examined each of those myself and come to the best wisdom I can about them.

But that's not the only motivation. I also want to become a better, wiser, kinder person. I believe by getting to know myself, all of myself, including each piece of dust, I will decrease the amount of hurt that I cause others, and myself, by not acting thoughtlessly from lack of awareness and reflexive conditioning. I'm trying to become aware of bad emotional and cognitive habits, and learn wiser ones--just as I would try to correct bad habits in tennis, golf, or the flute.

Once having recognized my dust, I want to polish and cleanse it, and as the wise Indian grandma said, feed my wiser self. In and through. At least that's the hope.

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I almost feel like I'm watching two different channels. On Channel One, which I am only occasionally allowed access to, I experience a world in harmony, One, connected, loving, perfect. Almost like a cosmic Disneyland. Al Hazrumi quotes poems of the Sufi mystical poet, Rumi, who talks about the fields out beyond distinctions of sin and not sin. Prem Devi reads from Ramprasad Sen, the Bengali mystic poet and singer of Hindu devotional songs, who says once you've seen and felt this truth, the world is place of mirth and joy;

On the other channel, I see a world in which there is suffering and hope, despair and cooperative efforts. On this second channel, there are two types of programming. One program says that Channel One does not exist. The world is indifferent, random, and our actions have no ultimate meaning or purpose.

The other type of programming says that Channel One does exist, it's just that we, who have limitations, have trouble accessing it. And whether we call that Channel One emptiness-- xujing, the cosmic void-- or the One it exists; and further, there are things we can teach you on this channel to help you make this channel better and wiser. Coming from a place of xujing, you can learn the best response for any given situation--dongjing. You can try to balance the energies of the sefirot, energies from God. Like the counting of the Omer after Passover, blending strength, love, mercy, justice, again depending on the situation and circumstances.

If I hadn't had experiences of Channel One, I'd say that the existential approach is more honest and conforming to the reality I see most of the time in my daily life. I'd also say that a good, meaningful, and courageous life can be created by following the wisdom of that approach, which honors the individual, invites us to take responsibility for our lives, and proclaims that it our choice to lead authentic lives. We're alone, and yes, it's scary, and we seem to have to wait and work hard for few moments of joy and accomplishment. We know that the rock will just roll down the hill, and we have to start over. But there is something majestic and yes, even inspiring about being willing to make the choice to "deny our nothingness."

I also believe that even if Channel One does exist, we live most of our life on Channel Two, and I would want to learn to do that as wisely and compassionately as possible. I would want to do so without dismissing the suffering I see within and around me, the loss through death, as just a delusional or illusory personal drama amidst the pure radiance of the truth of Channel One. Is it impossible for me to argue in good conscience that our lives

are just a dream-like bubble, in which personal pain and struggle are mere illusions and the revelation of unity occurs when a pin bursts the bubble?

To me, that's too trivializing of the pain I see and feel before and within me. I look at the violence of the modern world, the hashness, and seeming absurdity-- with brief moments of grace. It is too dismissive to say that's all part of illusion. I believe it must be asked of Channel One, how and where does the dust, the husks, the surface of the bubble come from, if all is God? And further, why did God choose to create such a radiant unity in such a dualistic, and often "evil" way? This "evil" may be nothing more than absence of light, but it is powerful and destructive nonetheless.

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I am also aware it's too painful to live only in a world of dust and suffering. Yet I still haven't completely resolved to my satisfaction whether it is fair or just to experience pure joy and happiness, while knowing that there are so many that are living lives of suffering, deprivation, and illness.

Toynbee spoke of times in a person's life of "withdrawal and return." Different traditions have alluded to that in terms of allowing some times of respite, so it's possible to return to the task of healing the world. I think of Camus' Dr. Rieux in the *Plague* swimming peacefully and refreshing himself in a cool lake. He needed to take time away from fighting the plague, to restore himself, so he could then return to the fight. Of the Buddha telling the old man to "drop the bundle"...to let go; so that he could then once again "pick up your bundle and continue your journey."

I also remember a similar "bundle" story Reb Janoathan told us about Shabbat. An old man, with a heavy bundle over his shoulder, was walking alongside the road and a person in a carriage offered him a ride, which he accepted. The man kept the bundle on his shoulder as the carriage continued the jourey. Finally, the owner of the carriage said, "You might as well put your bundle down, for the carriage is already carrying it." Similarly, Reb Jonathan

said, on Shabbat, you might as well put your bundles down, for God is already carrying them.

I want to keep reminding myself--through Shabbat, the morning prayers, the blessings before the meals, the Ashrei happiness prayer-- that Channel One does exist. This would give me the strength to continue the task of repairing the world and myself during the other six days of the week. And the trust that I am not alone in this task.

It would also mean acknowledging the joy and gratefulness for the beauty in life, even amidst the suffering and pain. Is it kosher to experience 100% joy - even for a moment or 24 hours - without that being a denial of and a hiding from the suffering and pain that exist for countless people even in those moments that I am experiencing and honoring joy? Does that mean we aren't allowed to ever feel pure joy, without the anchor of suffering attached?

And what about 100% pure suffering? If there is joy somewhere in the world--a child's smile, a bird singing, lovers holding hands---does that mean we should try to be grateful even in a time of despair?

The questions confuse me. Part of me would prefer a simpler black/white clarity.

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Maybe from the perspective of Akishige's mindfulness meditation, I could view both in a still clear, big mind---ten thousand joys, ten thousand sorrows. Is it a question of when and where you choose to focus?

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I see the importance of choice. But choice depends on free will. Do we have the skills and ability to choose? My psychology professor talked once in class about William James wondering whether or not he really had free will, or if everything was determined. He decided he would act "as if" he had free will, and his first act of free will would be to believe that he had free will.



What I like about that story is that it gives me, it gives us humans a way of being on control. We have the choice to believe we can exert control. We have the choice to believe and hope for a better life. We have the choice to choose whatever path in Channel Two most appeals to us, including whether or not Channel One even exists.

I have learned from the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, and from my journals, that control is indeed important to me. Maybe because I often feel out of control, or hate the feeling of loss of control--like when my parents divorced, or Mery left me. Or when I can't seem to make myself, or the world around me, better.

It's funny to look back and see how Johannes used words in his journal to show that he was the controller of his fate. I know now from my Job-like experiences that I have much less control than I once thought, which made me realize even more how important having control is to me.

How much do I have? Do humans have? I know it's not zero. And I know it's not 100%. Do I sometimes try to act in an assertive controlling way, when I don't or should try to be in active control, but instead should follow what Lin Zscho called Lao-Tzu's yielding, accepting "Way of Water?" I expend a lot of energy trying to keep things in control--I sometimes feel I'm holding up the world--although I know if I'm really honest, that's really not what's holding it up. Or doing useless actions just to gain an illusory sense of control--like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

To feel that in any way I am 100% in charge or controller of my fate is to create an illusion that I'm guiding the roller coaster that is carrying me. All I can really do, at times, when the roller coaster goes down the hill, or on a bumpy plane, is to hold on tight. Or maybe really let go, raise your arms and go "wheee."

I remember Jacques telling what for him was a joke. "Camus' has just come home, and his wife asks "Honey, how was your day? "

"I had a breakthrough in my thinking."

"Oh what?" She asks as she continues to prepare the meal.

"I realized world is meaningless and random and absurd."

"That's nice honey, would you like some peas?"

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Yes, the world may be meaningless and absurd, and yes, I may not have very much control, but still, I have some control, and I need to use it wisely. I can still do my part to help heal the world, to heal myself. Am I facing one of those either/or dichotomies I'm so fond of creating? Is my task to purify myself, to focus on finding God and meaning, through prayer and meditation as Ramakrishna emphasized, noting that doing good deeds, building hospitals, is social work, and not God's work. A similar argument was made by Luther-- that it was by faith alone that we are saved, countering the Catholic church's view of good deeds.

Or do I believe like Rabbi Heschel, who, when he returned from Selma in support of the Civil Rights marches of Martin Luther kind, was asked 'Did you find much time to pray, when you were in Selma?' to which Rabbi Heschel responded, 'I prayed with my feet.'

Maybe helping others and keeping my spiritual quest alive are not either/or, but both sides of the same coin, or corners of the puzzle, or...given greater attention at different times in one's day, one's life I'm not unaware that writing in my journal has been a conscious effort to regain a sense of control in my life. I also know I can make "as if" choices. I believe it is wise to act as though people are good and loving, and have God or Buddha nature within them. Namaste. I salute that which is sacred and holy within you.

But I want my views "as if" to be consistent with the truth, and not be simplistic illusions. I also know that people have dust, are defensive, unreflective, mean, and selfish, and sometimes "hell is other people." So I don't want to be naïve and not recognize others--and my--dust. But I also want to

be willing to easily and graciously appreciate and acknowledge the positive qualities.

And so what "as if" choice do I make about the nature of the universe?

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I put my pen down and look up at the stars in the night sky, the waning moon. Is this a court recess? Why not, it's my court. I can do what I want.

I close my eyes, and a recent dream surfaces. I was trying to move a large stereo speaker into an elevator. In the process of adjusting the stereo, I let it slip and it fell into the elevator shaft and down several floors. I stood watching it fall, feeling awful. I'd tried and failed.

What seems humorous and sad about the dream is that because of my ear, I can't hear stereo, can't tell which direction music is coming from. The dream is also about my fear of responsibility. I'm afraid that my bad habits or lack of consciousness or lack of skills or plagues within me will somehow destroy whatever I come into contact with. I remember mom, after she and dad divorced, telling me to take care of my siblings while she went out. Then, when she returned, she told me I'd done a horrible job and didn't deserve to be given that kind of power and control.

So how can I, a person deaf in one ear, be expected to hear what the nature of the universe is? I feel both fear and inadequacy. Can a mirror covered with dust reflect clearly? How can I ever know enough about myself, let alone the universe, to really make an informed choice? I know I've been trying desperately to learn more about me and my dust, and yet look how, even a year ago, when I cut myself with the scythe, I wasn't even aware of my conscious motivations, much less my unconscious ones. How can you be in control of your life when you don't even know yourself? How, with that level of ignorance, can I ever expect to make an informed decision about the nature of the universe at the deepest level?

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As I look at the sky this evening, seeing the moon which was full on Sukkot, and the amazing panoply of stars, I feel a sense of peace and harmony. Yet I remember Jacques saying, there is no harmony in the universe. The night sky is the result of chaos and the violent birth of stars. The sun itself, if you are too close, is inhospitable, dangerous. Mother Nature is utterly indifferent to human beings.

Yet doesn't the moon reflect the sun's light, illuminating our evening. And the sun itself warms us, from just the right distance away.

So many questions. Are there answers? Part of me values an existential position, that we seek to create and forge the best truth we can. But there is also "fear and trembling" in that nihilistic perspective. What if I'm wrong in the truth I espouse? Blinded by my own unknown inner dust? Perhaps there is no "right" answer, no correct solution to the puzzle? I don't think I can accept that level of uncertainty. I like the Chinese belief in dongjing, that there is a "best" answer for a given situation. There is an underlying "truth, and it's our task to find and uncover it. I keep bouncing back and forth between we need to create our own truth, worried there is no truth, and wanting to trust that there is an underlying truth to be discovered.

Jacques said that he feels our views of the nature of the universe are a Rorschach Test. God is just a Rorschach for our anger, yearning, hopes. "Tell me a person's view about God and I'll tell you about the person," he asserted with his usual confidence.

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I think back to the wonderful discussion our group had about the possibility of "matching" an individual's practice to their personal dynamics and style. As in yoga, "union" with the Divine, some may be more suited to hatha, some to bhakti. But, as Prem Devi asked, how much do we really consciously choose our belief system and our practices and ensure they are

"matched" to our psychological dynamics. She was talking about different "fingers" to the moon of yoga.

Even further, why do people have different belief systems about the moon? Why do some people believe with certainty in a theistic view, in an all powerful, all loving God? Why do others, like Jacques, believe in an existentially indifferent universe? I think of our discussion about the continuum of self control and other/Other control. Why are different people drawn to different beliefs? And while all non-theists believe in an "empty" Godless universe, some have a different view from Jacques' about what that means. For example, Buddhists say that emptiness (sunyata) is fullness (tathata).

So where Jacques would try to fill the emptiness with creating desire to accomplish something followed by meaningful action, Buddhists believe that desire--the inaccuracy of our "externalist" perceptions of reality and the fictional objects that are created from that misunderstanding -- is what causes suffering. Similarly, Taoist emptiness emphasizes restraint, patience, frugality, simplicity, and lack of worldly desire.

Could I in some ways be a personal test case of Jacques' hypothesis? What is it about me that I have trouble choosing "one" view of the universe? What is it in my personality that is, at different times, drawn to each of them? Jacques told me once that he wanted to be like Heidegger, or the Taoists' yin/yang, reconciling apparent opposites or revealing their underlying unity. What is it in me that is both drawn to these different beliefs and at the same time seeks to find a way to try to reconcile them?

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I may never truly know myself. But one thing no one will ever be able to say about me is that I didn't try. I commit myself to trying to uncover every motivation and defense and piece of dust I have. It may be my last illusion that

I can live without any illusions about myself but that is my goal. And I'd like to do that in a way which combines what Dr. Lisbet and Lin Zscho talked about--positive assertive, yang energy--in that I work on myself every day, believe I am capable of change and making progress; and positive yielding and acceptance, yin energy--recognizing that I need to be gentler, more compassionate, and more accepting of where I am today, including all my still to be addressed limitations.

Again, I wonder if there aren't areas where choosing the nature of the universe may not make a difference. If the world is existential, then I'm being authentic and taking responsibility for creating myself. If it's spiritual, I ask God to help make me the best person I can be, and know it's more of a team effort, and that "God's not finished with me yet."

In either case, even as I seek to grow, I'm learning a greater love and acceptance for myself--all my selves--just as I am, even as I continue to be a work in progress. On one level, this seems a paradox; on another level, it seems simple and feels right. I have brought in most of the exiles, and now, the wandering Jew in the diaspora in Israel, needs to come home.

Is there a home to come back to any longer, or am I, by my very nature, condemned, or choosing always to be separate, the outsider, apart.

Maybe like Jacob becoming Israel, Israel or home is a state of mind. The internal diaspora ends as self-love begins. Then, maybe, even though there is no home at one level, every place can become more like home.

I can go from the darkness of the sea and the shrillness of the voice, to soft white. I can taste the strawberry. That is one healing way to address the existential track. And if there is a God, then I can let go and trust "Into your arms, your loving arms, I commend my soul."

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My reverie under the night sky ends as I open my eyes, and jot down the thoughts I've just had. When I finish, I look through the last twenty pages, to where I began a letter "To Whom It May Concern." At one level, I saw this missive as a follow-up to my Nana. If this is a letter, it would be time to say some kind comments before giving my ultimate answer to the question of the nature of the universe.

I would want to say to Nana, to my family, to Mery, to the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, in the spirit of the just past Yom Kippur, please forgive me for hurts I've caused, intentionally or unintentionally by my thought, word or deed. I'd want to tell Nana how much I miss her hovering sheltering presence at Sunday brunches, what a lovely home she created. I'd want to tell her that I don't really have a lot to show for nine months, but it's the best I could do. I'd want to thank her for her loving patience and tell I am sorry for any worry I have caused her. I'd want to tell her I know she only worries about me because she loves me. I'd want to tell her that I send my love. And I'd want her to tell grandpa I'm working to make the story my own.

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But is this a letter? Or is it really an effort to create the template for a legal brief to others and my future self? If a legal brief, I realize it's not a traditional one. I'm trying to move beyond the adversarial style I was taught in which each side argues forcefully for the truth of its position, leaving out disconfirming evidence that might support the other side. Rather, I'm truly trying to get at the truth, staying open to all experience and everything I know. It's almost how I imagine a psychologist might act working with people who are in love, or need to live together, and want to reconcile; or a tai chi dance between the different tracks of an indifferent universe and a compassionate loving one. I'm trying to reach across the abyss as far as I can from the existential position toward the spiritual one, and to be as honest as I

can about the seeming flaws in the spiritual position which help move it toward the existential one.

When I first conceived this idea, I imaged a courtroom where two adversaries would wage a crisp "battle." I as judge and jury would decide which is right, which is true. But I have since departed from that model, which seems unnuanced and simplistic. And I am not sorry. I realize I would love there to be a way for these two sides to come together.

I think of the story Reb Jonathan told about a learned Rabbi and his Chasidim followers who heard there was a wise secular philosopher coming to dispute the Rabbi's teachings and show that everything the Rabbi believed was wrong. The followers were fearful and watched with great concern as the two finally met. The philosopher talked for a long time. Then the Rebbe said only one word, after which he embraced his supposed antagonist.

His one word: "Perhaps."

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The most honest I can be is that I don't know. My problem is that I see both sides of everything. The strength of that is now I can better hear other people's perspectives. I'm not trying to prove my rightness, or the rightness of any one position. But then I get caught in the middle, seeing some truth and wisdom in each side, and not being able to choose a single Truth.

Arguing from the God side, and trying to reach toward the existential, I wonder whether God didn't create secular existentialists. Buber said God created atheists so people wouldn't simply depend on God, but would try to heal the world and others through their own efforts. Maybe secular existentialists serve a similar purpose.

Is that the reason why, on Purim, where God is never mentioned? Our higher wisdom (Esther) has to save us from our more callous, crueler self (Mordechai)?

But then I ask, God, where are You hiding, and why? Why don't you help us



more in times of need? And then I think, maybe God's winds are blowing, but I'm not doing enough to raise my sail. Or maybe I'm trying to follow my own plans, rather than listen to God's. Maybe God is asking, where and why are we humans hiding from our higher selves?

Or is the theistic track merely a creation of our minds, because we--I--am unable to face the suffering and pain of the world in all its harshness? Did God create us in God's image; or do we create God in our hoped-for-fantasy--a Santa Claus, Easter Bunny, and Tooth Fairy supreme?

I wonder if the universe and my life aren't like a Rorschach ink blot. I try to view all the pieces of each and put them into a framework, a story. But the ink blot is bound by the limits of the card, like a chess game is by the board. I'm still trying to put together pieces of the puzzle, like when I was a child. Starting with the corner pieces, then the sides. But does the universe have corners? Is this more like counting numbers, no matter how many I count, I'm still infinitely far from the infinite? So when I try to see and experience the biggest picture of which I am capable, and then try to make sense out of it, I get caught between seeking order and structure, and feeling an infinite yearning.

I know, from my family history that I may have a tendency toward depression and anxiety from mom, and a tendency toward anger and impulsiveness from dad. I need to be vigilant of emotional lability. Maybe that's also why control is so important to me, particularly self-control. I also know that my own efforts of will only seem to take me so far. I need to create structures and rituals to take me out of my own frame of reference where I'm responsible for everything. I like the feeling I get when I recite the morning prayer and try to feel grateful and thankful, when I chant that "God is guiding my every step" and "providing for my every need." I like to be reminded in the afternoon of how "Happy I am in the house of the Lord. Sing hallelujah!"

I like the evening prayers of forgiveness, trying to clean the dust I've created and offering forgiveness. To repeat the journey of the Shema, which both acknowledges the struggle to wake up and wrestle with and toward God, but also says that the journey ends in One, Echad. That gives me hope and optimism about my struggles. The world can be a tough, scary, often ugly place, and there are parts of life's journey--sickness, aging, death, separation, loss-- that create enormous suffering---and I need those reminders to help keep me on a more even keel.

This is the best I can come up with. I feel like I can see truths in both positions, which are incompatible, and should be an either-or. But maybe my truth, and my ending combines them both. I'm the dash between either-or; between I-Thou, between the parallel railroad tracks, --or roller coaster tracks!-- between two different and incompatible views of the universe.

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I decide to try to organize my thoughts by making a table. My way of trying to find some tracks on which I can go forward. Or a vague handrail. Without that, I feel I'm just wobbling along the side of a cliff or over an abyss with nothing to hold onto.

Maybe my need for order flies in the face of reality. To order chaos, I create a timetable of daily activities, self-reflection journals, charts. As a kid, I enjoyed trying to solve giant jigsaw puzzles. I used to love this kind of challenge. I always assumed there was a solution, if I was diligent enough. What a great attitude toward jigsaw puzzles. Does it work with life? How do I know the pieces of the puzzle fit. I may be searching for meaning, a spiritual system in circumstances not obviously ordered. As Jacques said about death, it's a high interest, low evidence topic. What if there is no order, no pieces that really fit no outline of outside corners; one of those science experiments in which there is no answer.

Nevertheless, I try once again.

Column one: What are the different domains of life? For simplicity's sake, I am going to contrast the existential indifferent universe view in Column Two with a sacred Spiritual View of the Universe in Column Three. I am aware from my conversations with these wise elders that there is much nuance and overlap, and these can't be considered totally discrete categories. For example, sometimes a non theistic view (Taoist, Buddhist), although it has "emptiness, sunyata, xujing" as part of the teaching, has much in common with those views of a cosmic whole, spiritual universe. But to create two tracks, the following seems helpful, and a first good cut into the topics.

<i>AREAS OF LIFE, DOMAINS</i>	<i>EXISTENTIAL</i>	<i>SPIRITUAL (Theistic)</i>
<b>BODY.</b> Health, physical: pains, hurt, suffering, illness, aging, death	Self effort, this is our personal challenges to face; bozo like resilience; <b>Positive Assertive:</b> do the best you can.	We are a body, but more than a body. Body is the temple for the soul. <b>Positive yielding:</b> let go of the body when it is time.
<b>RELATIONSHIP:</b> Family of origin, friends, girlfriend, beloved.	Hell is other people; basic aloneness.	Feel interconnected; we're all part of God.
<b>CAREER; self and purpose.</b> Where and what is my professional identity, what do I want to do with my life; role of money, social status, contribution	Forge your own identity, (e.g. Kafka, land surveyor); what does society offer (Julian Sorel)	What is my piece of the cosmic puzzle, what gift do I have to contribute. Uncover your piece.
<b>EMOTIONS.</b> Anger, love, fear, hate, hostility	Be authentic, feel what you feel	Be love, transform negative emotions into healing kindness
<b>NATURE OF UNIVERSE</b>	Indifferent; create your "self; deny your nothingness	

I'll need to flesh out the pros and cons of each, including what I believe. But just as an example, there is an advantage to a a spiritual worldview, particularly when a self-reliant person's will begins to flag. Yes, Camus' Dr. Rieux can swim in the lake to refresh and restore himself. But it is all *his own* efforts, first forging ahead, and then pausing and engaging in self-care. There is solace in believing in a benevolent Other, and being able to say "Into Your arms, Your loving arms, I commend my soul."

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I remember my creative writing professor asking us about the style, timing and purpose of our writing. Regarding style, he noted Saul Bellow who broke with the hard boiled Hemingway style in favor of one more interior, reflective and psychological—a Jewish writer as immigrant and ethnic artist. Regarding timing, the professor quoted T.S. Eliot "The end is in the beginning." He told us that the beginning of a well-crafted story gives some indication about where we are headed as well as where we will be at the end. "This means," he said "that until you write the end you will not truly know the beginning. Which comes first?" He then cited Seneca, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."

Ends and beginnings. Alpha and Omega.

Finally, the professor asked us to consider when is the best time during your life to write your one magnum opus. He noted that Rilke asserted a poet should only write one poem at the end of his life, when there is greater perspective. The professor's opinion was that "There are some books you can only write when you're young; or when you are very old. When you are young, you are trying to get the knack of living; everything is new and fresh, and insights abound, some better, less jaded, while others are just naïve. On the other side, when you're old, you're beginning to exhale and can take a final look back.

Well, right now I can only write the young man's story.

The beginning.

Maybe one day, depending on where life's journey takes me, I'll have the opportunity to look back on my young man's story, and write the old man's version.

Beginnings and endings.

\* \* \*

Regarding purpose, what would I want for a book? Am I trying to push the reader? Share a story? Ask for guidance and feedback? Reach out to teach?

Do I want the story to be about how illusory control over our destiny is, how transitory, and often sad and tragic life is? Or do I want to send a more uplifting, even ennobling message, challenging and emboldening readers to ask what we can do with our one fragile, yet extraordinary moment in time?

\* \* \*

I wonder, as I look at my chart, can there be an integration on the other side?

Word as flesh and word as spirit? Seeing the dust in oneself and others and still believing in an essential goodness of humanity, a Buddha nature, a pure soul? Or that we are "blank slates" but can create that authentic goodness in ourselves and in the world? An existential world view and a spiritual one?

And what about connection and relationship? Seeing our aloneness, even at times desiring that aloneness and personal space. But also seeing the connection, how we can be a part of something larger than ourselves, can love and share intimacy. Can the world both be one where we are essentially alone, and also at some core level, essentially connected, or able to create such connections?

I know from an either-or standpoint the above integration makes no sense. It's like trying to intersect parallel lines. Only in a painting, as you look at a path far in the distance, can that seem to happen. But why not in a story, too?

Maybe I could call his story, "J's "Journey." Although I don't have final answers, I believe I have seen and tackled as best I could a few of the most important questions, and have done so with the wisest people on the planet. At some deep, fundamental level, I feel cleansed, baptized in the mikvah of the very water I want to serve. I have received on Easter Sunday what Joie called a

"second chance"—certainly a far cry from my baptism in the anything but pacific Pacific Ocean that night in Carmel with Mery.

I feel bare, ready to leap naked into existence. The crossword puzzle no longer hides. It creates a structure and framework. Now I need to do that for the universe, so that I can fill in the words of my life, my story.

But I've also learned that I can't do it all alone. My efforts flag. I need others. That's where I hope for angels, in whatever form they come: human and even spiritual partners and guides. From the theistic view, we need to do our part. I'm reminded of the teachings I learned from Prem Devia, Reb Jonathan, and Al Hazrumi: "God's winds are always blowing, but we must raise our sail" as Ramakrishna said. "Act as if everything depends on you" as Reb Nachman counseled, even knowing that it all depends on God. As it's said in Islam, Nasrudin, the wise fool of the Sufi stories advised, "Trust Allah. . .and tie your camel."

The advantage of the faith context is that when we doubt, or become tired, when our self-reliance begins to fade, we can turn to God for help, to hold us, lift us up on the wings of angels. We can turn to God the sculptor for assistance. As the t-shirt says, "Be patient, God isn't finished with me yet." And we can turn to God for forgiveness, when our efforts don't match the vision.

But existentialists and non-theists realize they need more than self-will and self-reliance, too. Even Camus' hero, Dr. Rieux, takes time from fighting the plague to joyfully splash in the sea. Akishige tells of samurai warriors take a a sip of tea to momentarily "stop the war." Withdrawal into a sanctuary, whether a monastery in space, a shabbat in time, a tea ceremony, a healing body of water, quiet meditation, the arms of others, a spiritual sangha, community, or Lin Zcho's tai chi forms, is necessary to heal and restore. Withdraw and return.

If there is no God, if we're just dust, existentially, we can face that with Zen calm unblinking strength, with surrender into the emptiness, with

fighting spirit, or a combination of all three. Perhaps knowing we've led an authentic life, "existed," created something or left something behind with our life, some legacy will help us in these last moments. What Beckers referred to as our existential efforts to "deny our death." Might this not be what atheistic kibbutzniks feel they are doing--creating their legacy--by tilling the land?

\* \* \*

I remember Mery saying that Michelangelo believed that the the sculptures he made were already within the block of stone--imprisoned?-- and his task was merely to release them. That is one point of view, one track-- that goodness is already within us, part of the divine Creator's gift to us, or our Buddha nature. I'm just "uncovering," "discovering," "reconnecting," and nourishing a gift and capacity that is already within. I'm already a piece of the cosmic puzzle. Our task is to live a life that brings forth our inner divine sculpture, our piece of the cosmic puzzle. If I am made in the image of God, that gives me hope that I can bring forth that image. The truth is there, it's only a matter of uncovering it, like Joie's story of the angel and the unborn child. It's also similar to what Lin Zscho said about the word dongjing: that there is a perfect response, a perfect combination of yin and yang, for every situation. It exists, we just have to find it. I touch the indentation below my nose, remembering the story Joie told me on Easter Sunday about all wisdom being within. I like this view. It gives me a sense of trust that all the different colors of my personal spectrum, when properly cleaned and polished, emanate at the deepest level from the white light spark of God.

The other view is that Michelangelo's insight, skills, and wisdom were necessary to envision the sculpture and then create it. This second track, this view, is that we existentially create the sculpture, not uncover it. As Jacques would say, existence precedes essence. I need to create my own white light. By

having a vision of an authentic whole person, the highest image of wisdom and compassion that the many faiths have proclaimed; by examining honestly all parts of myself and my actions, thoughts, feelings; and by choosing to act in ways that express who I want to be, eventually I can---not uncover and discover-- but actually work toward creating that reality toward which I aspire. I form and create a puzzle, then find and nourish my piece within it. I like this too, because it is so proactive and gives me responsibility for creating myself.

But is it possible that these two separate worldviews--one theistic, one non-theistic--can produce the same results, lead to the same end?

\* \* \*

BOTH AND. Each of the two tracks recognize the underlying universal root human issues we have to face, and have developed wise ways to help guide us. I don't need either/or. I can draw from the wisdom of both to create the structure and framework for this next phase. It's almost like creating the crossword puzzle outline, then turning myself over to it and working to fill in the words needed.

For me, now, these two aspects of life--these two world views--are the banks of the river, the tracks for the roller coaster. I do know that even though I can't reconcile these views, I can live with the ambiguity. I once again think of myself as a dash between them, seeking to build a bridge between two views. I don't need either-or certainty. I will be the roller coaster that takes me on this ride, and which bridges the abyss.

I have outlined the corners of the puzzle, the banks to channel the yearning, and a wholistic Rorschach story which which to proceed.

Somehow, I feel my task, for now, is to try to consciously contain both tracks in my mind and heart, and then allow myself to use those tracks to reenter life. How can I put that together? I remember my creative writing



professor quoting F. Scott Fitzgerald "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Ha! Am I first rate, Dad? And even if I aspire to be, can I still function while simultaenously holding these two tracks?

I think of playing tennis, trying to decide whether a ball is in or out. The lines give a helpful structure. Without them, as Confucius noted about life in gernal, you can't really play the game well. There is a need for more and better order, definition, precision, so communications can be clearer. Even with lines, some calls were difficult to be certain about, and two people, from different perspectives can see it differently.

Yet those lines in tennis are arbitrary. As Lao-tzu said, you can't divide up the river, the river flows and is one. Can both be true? Is it possible to play the game seriously and yet keep a perspective that it's not so serious. Maybe just play the game the best you can and enjoy.

Is it possible to reconcile their two viewopints? Can we ever really embrace contradictions and integrate profoundly differing views, creating further nuance amidst ambiguity?

\* \* \*

There are times when we, like Buddha's student, need to drop the bundle of life's burdens. Those are the times of the sanctuary of Shabbat, the rebirth of Easter Sunday, the Days of Awe, the experience of Mount Sinai, and even the lofty peaks of the air of Safed where angels' wings flap,

Hopefully, each time we have experiences that give us a larger perspective and understanding— we gain more courage, faith, inner peace, and wisdom.

But what do you do the Monday after an altered state, unitive, sacred experience on Easter Sunday? How do you live differently on the Monday after the resurrection? What did God do after the Sabbath, on the eighth day of creation?

Maybe more importantly, what do I do? I suppose our task, until we actually die, is to once again pick up the bundle and continue the journey, returning to the ways of the world and the reality of daily life, hopefully on the other side, as in Akishige's third stanza about mountains and lakes. There is a time to come down from the Mountain of Sinai, to push off from the lofty hills of Safed. Hopefully, I can apply the lessons learned at these summits in a healing way to life's daily struggles and suffering.

But if I've learned anything, it's that though the wisdom may be simple, it's not easy. Any ending has to be able to honor the complexity of both/and, suffering and joy; understanding and doubt; dust and light. As Ecclesiastes might have said, a time to drop the bundle, a time to pick it up. Whether from a theistic or non-theistic perspective.

Kohelet, the writer of Ecclesiastes, seems to also embody at some level, this attempt at integration. On the one hand, he preached vanity of vanities, all is vanity. Jacques loved that part. But Kohelet also concludes that the task, is "in the end to fear (revere) the Lord and follow the commandments." He acknowledges all the different aspects of life, good and evil, and says they are all part of the cycle. Yet he ends saying follow the commandments. Even while realizing it is all vanity at one level, we keep the context of "the Lord." We return to the law, though on the other side, having seen its limitations and problems. Is that both and?

\* \* \*

I haven't really answered the question unequivocally with which I, as John, started this search last Christmas. I was seeking to point the way. To what I wasn't sure. Perhaps to certainty. Perhaps to a wiser, more evolved self. I have seen suffering, within me and without that I can't reconcile with an all-good, all-loving, all-compassionate universe. In a yoga-like stretch, I have pushed my mind and heart to the limits of my current ability, as far as I am able for now, to come to an understanding of the nature of the

universe. I don't yet know how or if my two seemingly opposing views can ever completely fit together, a random, indifferent universe, and a loving, compassionate one.

I think of my two pictures, one the photograph of the person leaping, the other the ink drawing of the hands reaching out to each other, not quite touching, the yearning between them palpable.

I am trying to embody both pictures at the same time: taking a leap, and reaching out to join hands, with myself, and the universe.

\* \* \*

Who is it that reaches out, that leaps? Who is this self, this dash between the two tracks? I think of Akishige's quote from the Buddha.

*Yesterday is a memory  
Tomorrow is the unknown  
And now, is the knowing*

Such beautiful, simple wisdom. The self is the here and now knowing, present consciousness.

But my mind won't just rest in that simplicity. It's a truth, but not the whole truth. It's too simple.

Yesterday can be more than a memory. I think of the expression "your past will catch up with you." Isn't that a version of Prem Devi's karma, or Akishige's samara? If we don't focus on our past, and learn from it, I believe we are doomed to repeat it. I feel like this journey into my past has been, in some ways, more accurately, an effort to catch up with my past.

And the future self? Yes, it is unknown. But it's our intention and plans and vision that in some way help create our future self. What do we wish to learn, where and how do we want to grow?

So, yes, we are in the present moment of knowing, but there are ways, I Believe, that we can look backward and gain wisdom; look forward and develop wisdom; and also there are times to just be in the present. So, we need

complexity in weaving the strands of time. Like tonight's havdalah candle. But maybe there is simplicity in that braid, simplicity on the other side of complexity.

\* \* \*

These past months have been attempting to come to peace with my past selves, to learn to look at who I was with stillness, like a clear lake in which I could see the sediment, the mud, but not be roiled and foamed by it.

In looking at my past, I feel like Jacob when he spoke his final words to his assembled sons, the parashah that I read with the Rebbe during Chanukah at the start of the secular New Year, nine months ago. He sees his sons clearly, and is able to give a psychological assessment of each one's different attributes and temperaments: war-loving Benjamin, the security-loving Issachar, the morally unstable Reuben, the self-disciplined Joseph, the calm Judah. How or will they learn to work with each other, integrate their different families and tribes? He gives both warning and hope. He wants their common ancestry, their history to unite them, so he recalls the past. And we blesses them as they go into the future.

His words are the climax of the Book of Genesis, the end of the beginning. He is a bridge between the past and future. I now am the bridge from my past to my future. Who are the tribes from my self that I'm trying to bring forward from exile, to integrate and learn from? Which parts of each do I wish to leave in exile, and say good-bye to?

\* \* \*

Tonight at Simchat Torah there are seven circles of dancing, representing each of the seven sefirot of spiritual energies from God. Can I tie all my disparate selves together into a weaving, like the havdalah candle? What "sage" advice can I glean from each of these different parts of myself, that have been

part of my journey up to this point? How do I put this puzzle of different parts--(me)-- together? Or can I?

How much progress have I made in the past nine months, when I began, as John, in Jerusalem on Christmas Day, feeling a fragmented self, trying to figure out how to put myself back together again, to see if there was a self that could be recreated, to point the way to something beyond me, to a new self to be (re) born. What would I say now, as the nine month time frame I gave myself nears its end? Have I given birth to a new self?

\* \* \*

Johannes, at one level, you are both the simplest and most complex. You are certainly the most primitive part of me. You are a product of your biological urges, and your family and societally conditioned ambitions. The Chinese word for fate, Lin Zscho told me is, composed of two characters, heredity and environment. That is you. You desired great fame. Yet though you felt yourself real, in some ways you were more an illusion of a self. Francis Bacon said, "It is a sad fate for a man to die too well known to everybody else, and still unknown to himself." That would have been Johannes' fate. You had great "out" sight into situations and others within a very narrow range. You worked hard to perfect your seductive techniques, your ability to master an academic system, to build your external body.

But where was the "there" at your central core? There was none. And once those externals were challenged and questioned--by Mery, by life-- you became deconstructed, and saw that you were nothing but reflexive urges and what others' wanted you to do. You also saw how much suffering existed, both within and around you.

There is much to condemn in you. I think of you swimming furiously toward the person you felt violated your lane at the swimming pool, or your rage at Mery in Carmel when you felt her pulling away. I am struck by how important control was to you, that you get what you want when you want it, and the

immediate and reflexive level of anger that arose in you--much like our often abusive, violent father-- when you thought you might not get your way.

You were also callous and insensitive in how you got what you wanted. Before your fall, you were greedy, always seeking more: more and varied women, higher status. Other people were merely objects to gratify your needs. Your emotions were limited to self-serving and self-righteous anger and lust.

John, trying to point the way to spirit, wanted to completely exile you, to distance himself from you and the "flesh" and the worldly ambition you represented. The suffering, weeping, pained Job felt it was your callousness that hid you from the real world, and also tried to make a complete break from you.

It was a battle within me for survival of the fittest, each emerging self arguing its own position with tenacity, and trying to eliminate the other selves with which it disagreed.

\* \* \*

But I now believe a better way to understand this process is that it may be an inevitable part of growth. In evolution, simplicity begets complexity. The task is how to integrate, co-ordinate, harmonize, blend, balance, and honor that complexity, to build connections between those parts that are beneficial, and let go of those parts that no longer are useful, pruning to allow new growth to occur.

I need to learn to treat myself as a whole person, even when I'm composed of parts.

So, Johannes, I now want to invite you back--have you really ever completely left?-- hopefully on the other side of what we've learned. I like your energy, focus, playfulness with words and life. They provide a balance to the world of sadness that Job saw all so clearly, and to the world of the spirit, to which John was most attracted.

The positive of your--my--evolution into Job-like suffering is that we were able to open to the pain in the world. But that became the only glasses through which you/I saw reality. It was too much, too exclusively focused on darkness and suffering. You/I became the embodiment of helpless and existential nausea. The fears and suffering of your--our--suicidal mother were flowering in both of us. Poor us, poor me. Deaf in one ear; lost an lost older brother, abusive father, suicidal mother; divorced parents, my "castle" taken away from me, no more children at play, poor poor me.

You were like Jude the Obscure, tearing up at the sap dripping from a tree. Such unrelenting awareness of pain and suffering is paralyzing. There was a danger in you of trying to compete with Mery to see who saw the most pain in the world, and of becoming a whiny, crybaby. In this state of mind, it was impossible to have relationships with anyone, because you saw all the pain that they were in, and that they could cause you. You realized that every relationship is condemned to endings and partings. You saw that your own birth, by definition, ends in loss of self-- your death.

At first you tried to run away and hide, Jonah-like, from the task of facing life. In a place of darkness--metaphorically in the whale-- you sought to emerge as one who could carry a sacred message. You hoped, as John, to find a way to point beyond your limits to the way of the spirit. But the Job-like overemotional negativity is one of the reasons that led you to feel, Jesus-like, in wrestling with God, that you had been forsaken, that life was too painful, and caused you to consider taking your own life.

\* \* \*

I now see strengths and weaknesses in all of the different parts of me. I think of the wisdom Akishige shared from the classical text, the Abhidhamma, which points out that there are two types of people in the world. One type fills you with joy, uplift, and positive energy. The other type drains you, makes you feel tight, depressed, anxious. When he said that, I remember

thinking of all those people who I felt pulled me down: my family, Richard, Mery.

Then Abhidhamma says that we can learn lessons from both types of people. Each has something to teach us. With the help of Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet, and now with my friends here in Safed, I feel I've begun to learn the lessons from those people who have hurt me, brought me down, pained me.

The text says once you have learned your lessons, it's best to reduce the time you spend with those who don't enhance your life, and surround yourself with those who do.

I think of Jacob and his meeting with Esau years after Jacob had fled. They embraced. In the end, though, did not follow Esau. What Jacob wanted was reconciliation but not close association. I have worked hard to learn the lessons of those I've left behind and I believe I've also done good work seeking to forgive them, and asking their forgiveness. In terms of my different "selves," I have learned to recognize each, and explore their strengths and weakness. I have tried to gain understanding from their weaknesses, then leaving those weaknesses on one side of the bridge, while, after forgiving them, taking their strengths across the bridge.

And I've been increasingly able to surround myself--inside and outside--with a "sangha" of fellow travelers and seekers who have an inclusive, sacred searching nature that supports and enhances me.

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But, according to Akishige, the text does not stop there. Rather, it elaborates that the two types of people "out there" are really aspects of ourselves. The side that enervates and brings us down, the side that elevates and enhances us., are both us. Again, we can learn from both parts, but once we've learned the lessons, and have reconciled and forgiven, it's best to



reduce association with those parts that no longer serve us well and surround ourselves with those that do.

Even though I may have some of dad's violent anger or mom's fears and depression and even suicidal tendencies, I don't have to reenact the negative of my parents' lives. I can and have forgiven them, and can forgive those parts of myself that are like them. I can also recognize the positive that I have received from my parents, embrace their strengths and goodness, and love when and how it was given: mom's giving me a journal to write in as an adolescent, a gift that continues to be my salvation. Her love of poetry, and continual efforts at self-learning. Dad being my coach in sports, teaching me how to play basketball, football, baseball. I know that I also have his determination and strength in me.

I can cross a bridge, leaving behind the negatives of my parents, and take the positives from my family to the other side, to be reborn in a new way.

So who do I, Jacob, from the lofty air of Safed, at Reb Luria's grave, on Simchat Torah, ingather of my disparate selves?

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I sit and meditate, trying to see what appears in my mind. There are so many different feelings, motivations, thoughts that swirl around, each with their own musical sound: optimism, distrust, faith, perseverance, helplessness, playfulness, doubt, anger, joy, greed, fear, kindness. The sounds clash and create ferment, roiling the waters of my mind, each sound battling for supremacy.

No wonder I don't need many people around me. I have so many within me. I recall Whitman's Song of Myself. "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes)."

I remember feeling during the worst moments with and after my time with Mery, that I was like a pointillist painting. From a certain distance, I looked

like I was coherent and a whole, but if someone got too close, all they would see are the fragmented dots that passed for a picture of myself. Maybe that's why I was afraid then, and am still afraid now, to let anybody get too close. There's a certain point at which I seem to make sense, but up close I disappear.

I remember the chaos, the confusion, that was unbearably painful, like a neauseous seasickness that at first seemed to be lodged deep in my stomach and then like an acidic solution oozed into my throat and seemed to penetrate everywhere. It was a pain that couldn't be located or defined, but which squeezed and whirled through my insides until I was too-weakened to cry out, too tired to care, helpless to do anything, but feel its agonizing grip on me.

I continue to focus on my breathing, and I realize that though I can remember having those feelings, it seems I've gone in and through them. I recognize their contours, but they are a piece of the puzzle, not the puzzle. I can contain them, see them splashing in the roiling waters.

As my breathing softens, I imagine a still lake, and I try to see, with my eyes closed, the moon quietly reflecting off the waters, creating a still spacious area for the musical notes of my emotions to play in. I imagine myself lying in the Dead Sea, trusting, floating, knowing the waters are so salty I can't sink. Is this what it feels like, internally, for Joshua to enter the Promised Land at the Jordan River and the Dead Sea?

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I continue to breathe and relax, and realize, after several minutes of stillness, that I am learning very well to calm my mind.

Is this what Lin Zscho meant by xujing? I think so. Calmness, letting the waves of confusion settle, seeing all thoughts and feelings as part of the cosmic soup.

Then, perhaps, from that centered place of xujing, I can look clearly and non-defensively at all sides of myself, and try to create the best form, the best dongjing music I can for a given situation.

Who is the conductor? How to mix all these sounds?

I realize I want more structure and form. I want to evolve a metaphor for what I'm trying to do with this ingathering of self.

Are the different selves pieces of a puzzle I'm trying to put together, like a giant jigsaw? That's one metaphor. Another is that my "mind" is a center hub, from which different parts of me emerge as "spoke." Actually, like little j's around a center: The seven J's: Johannes, Job, Jonah, Moses/Joshua, John, Jesus, Jacob.

I take out a clean piece of paper and draw a center point, and then one J hanging from that center, followed by six more in a circle around it. I look at my doodle, and it looks like a fan, a windmill for a fire cracker on Independence Day. There are spaces between the letters, but in a wind, or spinning and twirled fast enough, it appears to be whole.

Is this a proper metaphor for how to put myself together? There is an illusion of solidity and wholeness if I'm whirling and spinning fast enough, but slowed down, there are lots of spaces. But maybe if I can keep my center, fast movement can be fun, like a merry go round . . . whee. . .

\* \* \*

Still playing with images, I draw all the J's hanging down from the center, so it looks like the curved chandelier of several lights hanging in the hollow of the spiral staircase in my Kansas City home. Turning that upside down, it is a series of candycanes (upside down J's) that form out of it, creating an umbrella like effect (to protect me!?)

I go to a different part of the page and draw a circle. I think of the seven circles we dance in during Simchat Torah. Am I trying to place my selves within my inner circle? Actually the metaphor is telling. My sense now is that

there is a center. And this center is the observing mind, which has been with me throughout. Johannes had it, in his detachment, his floating away from situations. John had it in observing and reflecting on the journals. In some ways, this mind is what I bring to each event. I need to take its strength--patience, clarity, witnessing--and let go of its weaknesses--detachment, indifference, not willing to engage.

Are the different selves then like stars in vast sky of consciousness, each with a different color, glow, energy? Is it like trying to learn from a leaderless symphony, deciding which combination of their various positive energies would create the best sound in a given situation? Is that like trying to balance the energies of the seven sefirot? To find the best yin and yang, dongjing combination?

With this still xujing mind, I can look at and try to gather in the tribes and exiles, forge them into a harmony and rebirth us as one whole self that can be born into the world.

\* \* \*

I want to keep the empathy and compassion that was born from the sorrow and pain and suffering of Job, without being overwhelmed by his grief. I want the meditative stillness of Jonah without hiding in the belly of darkness. I want to be a Moses like guide, leading myself from the narrow places, my plagues and dust. I want to continue crossing Reed Seas of Consciousness, and one day I'd like to stop wandering in the wilderness, and not only see, but like Joshua, enter the Promised Land. I want the search for the spirit of John, but without denying the flesh. I want the commitment of Ortho John without the rigidity and exclusivity of that orthodoxy. I want to know God as intimately as Jesus, while being able to live fully human, and to challenge God when I disagree with what I see in this world.

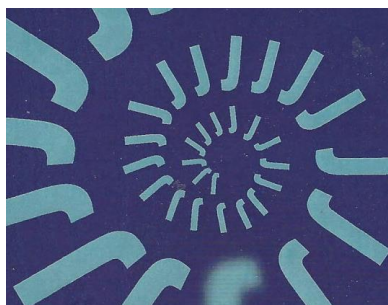
So it seems how I view the strengths and wisdom, as well as negative aspects of each of my selves, depends on the angle of viewing. With the proper

center, I can see the positive of each self. I guess that's why it's so important, as in the Devu drawing, to drop the oars, and make sure there is time and space to pull back and reflect on the whole, and the parts that make up the whole. Daily, with meditation and prayers; weekly with Shabbat; twice yearly, at least with Passover-Sinai; and Rosh HasHanah--Yom Kippur-Succot-Simchat Torah.

I like the outlines of this story--and my "self"--that I'm creating. It seems that as new parts of me emerged, and were created, I became increasingly complex. The new selves didn't always like each other, or know how to talk, much less coordinate with each other. I felt like pieces of a broken, fragmented self, like in stanza two of Akishige's poem.

But I'm beginning to see ways that the pieces, like ink blots of a Rorscahch, all fit together in some larger master narrative. I'm not just a series of names, random words, but the words unite to form a story; or fit together and interact to create the answers to a crossword puzzle.

As I look at the image of circles, I don't need to think of myself as just going around in circles. I could add a third dimension. Why? Because I exist in three dimensions. The circle and hub could actually evolve more like a spiral.



Johannes before meeting Job, Jonah, Moses/Joshua, John, Jesus, and yes, Jacob, is a different person than after meeting and interacting with them. The "Johannes spoke and circle" is still part of me. I can't deny my body, as

John wanted me to. But I can reintegrate it better, releasing those parts that no longer serve me, after having learned my lesson from them.

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So, inner selves--teachers if not exactly sages-- each in your own way, let me gather you in. Jonah, from Jaffa, on the way to Nineveh, through the meditation in the whale, welcome. Help me to know how to share with others and myself the warning that we must mend our ways. Job, let me accept that suffering and doubt are part of life, and that emotions, tears and the heart breaking open are all part of the path. Tears tear open the heart. And yes, while heartbreaking, there is also something magical about that if it opens us to a fresh, cleansed perspective.

Moses and Joshua from Sinai, help lead me across the Red Sea, to a higher state of consciousness.

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Moses and Joshua from Sinai, help lead me across the Red Sea, to a higher state of consciousness, and then guide me so that I learn in my travels from Eilat, how to survive in the Negev desert and wilderness. Help me to trust that even though I am far from perfect, I have something to offer, and that I, or my descendants, may be able to cross the Jordan River, enter Jericho and the Promised Land.

John and Jesus in Jerusalem, show me how to point the way, to face God openly, within and without, as you point toward helping me create a rebirth of myself.

And, you, Johannes, you, too are welcomed back from exile, a lost wandering tribe returned home. Yes, there is a place at the table for you, too, with your playful enthusiasms, intellectual punning, delight and appreciation for the body and its joys. We can use some of that too, in our mix. We'll just need to proceed slowly and cautiously to make sure you mind your manners, and keep your heart open.

And finally, I welcome you, too, Jacob, you who realized that God is in this place and I did not know it, you who are trying to reflect on how all the particulars become a universal, how all the different sounds and notes become a piece of music.

Parts and whole. I think of Zeke saying in golf you have to know and then separate each part of the body, uncoupling shoulders, arms, wrists, hips. You have to know your bad habits and tendencies with each part--not to dwell on them-- but to be sensitive to them. Then, for the melody and free flowing form of the golf swing to work effectively, each part needs to coordinate and work with the others for the good of the whole. Like me now as I prepare to return down the mountain. Seeking ways to honor each of the parts, while seeing them in some way that makes them more than fragmented pieces, allows them to be part of a whole.

I am trying to work on creating myself, but also letting myself be guided on this journey of transformation. The Shema is my model. The place where the Shema is said in the service is after the ahava (a song of love) and before the Veahavta (you shall love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might--like Jesus' words in Matthew 22:37)--also a song of love.

Surrounded by love, and coming from a place of love, I am trying, as the Shema says, to hear and wake up and wrestle to put all the best pieces of the

puzzle that is me together in a way that fits and leads from too Israel to Echad.

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I am on a bike, and heading down a beautiful country road. I take a path off the road which looks like it will lead across the valley to a school house, where I am supposed to teach. But the path ends at a cliff, with a lovely, though torrential waterfall. I need to turn around and go back. Finally, I arrive at the schoolhouse, which is for poor children. There are lots of gleaming new desks and cabinets. A man appears who works there and looks vaguely like my father. I am told that he is a trusted and valued community member, and has, through his charitable endeavors, helped obtain almost singlehandedly all of the furniture for the school.

But I realize quickly that this person knows that none of the furniture and cabinets have locks, so when people put their valuables in them, or store money, he later comes in and steals them. Further, I observe him making deals with nefarious people, even re-selling even the ketchup in the refrigerator.

I start taking pictures at the school, both of the suspicious goings on, and also of all the children in the music room dancing. Then one of the school administrators says he sees something in my eye and when he looks carefully, he can see that I'm a spy. I realize I'm caught and am going to be punished, and start struggling to escape, but I'm trapped.

I wake up gasping for air and panicky.

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I try to catch my breath, and reach for my dream journal. This dream is my worst fear. Not only can't I trust my father--in life and in the dream-- but I can't trust that part of me that's supposed to be helping guide, raise, and take care of me. Yet, when I recognize and then try to catch-- through photographic evidence-- that bad, greedy, grasping part that is seeking to take



what doesn't belong to me, what happens? Someone (me again) turns on me and tells me I'm actually a spy who needs to be punished.

I feel powerless before my negative side, a mind divided against itself. Why does it seem when I feel I am just about to have everything figured out, things seems to fall apart. In dream life? In waking life?

How can I act if every action may be untrustworthy? It becomes too scary to act, because I don't yet know myself well enough to trust myself.

I sit motionless. How can I take a step forward when there is so much to sabotage me. Within and without. I feel like Mery waiting for a lane at the swimming pool. There is no right or guarantee of a lane. It's not always a fair world. People take what isn't theirs. Myself included.

But what's the alternative to passive paralysis? In some crude survival way, Johannes, was also right. You need to plunge into the pool. As I think of doing that, I feel Johannes' anger arise. But it's not just Johannes who was angry. There's an anger in Job suffering and shouting at the universe; there's a fury in John writing the play and yelling at God; there's a Jesus-like rage at the social injustice. There's even anger in me now at all my imperfections.

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I take a breath. I've worked so hard to see all my emotions--anger, pain, fear, love, sadness. Now I need to learn how not to be overwhelmed by them. I think of Dr. Lisbet's and Akishige's teachings about emotions and thoughts as stars in the night sky of the mind. As I sit and breathe, I watch them, observing them but not allowing them to pull me in and causing me to rush toward them, but not recoiling in aversion and running away from them, either.

Isn't my task to notice these emotions in this stillness, and then figure out what is the most skillful way to deal with them? I remember in my psychology, the professor said that people who see the world clearly are more likely to be depressed. Is that why we try to live in denial and illusion, like O'Neill's *Iceman Cometh*? But maybe that's because most of us haven't learned to

train our minds, and the first time we see all the pain and suffering in the world--and all the dust in ourselves--it's simply overwhelming. But being overwhelmed by such suffering - becoming paralyzed, despondent, suicidal - does nothing for anyone and produces nothing. I want to learn to see honestly the suffering in the world--and the dust and pain within myself--as a way to be more compassionate and sensitive to others, and myself. But I need to be careful I don't use seeing all the dust and problems and pain as an excuse to fall into depression, like mom.

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With practice and wise teachers, I'm beginning to learn to see more clearly, and also slowly learn to be less overwhelmed. It's a complicated task trying to listen to and know when to trust the body, the mind and thoughts, my emotions, and how to integrate them, and have them work together in harmony.

It's like I'm trying to learn Buddha's "middle way" between excessive misery--becoming lost in Job-like suffering--versus protecting myself through callous positive thinking: everything is the best in this best of all Panglossian possible worlds.

As Akishige says, ten thousand joys, ten thousand sorrows.

I have anger and sadness and dust, but I am not just anger and sadness and dust. I can channel anger into determination, and don't have to be controlled by it. I can see my dust and try, with compassion, to clean it. I can feel sadness, and have that open my heart and be more empathic. I can watch my thoughts, and see which ones seem more helpful, which ones are not in my and others' best interest. I can listen to my body, enjoy it, honor and respect it, but also learn when not to trust its impulses.

I have also begun to learn the art of forgiveness for when I, and others, make mistakes, intentionally or unintentionally. I am increasingly trying to come from a place of love toward myself and others. And I am beginning to learn how to embrace uncertainty with less fear and anger, and more quiet courage.

And to cry without drowning in my tears.

I can proceed with an amalgam of all these strands of myself

I close my eyes, take a breath, inviting the image that resonates. I see the braided Havdalah candle, with the different strands gathered into a weaving which culminates in a beautiful, radiant, warm flame reaching toward the heavens.

Opening my eyes, I am struck by a feeling...that these parts of me, woven and braided together, are strong, evidencing what Akishige what would call a steely Zen resolve, like a warrior. A loving, tender-hearted warrior who does not need to just sit fearfully by the side of the pool, like a victim, or die here next to Reb Luria.

A warrior, who, though recognizing fear, can still take a leap.

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It's clear to me that life is not a linear evolution. Unlearned lessons continue to haunt us. I remember Prem Devi telling me that Karma was like the saying of George Santayana "Those who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat it"

I have put in enormous effort, and been helped by the wisdom and guidance of such kind, compassionate teachers. Looking back and learning the needed lessons seems to me more like a potential spiral, a seashell, a revolution, with new lessons incorporated. Now, I, alone, naked, have a chance to be reborn; anew, nameless, to re-forged and re-create, and integrate my different selves, into a harmony that can now be in the world.

Can I now return, cleansed, having tried to polish my dust as best I have been able? I know there are more "motes" to see, more lessons to be learned, challenges to address.

But I feel a kernel of self emerging, cleansed, from the whirling chaos. The pseudo intellectual, the emotionless person that mom and dad called me is learning to integrate my mind and heart, to develop an I-Thou with myself. I remember Lin Zschau sharing that the Chinese word for mind in calligraphy is the sun rising in the heart. I am feeling that heart and mind connected. I am a body and can enjoy my body, neither rejecting it or overly indulging it. I

sense a new revolution ahead of me, in which I will have learned from the past, cried over my mistakes and hurts from and toward others, and asked for and offered forgiveness.

I've taken time away from the world, to learn about myself. Dr. Lisbet once told me that the heart beats first to itself. It is not selfish to reflect on and strengthen yourself, to take time to drop the bundle. Now, strengthened, it is time to let my heart's blood be shared with more, to pick up the bundle and continue my journey.

What will the form be for "serving water"? It might be partly to learn where we have control and where and how we can deal wisely when we don't. I want to say open to the awe and mystery, be able to cast myself into the empty void, learn to float on existence as well as steer the current.

Is their fear as well as awe. Of course.

The task ahead is clear, as as Freud said "love and work." Now is the time to see how I might merge into society to find a career that has meaning and allows me to serve water, to share; to find a beloved with whom where there is giving and receiving, an I-Thou relationship.

Names (shemot, exodus) and no names. Exodus and teshuva. Both are part of the spiral. I've crossed one Reed Sea, I've seen the Sea of Galilee, and both have served as mikvah and baptism. I've been to the top of Sinai and seen the Promised Land. Now I am ready to come back from the mountain and into the world.

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I keep coming back to the ending of the story. Maybe too much so. We all know life ends in death. If Grandpa had consciously sat and thought about how his story would end, would he have done anything differently? Would he have begun the journey with Grandma? I think the answer is yes. We shouldn't allow the outcome of the story, which, in its final scene, is already known, to determine how we view the journey of the story, the previous acts.

For Sisyphus, pushing the stone up the mountain, does knowing it's going to fall again as soon as he reaches the top, tarnish the dignity and majesty of his efforts? Or rather, does knowing the fated outcome, yet still engaging in life with a fighting spirit, enhance the nobility of the journey? Doesn't this knowledge actually help us redirect our attention, not just to the goal, but to the path?

Is Joshua's life, compared to Moses', more noble, less tragic, more worthy because he was able to enter the Promised Land and Moses was not? Or is the value and worth of a life to be found as much in the journey, as the outcome? Isn't there a majesty to Moses, knowing he personally would never reach the Promised Land, still guiding and leading the Jews through the wilderness?

Does the answer really depend on how you see the nature of the universe? I keep coming back to the same question. If the world is random and indifferent, would Moses still not want to be of service and help lead the Jews to a better place? And wouldn't he do so, even if there is no promised land, just the top of the mountain, from which the rock once again rolls back down? Wouldn't he want to live his life as fully and authentically as he could? Does the choice of the nature of the universe really determine the ending of the story?

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I look up at the actual stars of the night sky.

They are still. I take another breath, and try to imagine that my mind is spaciously mirroring them.

I have been spent the last nine months, since Christmas, working on myself. I remember when I asked Dr. Lisbet if that was ok to do, or wasn't therapy and self-reflection self-indulgent. She said to me that the heart, which needs to send blood to all the parts of our body-- brain, lungs-- first sends blood to itself. We need to heal ourselves, not as an end in itself, but as a means to help others. Lin Zscho told me that the Chinese characters for mind

and self are the same: the sun rising in the heart. I've been looking for my self, my heart, and even tonight, with the moon waning, I can feel the sun rising within me.

I feel I have learned from and forgiven the past, with love and compassion and healing, and gratefulness.

I now see clearly the two parallel tracks before me-- existential and spiritual, and have some sense of the amalgam of the dash that is me between them.

It's funny to think of these tracks, while I look down the hill. As in a painting, the tracks, though parallel, seem to be moving toward each other. It's as if I'm at the top of a funnel, or the top half of an hour glass. Right now I am all potential, all choices are open before me. I've healed myself enough to tackle the next phase.

What will I encounter as the hour glass narrows toward its midpoint? What will I choose, as I move down the hill, in the two critical life tasks left to me, what Freud called "love and work?"

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Well, Reb Luria, the first time I visited you I was able to make great strides toward an inner peace, forgiving myself and others, and gaining wisdom on how to deal with death. I also learned how facing death directly can positively affect how I face life, giving me a perspective on what is and isn't important.

Now the time of this visit is nearing it's end. One last set of reflections about love and work before I allow myself to let the roller coaster ride begin. Let me start with work.

Who am I supposed to be in life? I know I want to "serve water"-- to make a contribution. But what form of vessel for serving water? This isn't just a selfless question. Egoically, I suppose I'm asking what do I want to be remembered for. What will be said about me after I die?

I remember the Rebbe telling me the story of Rabbi Zuscha, who observed to his followers that when he died and appeared before the Heavenly Court, he wouldn't be asked, "Zuscha, why weren't you as wise as Moses with his leadership abilities, or as kind and intelligent as Abraham? Rather, they will ask me, Zuscha, why weren't you Zuscha? Why did you fulfill your potential? Did you follow the path that was yours?"

What is my path, my potential? What do I have to offer to the world?  
What does the world need from me?

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Lin Zscho told me that the path of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and that step begins where you are. And where the world is. I look in me and see dust and hope. I look at the world and also see both these things. I see promises of peace and good will, human kind's towering achievements, like landing on the moon, the desire to create more love and joy in our lives, like at Woodstock. I see social revolution to bring equal rights to all over the last decade-- the civil rights movement, the Native American movement, the women's liberation conference, the protests against the Vietnamese war. I hear the Fifth Dimensions, the Age of Aquarius. Let the sunshine in.

But there is so much darkness to overcome. Within and without.

Within, I who was taught to shoot my BB gun at Indians with dad. Stanford's mascot being the Indian, and the sticker on my car with a Stanford Indian thumbing his nose at the world. I who grew up with the only black people I knew were ones who worked for us as domestics. My happiness that because I was deaf in my left ear, I was classified as 4-F, and didn't have to fight in Vietnam, but my insensitivity to those who did and ignorance and nonchalance about why we were fighting.

Without, the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, race riots, the authoritarian crackdown in Chicago on political and cultural protest; the Manson murders. We who are supposed to be stewards of the

planet, are insatiable consumers, seemingly intent on destroying our home. Fighting here in Israel, in Vietnam. People hating and killing each other.

Which is the aberration, which true? And what is my role?

I need to recognize that even with my dissatisfaction with the world (and myself, and others), there is no perfect action, so that should not be a reason not to act. But where to begin, with what small action?

I know now that I want to return (Teshuvah) to find a way to use my mind and heart, to truly be of service. I need to be humble, allow for small, non-earth-shaking actions. Maybe there will be no great sermons, but I'd like to be a breath of fresh air coming back, a gentle wind that blows in trying to contribute my piece of the puzzle. To step forward and learn to be assertive even with all my wounds and shortcomings, which I now so clearly see.

Moses was slow of speech. Jonah fled. And they still found a way to contribute.

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I need to believe I can make a contribution even with my flaws. I've run into walls, but need to look for the door, the opening that is my path. When I feel discouraged and defeated and weary, I need to remember the message of Chanukah, that I have more inner light and energy than I believe. To hear Hemingway's Old Man say "A man can be destroyed, but not defeated."

I need to follow the chutzpah of the protagonist in the German existential novelist Kafka's *Castle*, who, when asked by "Who are you?" by the guard at the entrance of the castle, defiantly replied, "I'm a land surveyor."

At times we have to take a leap of faith and declare our identity and selfhood.

Can I reenter society without once again being corrupted by it? I'm not sure. Balzac didn't think so. Some psychological theories say we are controlled by our environment. But others say we can rise above our conditioning and our environment. Lin Zscho explained to me that the word fate in Chinese is



composed our fate, composed two characters of "heredity" and "environment." However, the word for education is composed of characters meaning "having the self soar." We can learn to rise above, challenge, work with "fate" and have some influence.

I remember Prem Devi citing Gandhi about inner change and outer effects.

If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. We need not wait to see what others do.

When she said this, Joie shared from Anne Frank's Diary, near the end of her confinement:

How lovely to think that no one need wait a moment,  
we can start now, start slowly changing the world.

What am I waiting for?

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I recall snippets of a dream. Did I doze off? My grandparents are watching my brother and sister fight about a game of tag. I am the healing mediator. My grandparents are smiling at me. At my blue-eyed grandmother's urging, Grandpa offers me money. I smile and say no thank you.

On the surface it is an obvious dream. I want to be a healing presence in life, a bridge builder. And yes, I want something from my grandparents. Not their money, their approval. That's all I need. I realize this dream is also to show my mom that I can be trusted to be responsible for my "brothers and sisters," that I don't have to be exiled from my family.

Another level of the dream is of course wish fulfillment. Even though the dream is of my grandparents, they may be symbols of adults. My parents. What I want is a reuniting of the nuclear family of five. I want to be with my family, pre divorce, when everything was the Garden of Eden. And I had their approval.

If, as Dr. Lisbet suggests, since we create our dreams, then we may be all parts of our dreams. Why did I fill this dream with these particular characters? If the brother and sister are me, I am fighting myself, arguing with myself (my male and female sides?). The (grand) parents are watching. Perhaps

I as my own parents, male and female, am trying to heal the battle within me. Then there is the final "I", the healing "I" who bridges the split between the warring siblings, and wins parental approval. A self that is not homogenous, but is balanced, integrated, harmonized, working as a unified whole.

I love this interpretation. I hope there can be a healing within my fractured self, like all the "pieces" of a golf swing, or tennis swing, or musical notes becoming digested, integrated to form a perfect whole.

And let the harmony spread to my fractured family. Let it spread to the Judeo-Christian-Islam challenges. Let it spread to the Israelis and Palestinians and all who are oppressed and not free, who are in bondage to themselves and each other.

Let there be reconciliation with God.

Forgiveness. Healing, Compassion. It may only be a dream. But I need hope now, facing the abyss. And this vision, this dream gives me that hope.

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I can and must continue to work on changing myself, growing into a better human being. That's a start. And I have no excuse not to do that.

But what can I offer to others, besides my self-improvement?

I think of my impassioned journal writing about the men on Sixth Street. Yes, partly it was all about me and my pain, but isn't there a part of that which might bring psychological and political awareness about their struggle and pain to others? Could sharing that awareness with others become a part of my piece of the puzzle?

Or in my writing in Gethsemane, trying to tear down the illusory bricks that hide us from each other, could there be a message there that might help improve our world?

I believe there are like-minded souls who would value what I have to share, and might be excited, even grateful to contemplate my thoughts about service, kindness, and love. My grandfather used to call this "preaching to the

choir." I see nothing wrong with that. We can all use uplift and support. I sure do.

But what right and responsibility do I have to engage with those who don't ask for my advice, and don't share my views? I think of the six-level hierarchy I created of universal/particular beliefs. There are those in the world who are convinced of the rightness of their particular truth and want to forcefully convert others to it, or else eliminate them entirely. Is dialogue there even possible?

Reb Jonathan once told me regarding forgiveness that some issues are overwhelming to address, like the Holocaust. He said he found it best to take those atrocities and put them at the back of the file drawer until he had addressed smaller, more manageable challenges which require forgiveness.

I wonder if a similar model might apply here. Maybe I shouldn't start with people who are completely closed minded and unwilling to engage in dialogue.

Between the "choir" and the "unbendable" there may be some with whom I disagree, but would be willing to engage in good-faith dialogue, from which we would both be able to grow.

Perhaps I could use as a model the sages in Safed, coming from different traditions, but willing to mutually engage in respectful dialogue. With this approach, it might be possible to converse with others in ways in which both of us seek to broaden our horizons, to create bridges between our differing perspectives.

I only have one ear with which I can hear. Yet, as part of God's cosmic humor, I believe that may be my piece of the cosmic puzzle. I can be an excellent listener. I can be someone to hear others with clarity, really understand their inner point of view, and perhaps from that foundation, begin a conversation that connects rather than divides.

I know I can't do that with everyone, but I need to try to do this as best as I am able with those who are willing.

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I look down the imaginary tracks leading to my life. In some ways it feels like I'm at the start of an onramp leading to a freeway. In life, as in paintings, there is a Trompe-l'œil, so that when you start onto the on ramp, the onramp appears to narrow further ahead. Further, you can't guarantee ahead of time that a space will open up or how smoothly your transition will be into the actual freeway. It does no good to look too far ahead to try to predict which cars will be blocking you, or what space might open up. That's all out of our control. All I can do is proceed along the onramp as best I can, trusting that as I get closer to the freeway, the onramp stays wide, and with patience and trust, there is a very high likelihood a space will be available to enter

It's been so long since I've been wandering on my own. I wonder, in the world of work, what might be my best vehicle to try to enter back into the freeway of society?

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I need to lay out my options, then make a choice, and stand by it. *Decisis*. The legal notion of standing by a decision. Courts should follow the rules of the judges who came before them. If only I could be as constant as the law. In the ungrounded "air" of Safed, there is something attractive about regrounding myself in tradition, only on the other side. I could return to America and continue my study of law. Not for the fame or glory, proving my intelligence and ability to compete and win, but as a vessel for me to serve water, speak in defense of the oppressed, give them a voice.

As Grandpa once told me, isn't law at its highest vision a way to create rules so that we nonviolently seek ways to deal with conflicts that weigh the rights and needs of everyone involved, a promised land of equal treatment and human dignity? Isn't this seeking the best vision of ourselves, balancing

justice—having all of us learn responsibility and consequences for our actions--  
and mercy?

But I could also stand up against those parts of the law I disagreed with. As did Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and so many others who protested through civil disobedience against laws they considered unjust. Martin Luther King went to prison twenty times to protest the laws of segregation, and to seek to get those laws dismantled. I wouldn't need to be a tool of the law, I could use my understanding of it to help those who are oppressed and change society to further justice and freedom.

Let freedom ring. I'm almost inspiring myself. Maybe I should apply to Rabbinical school, seeking Divine law, exploring the best spiritual wisdom, from both the mystical kaballah and the evolving legal teachings. I can see myself sharing wisdom to my congregants. I have a dream.

I could apply to divinity school to learn about all religions, seeking to be a link and connection, a bridge for understanding between traditions.

I once thought human law was so much wiser than God's law. Then I thought it was God's law that was wiser, only to realize that God's laws were always eventually interpreted by humans, who, though perhaps God inspired, were imperfect and often trapped and limited by their own psychological blinders and dynamics. We need inner learning, too. From psychology, from great works of literature.

What about using literature as a way to understand religious ideas, like Doestoevsky, Graham Greene, Herman Hesse? Literature also offers rich psychological insights about human nature. I wonder whether I'd want to teach about such psychological insights as an English professor; or maybe use literature's insights to help expand the breadth of psychology, maybe even become a psychologist like Dr. Lisbet?

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But why do I have to decide now, and rush back to graduate school? Maybe I could take a long way to return to America. I feel like I've obtained a good education in Judaism and Christianity here in Israel, and there was no better place to obtain it. One idea would be to continue my wandering and study, exploring further what I've learned here in Safed from my fellow travelers in the actual locations and countries of these traditions. I could learn more about Islam, and travel to Mecca and visit Al Hazrumi. Then I could go onward to India, and study Eastern thought. Maybe live on the ashram in Pondicherry where the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet stayed. Visit Prem Devi's ashram, Dakshinswar. Then travel to China and study Taosim and Tai Chi at a Shaolin temple, go to Taroko Gorge monastery in Taiwan. Finally, on to Japan to study in a Zen temple in Kyoto.

Is that avoidance, or my onramp? It would certainly be an education. Maybe in many ways. Not only learning about different cultures in more depth, but continuing to learn about myself. Using the world as a university for the soul, rather than having to attend a specific institution of "higher education."

If I think of a specific profession, given what I've learned about myself, what might be the best match for me?

It's becoming increasingly clear to me that in truth, I am more of a quiet reserved person than I, as Johannes, once thought I was. Perhaps I was just a different person then. I think of being a counselor at summer camp, responsible all day for the children in my cabin, as well as teaching swimming and tennis. Living in a common area with ten other people. During that time, I was a much more social person, and even a person of action. Is that still in me?

Now I no longer seem to be a hail-fellow-well-met like my father, or Falstaff, or Richard. I see how complex everything is, and every issue for me requires thought, about identity, mortality, how centered am I, what is the best way to act. That makes it hard to act spontaneously. I am more comfortable with a deliberative manner, with time for practice. I want lots of dress

rehearsals so that my performance—who I want to be and how I want to act-- is as wise and authentic as I can make it. I guess it's like learning to play a concerto on the flute. I make lots of mistakes in practice. I try to learn from my mistakes. But there's no guarantee you won't make another mistake, in a different place, the next time. That's why I'm shy about playing before others.

But writing is different. Writing is suited to me because of its deliberative pace, and an editing function. You can go over the parts that don't seem smooth and clear and edit and rewrite them again and again. And the parts you like can remain the same. Then you can choose to release a finished product to share with others.

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So I would need some kind of career where I'm not called on to be on stage very much, where I could work behind the scenes until I'm ready to come forth. I don't think well on my feet over a protracted period of time. I certainly wouldn't be quick enough on my feet for being a trial lawyer. I'd want to think every thing through. I'm not a good jazz musician. I want the notes before me. And I can't even read those very well without lots of practice.

in an emergency, rescuing a drwonign person, as in Eilat. And sometimes my mind is playfully quick, like in bon mot repartee with Richard, although increasingly this is more the exception rather than the rule.

I need to honor that this is who I am now and trust there is a place for someone like me to offer what I have as a service to the world.

I could open a coffee house combined with a bookstore, surrounding myself with people who loved books. But that would be too unstructured and I would always be expected to be present. I'm more of a social camel, a little bit of interaction goes a long way with me. Also, I do better in situations in which there is a clear structure and I have a clear role. I'm not just a "hang out" type person with others.

In many ways I'm like my family in that the jobs they eventually ended up with were ones where they were their own boss. One grandfather initially worked for others, but eventually decided he wanted to run his own clothing store. My other grandfather runs his own law office. My father clearly wants to be his own boss. Is it the wandering Jew in me wanting to have within my mind all that I own, so I can leave on a moment's notice and take my profession with me? I need to be open to creating an odd, not necessarily conventional professional path for myself.

How do all these different pieces of the puzzle fit? Maybe my path will be a weaving of several different pieces. A teacher. Moral philosopher. Legal thinker. Psychologist. Writer. Mystical sage living in a cave on a mountain-- or here in the air in Safed.

And maybe my first task is to try to fit those pieces together. Perhaps I will try my hand at creative writing, a way of sharing a story, the search of a voice in the wilderness. Many traditions have sacred books which tell the stories of the origins of the tradition, their deities, ancestors, heroes, struggles, goals. It's the way a tradition creates an understanding and foundation for itself. Why not write a book like that, only on an individual level, to create a foundation for myself? That would be congruent with my temperament--I could go over and over the material until I am sure it says exactly what I want it to say.

And it would also be congruent with my reflective style. The form itself could even be Talmudic like--reflections on my journal reflections, a dialogue with myself across time. Like a psycho-spiritual novel of self, identity, and personal searching.

Gazing one more at the night stars. I like letting these ideas flow through my mind. It seems I'm getting somewhere. I look back at what I've written:

*"A psycho-spiritual novel of self, identity, and personal searching."*



Very good. I've addressed the nature of the universe at the deepest level; is it random or determined; compassionate or indifferent. I've explored this through science, existential philosophy, and different religious traditions. I've looked at my personal identity and how I might be a dash, a bridge between different beliefs about the nature of the universe. Yes, I like this a lot. It's excellent . . . as far as it goes. Though could this all be one big avoidance? At the least, is there an elephant in the room I'm not considering?

Like relationship?

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It's true I've thought of what work I might do to help serve the world. I am able to love humanity and help the poor and homeless, to feel sorry and empathic for those who are fighting and dying, and want to find a way to make a contribution to them. Yet I seem most willing and able to consider doing this from afar, from atop the mountain, alone. Maybe I'm making progress. Six months ago, in Gethsemane, I felt my task was to tear down the bricks, the illusory connections with others. I, as the uberman, had to see and do everything myself, without any belief in other's help. If I am not for myself, who will be?

And now I can say, if I am only for myself, who am I? Joie said to me that connection restores the world to wholeness, and our separate lives become meaningful as we learn how truly necessary we are to each other. Now I know intellectually that makes sense.

But what is missing is a personal, loving, non-abstract relationship. Am I capable of that? Do I even want that?

I think of Richard, Mery, my mother and father. I have truly forgiven them, and asked their forgiveness. They are now only relationships in my mind, that I have sought to explore and learn from. But that is the past, which has been healed. And I do best with them now in the present by their absence: a reconciliation but not close association. What about going forward? What about Joie who is down below in the sukkah?

Is it possible to make my story not only about the birth pangs of identity, about seeking the deepest wisdom about the nature of the universe, about finding my place and contribution in society, but also to make it a love story?

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As I lie on the ground looking at the sky, I imagine Joie lying next to me. I remember the story she told of how she and her brother and sister would lie in the snow, holding hands, looking up at the sky, then moving their hands and feet in wide arcs to make snow angels. I imagine that I am up in the sky looking down at me, seeing me holding hands with Joie, on a blanket of snow, each of us surrounded by a snow angel. We're pretty cute together.

And pretty small. It's an awfully big world. Is that why we want a companion for the journey?

I remember the two pigeons I saw in Carmel when I was with Mery. I thought they represented a sign of the rightness of my relationship with her. Her lovely smile when I pointed them out to her, as we watched them arm in arm.

Now I'm thinking of snow angels and Joie holding hands, and can see the two pigeons so clearly in my mind. I wonder if they are a sign of the rightness of my relationship with Joie.

Does that mean there is no right person? That it can be anybody? Is love only a desire in search of an object? It started off so well with Mery--her playful smile-- but then there was just too much baggage and differences between us. Now that spark is no longer there. Will the same thing happen if I stay with Joie?

And her Mona Lisa smile. Her father saying to her "corners up."

\* \* \*

A smile. I thumb through my "poetry" journal and pull out a poem I wrote after my time in Carmel with Mery. It's one that felt too personal to send to my creative writing professor. A poem about Mery's smile--one that I once saw as

impish, playful, innocent, and shy. Which became that distant smile as I lay helpless on the beach, leaving me betrayed, deserted, stranding me emotionally. And even after she was gone, that smile stayed with me. That smile followed me that night as we drove back home. A smug smile that said she was feeling superior to me, more alive, more joyful, more spiritual, kinder. Eventually, I saw her smile as a barrier she put up to keep me from her.

### THE SMILE

Floating, dizzily driven,  
Twisty bends  
Can't feel the earth beneath the car  
trees close in on both sides

Who's steering as I go faster  
and faster  
Where does this road lead,  
end...  
Am I driving,  
being driven?

Slow down, you're lost,  
losing control  
dizziness the road won't  
stay still, keeps turning and  
head spinning and screeching  
can't anything be steady...

And she smiles.  
God, can't you see what's happening to me  
Can't you see the Nothing,  
listen to the topsy turvy dizzy

as it crescendos, louder, shriller, shrieking,,  
and she smiles

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I feel a wound re-opening as I continue reading my journal "fury  
rising...I'm helpless...impotent, and she stares with a cunning know all smile.  
The smile that says 'I see you are trapped and can't get out. I knew all along  
you were weak." Haughtily, condescendingly sitting back and watching me squirm  
as I try to break free from the web she created to entangle me. You tried to  
provoke me, to lash out, become my father "Oh, losing your self-control, Mr

Strong one? Evidence itself, Mr. Lawyer ot be." See the bile rise in you, see the grotesque, contorted, bitterness within you. I hate that pompous aloof smile, and hating her smile makes me hate myself more."

\* \* \*

I set the journal down and take several breaths. I'm shocked how quickly old wounds can remerge. More breaths. What's going on? Is it fear of a new relationship? I reread the poem about the smile and the road. I feel trapped and want desperately to be the driver, not to feel driven. But is there anyway to really ultimately be the driver in life? Perhaps the most we can do is at times give ourselves the illusion that we are the driver.

And maybe that's what I'm doing now. Trying to give myself the illusion that I'm driving life, that I am in control of the situation, and with enough care and thought and heart looking back at my past, I can choose more wisely where I go in the future.

I continue thumbing through my journal and find the section where John in Jerusalem is reading about Johannes after he picks up Ruth and takes her to the Fairmont. I realize what I've done is make Johannes the intellectual person of the flesh, and Job the emotional, sensitive core that is missing. It's interesting to watch Job take on an increasingly strong role in Johannes' life and journal. I read from John's journal, where he "feels like a commentator twice removed." I guess that means I'm a commentator three times removed. I begin reading.

\* \* \*

I feel like a commentator twice removed from the event. Johannes always seeks to keep himself distant from events, watching, describing, intellectualizing. But as Job emerges, Johannes' actions are now being observed from a different slant. The journaler is being watched by a newly emerging dimension of himself, who is, in turn, being watched by me in Jerusalem.

I notice several different reactions to reading this journal entry. One is a Johannes like reaction to his sexual encounter with Ruth: talk about a "Golden Calf?!" Excuse the Johannes word play, but you, Johannes, are a "John" of the flesh, as I seek to be John of the spirit.

That was your last sexual encounter. I guess you needed to try once more, Johannes, to prove to yourself that your sexual desires are not going to give you the companionship and solace you want. I guess we keep repeating our mistakes until we learn from them. You finally figured out that the body was not going to solve your problems. Thank you for that wisdom!

Johannes you react as usual with anger to Ruth's smile, as it reminds you of Mery, and you feel patronized, dismissed. The newly emerging Job's discomfort is a softer anger, which he ends up turning toward sadness and disappointment at himself.

Aren't the smiles really just excuses to focus on rather than face the underlying nothingness? (Blame the smile, the law, Mery, our parents?)

And I want to distance myself from both of you! Johannes, enough anger and rage. Job, enough "dizzy loss of control angst, sturm and drang." Aren't you beginning to feel exhausted by so much emptiness, spouting constantly about how sad and lonely you are. I'm becoming tired of it. That may not be very empathic, but I feel like saying, "Stop whining." I know that in the throes of this inner pain, that feels nearly impossible to do. And I guess I'm not one to talk: sort of seeing the speck in the other while I have a moat in my own eye.

But, friend, this gets old fast.

\* \* \*

I breathe, trying to feel some compassion for their hurt and limitations. I drink some tea, looking around at the walls of the Old City. The walls are like our skin, there to protect us, to keep problems out, our heart safe.

Both of your responses, Job and Johannes, show you are trapped by your way of thinking and seeing the world. Johannes' resentment and anger; Job's passive resignation and hurt. Doesn't one of you think too much; the other feel too much? Both are caught in either/or, black and white thinking. To each of you, a smile has only one essence, one meaning.

Maybe Mery's smile at the beach wasn't meant to put up barriers at all. Maybe, although she, (or Ruth), couldn't intellectually understand what was wrong with you, she wanted to smile to let you know that she cared about you, that she was there for you. Or maybe Mery was feeling afraid at the beach, and was trying to reassure you. Maybe Ruth was feeling awkward because she didn't really know you and you pushed her into an embarrassing situation by too vulnerably revealing yourself, and she wasn't sure how to respond. Maybe you felt she was treating you like an object, because in fact that's the way you were treating her. Maybe it was your callousness, your self-absorption which created the barrier. Could it be that you were so stuck in your own perspective that you couldn't see that a smile doesn't have to hide nothingness. It can be a sign of caring on the other side of, or in the midst of, that emptiness.

I'm only just beginning to understand that you can hold two things at once in the mind that seem paradoxical, or contradictory. Although this is initially more confusing than a single interpretation, it may in fact be deeper, richer, and perhaps more productive and wise.

But I need to be careful, too. The mind is so tricky, and it's so hard to see the lens through which I peer. I still have some of that either/or thinking myself.

Like right now.

Exactly what I accused you of doing, Johannes, Job. The either-or. I've just lectured you about being so caught in your perspective that you are mistaken about the smiles. I believe I've added

some nuance, some dimensionality. Yet in rejecting your perspective, I may have become imprisoned outside it: "The smiles can be kind, gentle, reassuring. They aren't necessarily mean, antagonistic. You, Johannes and Job, are limited."

But why can't it be both? Maybe their smiles meant all those things, at different times, and sometimes many of them at the same time. That's one of the hardest concepts for me to grasp.

I want everything to be ordered and defined, to be reduced to one essence. I reject you Johannes, and your body fixation, your mean, taunting, sophomoric intellectualization, your distancing from life. I want to reject you too, Job, and your whining, your too tender sensitivity, your confusion.

At the same time, I need to be open to what you Johannes have to offer, your sense of humor, your puns and alliterations, sometimes sophomoric, but also occasionally playful and funny. I enjoy and value your inquisitiveness and sense of adventure. Similarly, maybe I should consider what you Job can give me, regarding empathy, willingness to search inward, caring for others' hurts.

In looking at the past, can I open myself to all sides of myself? In looking toward the future, I see all that which I can't reduce to one essence: Mery's face, the ocean, God, each of which it seems I must pursue. I'm like a moth drawn to a flame. I want to grasp with my mind uncertainty, the unknown, mystery. You Johannes would use denial to avoid facing what didn't fit. You, Job, can only see the world through gray tinted glasses.

Here, I am becoming entangled by my pursuit of understanding and clarity, trying to reduce everything to one essence. Until I do, I feel out of control, unsure about the most critical question: whether life is worth living. You Johannes would reject what didn't fit into your worldview. I'm trying to enlarge my world view so that I deny nothing, see everything. And

then somehow find a way not be overwhelmed like Job, but rather can create a meaningful and sufficiently affirming life that justifies continuing to live. That, simply, is my quest.

All of us are limited in the way we see the world..

I'm truly trying to polish my "doors of perception." Yet I recognize the danger in this, as Johannes saw when trying to understand why he picked up a black woman. You could sense the whirring mind confusion, the multiplication of motives creating a fragmentation in him. "Too much nuance and introspection, too much parsing of any question, can lead to dissolution...on so many levels."

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Well, past selves, yes, even past friends, all of us are meeting again here in Safed. Past has caught up to present. I, you, me. And now we have to decide how to go forward. What can we learn from past relationships and our past ways of acting as we explore our current situation? About Joie? About relationship? About me?

Joie is not Mery. But already I can see the fault lines.

Some are in me. She's a unique beauty. I love the way she looks. I'd love to photograph her. Not salaciously, but artistically and creatively. An exotic face, with long dangling earrings. The way she arches her eyebrows with a school-marmish, don't-mess-with-me intensity. The shy downward turning tuck of her chin, looking up at me with a slightly flirtatious version of a Mona Lisa grin. The inward-looking expression of pain that I can barely glimpse, before she turns "corners up." The tautness and steely-eyed glance that often comes just before her face softens in tears. The joyous smile with blue eyes twinkling that says everything is going to work out, and love is possible.

And yes, there's the body, too. Which I love looking at. And holding.

But here I become afraid of my own inner demons. I think of Johannes taking pictures of Beth jumping on the bed in the Fairmont, while she ate



bananas covered with chocolate. Playful. Yes. But Johannes loved having her so care-free and uninhibited, her lust a tool he could exploit for his own sexual pleasure. And wasn't part of the pleasure like capturing and conquering a wild, untamed animal on a safari? Wasn't there something pleasurable for Johannes in the demeaning conquest? Is there a way to enjoy the playfulness of sexual fantasies and arousal without depersonalizing a beloved into an object? Can I do that? Is a part of Johannes still with me. I fear returning to being the same person I was.

Dr. Lisbet and Prem Devi say there is a way to engage in consensual sexual playfulness of multiple types, while still keeping an I-Thou context. That feels like playing with fire to me. Perhaps fun fire, but I'm not sure I trust myself there. And it's not just distrust of my body and sexuality. I wonder if there isn't a part of me that wants, even yearns for love, but then wants to tear it down because I fear being trapped and committed. A part that fears I'm not lovable if someone gets too close to me. That knows I long for newness and novelty, even as part of me wants tradition, roots, commitment, and stability.

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And then there's the difficulty of day-in, day-out relationship, where two people who are different try to do things "together." I remember the discomfort I felt on Easter Sunday walking to the Mount of Olives with Joie. It was awkward because we walk at different paces, she faster than I. I felt like I was constantly racing to keep up. We have different sleep patterns. I go to bed early and wake up with the light. She goes to bed after midnight and likes to sleep in.

And then there is work and society. She is ambitious and driven to succeed by duty and society. I have the luxury that a job is not a means to an end. I don't need to work to survive. I only have to work if I want to, or choose it. "Work" will have to be something I feel passionately about, part of who I am,

or who I want to be. I fear Joie pulling me back into society, and trapping me there.

And trapping me in a relationship. Why is she so insistent upon marriage? I want to be with someone because I choose to be--afresh each day--not because I'm compelled by some formal societal document. Why get married? Why not see how things evolve, one day at a time?

Love, writing, life. You can outline and make plans for it all you want, but don't you just have to plunge in and let them evolve? How can you make a lifetime commitment to anything, or anyone? You can plan it in your mind, but how often does it actually come out as planned?

In fact, if I look at my life until now, what has in fact happened as planned? A year and a half ago, when I'd just gotten into law school, and decided to celebrate by going to a party in Berkeley, then stopped at David's Deli on the way up, did I think I'd be lying on my back in Safed next to Reb Luria's grave, imagining I'd made an imaginary snow angel, next to someone named Joie, who isn't even here but down the mountain in a sukkah?

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I think of her kisses. They are romantic and loving and comforting. But what is a kiss really? How did it evolve? Could it have begun with sniffing, to see how the other person smelled, like rubbing noses? Could it have come from mouth to mouth feeding like the mother bird to the baby? Isn't kissing just a biological process, a contraction of muscles in the face, neck, and head. The mouth and lips pucker. There are lots of nerve endings in lips and on the tongue which send signals to the brain; blood rushes to the lips, the body warms, saliva pours out of glands. There are millions of bacteria that pass between the mouths of two people kissing. You can pick up colds, flus, the taste of yogurt or tuna salad that she's just been eating. Is that what I want? Do I really want to be that controlled by my biology?

It's interesting to watch my mind swirl, like the shemenet and honey I used to stir at breakfast at the Y in Jerusalem. Who's stirring my mind now? It seems like it's stirring itself, and I'm just a passive flotsam being tossed hither and thither. Thoughts like the ones I'm having now push me away from any relationship. Contact with another human is not erotic, it's bacteria and contamination and a skeleton under the flesh. Maybe these past few months have been a mistake. Maybe John was right. Flesh and spirit really don't mix. Not only is she pulling me toward the world of flesh, but also toward society, where I would inevitably, as Balzac writes, become trapped and defeated. Maybe the best thing to do is make a clean break here. I don't want to run and hide in another from fear of facing the world myself.

And as I know so clearly from what happened with Grandpa and Grandma that, even if the relationship were to work, it would have to end one day, with sadness and pain. Why not end it now?

I could just meditate here for two days, and she would just leave and go back to America. Then I could come down, and have the space to write my story, without any encumbrance. Maybe this isn't meant to be a love story.

Is that how I want the story to end?

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I can hear the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet telling me that it's certainly my choice. But I can also hear them telling me that if that is my choice, I need to learn to say good-bye in a less hiding, more authentic way.

Well, Reb Luria, does that make sense? I image him alive, singing with Rabbi Shlomo Halevi Alkabetz, Lecha Dodi, dressed in white, dancing here in the hills of Safed. Come my beloved. Welcoming God, welcoming friends. I remember Prem Devi and Dr. Lisbet saying I needed to be careful not to think of flesh and spirit as either-or. I remember Reb Jonathan commenting that the Song of Songs is both a love song of the spirit, and of the flesh.

Am I ready to try a both/and?

I think back to my image of us as snow angels, to the pigeons playing, of Grandpa Julius and Grandma Dorothy putting their fingers on each other's backs to help propel themselves up a hill. I remember sitting with Joie at Easter, leaning against each other's backs to hold ourselves up.

I am alone in the world, and often that's fine with me. But at times it becomes such a lonely world. Often when I am around her, I feel a sense of renewal and hope. When she sings, she transports me to places in my heart and soul that I can't take myself. She knows me as well as anyone, has seen me through my tears and searching, and wants to be with me, even though I have hidden nothing from her, my sadness, my brokenness, my doubts, my fears. my tears. She listens to me, hears me, and then sings "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" or just holds me and cuddles me to her breast, and whispers to me that it's going to be ok, that

"Love is entwined with all of its kind."

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I love when she reads stories to me. The fairy tales of the husband and wife with arms around each other watching their child dancing around the Golden Tree. Of the lovers like vines clinging to and embracing each other even after death. The stories of Sholem Aleichem, "and even in death they were not parted."

My heart opens when she recounts *Tevye and his Daughters*, a Broadway play she and her Grandmother saw a few years ago, where the milkman Tevye and his wife Golde, after twenty-five years of marriage, acknowledge that they love each other. I can't imagine being married to the same person for twenty-five years. That seems like an eternity. Double who I am. Maybe I'm like the old Grocho Marx saying, I wouldn't ever join a club that would have me as a member. Maybe I'm afraid to be part of someone or something again.

But what about following her back to America? Doesn't that mean she's taking over my life and controlling me? How can I maintain my sense of being a strong self when I would just surrender to her goals? Well, Kierkegaard, I'm trying to move beyond either-or in the nature of the universe. Maybe I have to do the same in relationship.

I take a breath, allowing the swirling waters of my mind to still. I see the moon reflected overhead.

I remember a bearded man from one of our classes, scholarly-looking, a few years older than me, asking Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet how they made decisions. Where to live? How to teach together? Who was in charge? I loved this question, and wished I'd had the courage to ask it.

The Rebbe responded straight-faced, "We arm wrestled, and I lost!" Then he smiled and we all laughed at the image.

"Seriously, that's a great question, and one all of us have to address in a relationship. A wise teacher once asked me to imagine two people on roller skates, connected by a rope. When one is skating ahead of the other, if you were to take a snapshot, you'd say that person is the leader and is in control, and the other the follower. But if you had a motion picture, you'd see the person in the lead pulling the other person around, increasing their centrifugal force, so that the one behind then becomes the leader, and now is pulling the one who used to lead." And so the process goes, each adding to the benefit of the other. If you trust the process, you realize you're working as a team. Through this synergy, as part of a team, both go faster and more efficiently than they could have done, alone.

"If you trust your partner holding the rope," he looks over at Dr. Lisbet, "your beloved, you realize it is indeed like the tai chi dance that Dr. Lisbet taught us." He offers to let her summarize, but she holds an open hand, and gestures for him to continue. What a great example of what he's talking about.

"Just as a reminder, for those of you who might have missed Dr. Lisbet's session, tai chi dancing involves two people listening to each other, one at times leading, the other surrendering, and then the roles reversing. The context is harmony and working together." Reb Jonathan turns to her with a smile, almost as if asking for approval and assurance. "Would you please recapitulate?"

Seamlessly Dr. Lisbet continues the dance. "Imagine two partners, hands touching. Not too tight, but not too loose, so that a kleenex can be held between them. One person pushes assertively forward, the one other allows the push and surrenders. The one who is in assertive control has the responsibility to listen very carefully with the fingers (and heart) so that they can hear and feel when the person who is surrendering gives a signal they've gone as far back as they can, and begins to push forward. It's not a tug of war push, just a gentle 'I'd like to switch directions.' Then that partner becomes the assertive one, and the other partner surrenders and lets go of active control."

She nods to the Rebbe and it's as if a baton has once again been passed between them.

"For example, some time after we first met in India, at Pondicherry, I felt the need to return to Israel. Dr. Lisbet let me (and I use the word 'let' honoring her free will to choose surrender) come back and chose to accompany me. We've been here a few years. My work is not completely done, but it's time for Dr. Lisbet to be the leader, to pull me along. And I trust her, and so go along for the ride. Like on a merry go round, I just close my eyes and go 'Whheeee!' He suddenly looked like a little boy behind the great gray beard and jaunty little beret, covered by a talit, a kind of Joseph's robe of many colors.

"This exercise allows you to learn to deeply hear your partner, and to avoid power struggles, such as both pushing assertively at the same time, or

collapsing in the face of an assertive push. It's easy to let your partner go first, if you trust that partner will be listening to you, and you will have a turn." It's now Dr. Lisbet speaking, but it could just as easily have been the Rebbe.

What a wonderful model for how to dialogue without my mom's collapse, or my dad's anger. How can I apply roller skating and tai chi dancing here?

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I know I need to work on learning how to love and accept myself just as I am, and to be able to do that toward her, too. And yet from that context of loving each other just as we are, we could also help each other grow and evolve into the wisest people of which we are capable. Why not? What a glorious vision. That's one I can buy into.

And the different paces we walk at? Well, I've learned from my meditation walks with Akishige, that I take five steps every ten seconds when I walk mindfully. I take ten steps with moderate comfort every ten seconds when I have a hurt calf or thigh, and my maximum is fourteen with a bad leg. Seventeen steps every ten second is my comfortable walking pace. I can maintain 20 steps every ten seconds for a long time, and twenty-two steps for ten seconds is my maximum pace. With that information, I can monitor Joie's natural pace, and then we can learn to compromise. Maybe that would mean sometimes she walks alone, sometimes I walk alone, and when we walk together, we find a pace that both of us can agree on. Simple. Combining the wisdom of Zen, the Prophet, roller skates, tai chi dancing, and behavioral psychology. Maybe I'll become a marriage counselor, or a conflict resolution diplomat.

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If Joie and I end up together, how amazing would it be that we were both born and then actually met? How could it be mere coincidence? How could it not be kismet, fated? My grandfather Dave's family came from Russia because of laws implemented by the czar Alexander III, which forbade issuing of mortgages to

Jews, closed synagogues, established job quotas and led to mass deportations. My Grandpa Julius and blue-eyed grandmother came to America because of German anti-Semitism. Joie's paternal grandfather came to America because he was involved with a failed socialist rebellion against the king of Romania. Joie's mother's family came to America because of the Irish potato famine. What are the odds that these circumstances occurred; that all of our forebears survived their trials; that they all ended up in America?

And their trails didn't end once they reached this "promised land."

In my political science class, we were assigned an excerpt from the 1911 Dillingham Commission on immigration. I read it with some interest because this must have been written after my great-great-grandparents came to the U.S.

the new immigrant as a class is far less intelligent than the old. ...generally speaking they are coming by different ideals, for the old immigration came to be a part of the country, while the new, in a large measure, comes with the intuition of profiting, in a pecuniary way, by the superior advantages of the new world and then returning to the old country.

These immigrants were indeed strangers in a strange land, faulted for their lack of assimilation and English skills, accused of grossly stereotypic motivations. Such blatant bias makes me better understand my family's desire to assimilate, to prove their allegiance, to fit in, yet always a little bit the outsider, always feeling the need to prove yourself.

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I wonder if there is ever really an easy time to be alive. My ancestors had to leave their homeland, fleeing pogroms and persecution. They then lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression. Now, in the 1960's, with Vietnam raging and civil unrest at home, is this really better?

I remember being a high school sophomore in the student newspaper office and hearing with shock and almost incomprehension of President Kennedy's assassination; reading about the summer Watts riots and escalating Vietnam involvement. Napalm. Though my family tried to keep me insulated in my "castle"



from all the distress and upheaval, when I arrived at Stanford, Dylan's *Eve of Destruction* was topping the charts:

The eastern world it is explodin'  
Violence flarin', bullets loadin'  
You're old enough to kill but not for votin'  
You don't believe in war, what's that gun you're totin'  
And even the Jordan river has bodies floatin'

But you tell me over and over and over again my friend  
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction

Nuclear anxiety, civil rights agitation, and Vietnamese protests. It's like the old world is dying, and the new world is in flux and revolt.

Amidst the chaos and gloom, I can't believe how blithely Johannes was able to keep his sensual blinders on. For him *Can't Get No Satisfaction* was merely a perfect song to play to help him appear cool and get all the sensual pleasure he could.

I wonder why at such a time of violence and despair, a song like this emerged about advertising and commercialism. Was it a counter force, its own rebellion against an imploding world? Was the song so popular because of all the focus on societal unrest? In spite of it? In reaction to?

Of course, there were rays of hope during the same decade. The Civil Rights Movement legislation. Increased attention to the rights of women, minorities, and people lacking privilege and power. And yes, there was also the Summer of love, the Haight Ashbury counterculture; the Golden Gate Park hippie celebration where Timothy Leary told us to turn on, tune in, drop out. Peter, Paul and Mary, exhorting us to "love one another right now." Woodstock in Bethel, New York. Temple of God.

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I think of reading Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* in my creative writing class. Paton felt that if people are treated inhumanely, they will cease to act humanly. "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating." Can

people who are treated brutally keep from turning into brutes? How do we avoid a world in which inhumanity begets inhumanity?

What is the right way to protest? Have peaceful protest, persuasion, demonstration, negotiations made a dent? What happens when all legitimate forms of dissent go unheeded? Will illegitimate forms arise? Violence often does not produce the desired result (except in the American Revolution).

Is there a parallel with the Israeli/Palestinian conflict? The Israeli War of Independence is the Palestinians' Nakba, the War of Catastrophe and Destruction. I heard that neither of these names was included in Hebrew textbooks of contemporary history for third graders because they were considered too young to grasp the concept of competing narratives.

At what age will they be old enough? Will I? When will humanity be old and wise enough to understand differing points of view without making one completely wrong and the other completely right? When will we be ready not only to grasp each other's perspective, but to work toward a shared humanity?

Are Martin Luther King's inspiring words - "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that" - only a pipedream?

Yet what is the alternative?

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And from the societal back to the personal, how could love emerge and bloom amidst so many challenges? How could Joie and I the children of our parents, grandparents, great grandparents meet? How could it be a random indifferent universe when so much love is allowed to flourish in our lives? Yet doesn't our love emerge amidst the pain and suffering and so many bad things happening to our families and to so many others?

From that history of hardship and resilience, how could I not treat this relationship like a precious flower? I hope I can help nurture her to become the best person she can be.

I love that she's so strong. And independent. I think of the passage Al Hazrumi shared with me from *The Prophet*, by Kahil Gibran, on marriage. It's a beautiful model of how we can be so entwined, so close and yet also honor the need for each of us to have space.

*You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.  
But let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be  
alone,  
Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the  
same music.  
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.*

Yet, even as we give space for sunlight to shine on each other, I know we will need to give each other shade and shelter, to care for and protect each other. Can I make that sort of commitment? There is still a part of me that feels I have to do everything alone. Working on myself to become a better person is hard. Working with another to become a better couple seems doubly so. I've had to learn to trust that a flower blooms at its own pace, and that I can water it, nurture it, but can't force it open with my hands because that would damage, even destroy the blossom. I need to remember the balance: positive assertive action where it's warranted, positive acceptance, patience and trust where that is wisdom. And I have to remember to apply this balance to me... and to us.

It occurs to me that in Dicken's *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham was thought to have done wrong because she taught Stella never to love anybody. Certainly part of me understood her point...the one who loves is weak and the one who doesn't is strong. But I also see myself shifting, realizing how strong you have to be to allow yourself to be so vulnerable to another.

I know there is a large part of me that hopes and prays that we will learn to dance together, and have lots of time to dance in partnership.

Mom once told me that if I ever became a writer, "I bet you'll write a love story.... a young handsome man, searching for love, and finding it.....in a mirror." It was a pretty cruel comment - and maybe at the time I deserved it. But I sincerely believe I've changed. I want to try to get to know Joie as well as I know myself. Maybe one day she'll even joke with me that I know her better than she knows herself. I want Joie to look back on her life with me and feel that it was the best life she could have had; and that I helped her. What would Mom say about me now? And what would I say to her? I think I'd say, or what I hope I'd say, is "Thank you, Mom, for helping me see myself more clearly, even when that was not what I wanted to hear. I think you'd be very proud of me." was not what I wanted to hear. I think you'd be very proud of me."

My relationship with Joie could be like a tai chi dance, learning to hear and listen to each other, and work toward a harmony of compromise and sharing, space and togetherness. Ovid would certainly approve. Rather than seeing our differences as disrupting and derailing the progress of my life, I could see it as working to build a new life together, as a team. Like a dance, I could nourish her, as she nourishes me.

*You were born together, and together you  
shall be forevermore.  
You shall be together when the white  
wings of death scatter your days.  
Ay, you shall be together even in the  
silent memory of God.*

\* \* \*

Nothing in my life is written in stone. I'm completely free at this moment. There's no reason I couldn't follow Joie back to America. Maybe continue my writing. Take some courses. She loves history and literature. I love religion and literature, and psychology and literature. How could we go wrong with a common love of literature? Maybe we could open a coffee house filled with lots of books, and sometimes in the evening she could come in and with that shy, prim, demure face, sing in her heartfelt manner. Maybe, if I got

my courage up, we could even play some guitar and flute together. What a long way I've come from playing flute and piano with Mery.

I remember my conversation with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet about the flute and why I began playing. It seemed like such an odd tangential therapeutic question at the time, and yet led to such a profound understanding. I look through my notes and find it.

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"Why did you choose to play the flute?" Dr Lisbet asks. I'm not sure why she asks this question. Is it something Freudian? I thought she was a Jungian. I decide not to go there, and just answer her.

"As I've shared, I'm deaf in one ear and couldn't carry a tune ---or so said my school choir director. Since music was a requirement, I chose an instrument, and for me the flute seemed logical"

"But why not a violin? Or a piano?"

"It's because the flute covers my mouth. You can't sing and play the flute at the same time. In a way, I suppose the flute became my voice."

Both she and the Rebbe smile and I continue.

"Although the first sounds were less than charming, when played well, the flute is a pure sound. In different pieces, it can be calming, passionate, whimsical, seductive, mournful, and powerful. I enjoyed the practice time, and viewed it as 'personal' space where I could be alone with the sounds. Also, I could improvise however I saw fit, and there was no one to "correct" me. Though I'm not much of a free form jazz-type improvisationalist, when you're playing by yourself, you can choose whether to make 16<sup>th</sup> notes longer, or faster. You're in control. You can create your own melody."

"Did you ever want to play as part of a group, with others?" the Rebbe asks.

"As I got better, I was asked to be part of the band. This created a lot of complications. I could no longer just play when I wanted, and at my own

tempo. Either as part of an ensemble, or just playing with one other person, like Mery, you need such precision to work as a team. You need to be acutely aware of when to come in, how to syncopate when there are 16<sup>th</sup> notes. Through this precision, you seek to come together to create harmony and clarity. I tried hard to fit in. At first, I would get satisfaction in being part of the 'team,' similar to when I played football. We were all in it together, trying to harmonize as a group effort.

"But it seems you don't see yourself now as a team player, do you? What changed?"

"In football, through 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I was the quarterback, the star player. In eighth grade, when we shifted from touch to tackle football, I realized I didn't handle the pressure of people rushing at me to try to tackle me before I could throw the ball. I was happy to be part of the team, left tackle, a blocking back, to protect the quarterback. But eventually I was drawn to more individual sports, like golf or tennis. No one rushing to tackle me. And I was the center of attention, not just 'blocking' for someone else."

"Ah, so you didn't like not being central... just supporting someone else?"

"That sounds harsh, but yes, it's true. In music, no one is trying to tackle you either, and I realized that being 'just' a member of the group eventually was not that satisfying to me. In an orchestra, you need to know when your part is a supportive one and play with sensitivity so as to let the soloist shine, to accommodate to them. The first violin performs the solos, and is, as Grandpa would say, 'the best.' The second violin connects the first with the cello and viola. The flute is versatile - it can be a background sound, part of the team, or a solo instrument."

"And which role would you rather have, center stage, or being part of a group?"

"Both are part of the group," I counter. "But one is at the head of the table, supported by others, rather than merely a participant.

There's no question in my mind that, when part of a group, clearly I'd prefer to be the soloist, and to be recognized and applauded for my excellence. When you're a soloist, you're the center, and others have to accommodate to you. I remember when playing with Mery, even when I could "get the timing, she would then criticize me as too detailed, too focused on the 16<sup>th</sup> notes and not connected to the passion and melody of the composition. I felt like I could never win as part of a team with her. I also remember her challenging me about my need for fame and centrality, asking me how would I feel if I were Bach--incredibly gifted--but nobody recognized my talent until after I was dead. I told her that would be unacceptable."

"So, it's not enough to be the best you can be, you also want to be recognized in the here and now as the best, right? And even if you were the best flutist, what about the conductor? Wouldn't there still be someone over you?"

"I've thought about that. Yes, my ego would prefer to be the group leader, the orchestra conductor. But that would mean knowing the roles of each of the members of that group and how they fit together. That's too much for me to figure out. It's hard enough just learning my own piece."

"Maybe because being part of a group is not where your strength lies, not something you know how to do well? Maybe your desire to be the best is getting conflated with being the head of the team, the head of the table, the leader of a group."

"Certainly looking at my experience, that seems true. In music, in my family. With Mery. Maybe it's best if I want centrality, to return to playing music--and life--on my own?" I ask as if a question, but I'm not sure it isn't a declarative statement. I wonder if writing a book wouldn't fulfill that need--to be the central character, and to do it on my own.

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"Isn't the question you're really asking, at the deepest level, is what is your piece of the cosmic puzzle, your piece of the universal orchestra? And it seems you want to be not just "a" piece of the cosmic puzzle, but the central piece, right? Can you imagine getting satisfaction out of being part of something larger than yourself?" The Rebbe stares at me, intently, but with kindness in his eyes.

To avoid his gaze, I close mine. I speak slowly and deliberately, trying to maintain a focus on my breathing. "When it comes to music, and it seems in a lot of areas in my life, including relationship, I'm realizing I'm not really a very good team player. And no, I don't think of being part of something larger than myself. Though I can feel, as you say it, that could be comforting."

So, what then might be my melody, my piece of the cosmic puzzle? I hear myself increasingly say I want to serve water, to be a bridge builder, to be the shamus that helps bring light to others. These each seem like roles of service, of giving, but I wonder how much pursuing them is really ego-driven, involving a need for fame. If I'm honest don't I really want to be famous for being the best server of water, the most spectacular bridge builder, the most giving of light shamus? I'm partly ashamed even to admit that?"

"We both appreciate your honesty. Please, again, let me invite you to be wary of either/or thinking. Yes, there is still a part of you, as there is of all of us, to be recognized, valued for our contributions. But notice how you're wanting to use that desire to be recognized now for the betterment of others. Can't you see the progress in that. The increase in your compassion, and caring, and wanting to be of service? And, in spite of your protestations of not wanting thinking of yourself as part of something larger, can't you see that the very service you want to offer, though yes they may be solo acts, the intention is to bring healing, compassion, sustenance and light to the larger world which is parched and in need?



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I close my eyes and breathe, trying to comprehend what Dr. Lisbet is saying. It feels like I'm trying to stretch into a new understanding of myself that perhaps I was too blind to see.

My eyes are still closed as I hear the Rebbe starting to sing a niggun. For some reason, I'm reminded of the song Dayenu, "it is enough." I hear Dr. Lisbet join in. The words echo in my mind and though self-conscious because of my voice, I too start to hum. Soon my diffidence vanishes and I feel enclosed by the beauty and warmth of the melody.

Dayenu. Each word of the niggun is like a note on the flute, born in each moment. As fast as it is born, it begins to die as the sound of that note vanishes. Then another note. Is this like life? Each moment vanishes, replaced by another moment? Is there a melody in life? Can I let each flute sound go, each moment of life, and allow the sound's brief burst of color in the now to be enough?

Perhaps if I can hold an attitude of dayenu, then it may not matter so much whether I am the brightest star or just a piece of the solar system. I can enjoy the melody of the here and now. And maybe, as I follow the Rebbe's lead, I'm learning to embrace being a part of something larger than myself.

Still evolving. So many levels within.

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I want to always remember the Zen teaching Akishige told me, that we need to learn to see the flower the hundredth time as we saw it the first time. Rev Noel said that was similar to Jesus reminding us to see with eyes of wonder and the awe of a small child. That's the way I want to always look at her, even as we grow old together. And play music together.

Hey, hey, oh playmate,  
Come out and play with me

And we'll be jolly friends  
Forever more, more, more.

I think of the words of Ecclesiastes, "Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which God has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun."

Maybe one of the stories we will read to each other in the evening would be the Song of Songs, recalling how we first really got together over Passover and Easter. And I would read to her about rebirth, and second chances, and how the story of the Song is about spirit and flesh:

Ani le dodi, ve dodi li

I am my beloved, and my beloved is mine.

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Maybe one day, like the story of the Golden Tree, we will see our child dancing. I think of John in Jerusalem, writing about Reb Jonathan's discussion of the Fall Holy Day Season—the "Fall Preview." Might I, like the Biblical Jacob one say continue that cycle and teach about the Days of Awe to my children and grandchildren? I imagine sharing with Joie what I would say. I turn to a blank space in my journal and make some notes, based on my notes on his talks, and what I've learned this past year.

**CONTEXT:** A loving compassionate universe; honoring and gratefulness for the blessings in our lives; Judaism believes "The soul which God gives us is pure. (han 'shama shenata beteh ora. hi). This IS a beautiful niggun song so recognizing the essential rightness of our Buddha nature within.

**JUDGMENT.** This time is often called the Days of Judgment. For many years, I didn't like this aspect or concept. Too harsh, too negative. And on Yom Kippur, there is a section where in some services people recite together an alphabet list of sins, while they hit their chest. Too melodramatic, I thought. But I now have a different view. I now see it, within a context, as an opportunity for a ruthlessly honest and candid soul-searching, to see ALL the dust that that we are capable of this year in as non-defensive a way as possible. We need to honestly judge where we are---discern the dust on our mirror--not as a way to punish ourselves, but as a way to say, wow, the task is long, hard, deep, and will require constant effort!

And I now perceive and feel the listing of sins and the hand on the heart, not as a self-blaming pounding, but as a knocking, we are knocking on our hearts to open our hearts, to honestly face our shortcomings, unskillful and unwholesome habits, and asking ourselves and God to open us as deeply and honestly as possible. I inevitably cry during this section ... and I recall that there is a story that says that these tears are a way that We open our hearts and touch God.

This developing of insight into ourselves and our wrongs is considered the most important first step in TESHUVAH, the turning, or returning to God, or our highest, more pure soul nature. Once we recognize ways we have created dust on our mirrors, we then ...

**CASTING OUT (Taslich) and ASKING FORGIVENESS.** There is no way we can do an honest inventory and not realize that there are unskillful habits and behaviors we have engaged in the past year. I see Taslich as a ceremony where we say, I recognize those thoughts, behaviors, actions, I acknowledge them, and wipe them as dust from my pure nature .... I seek a time of new beginnings .... The line we say is from Michah: "God will cast our transgressions into the sea " water symbolizes kindness ....

And the forgiveness part when we honestly see how we have acted toward people by thought, word, and deed, we want to ask their forgiveness for any hurt we have caused them, intentionally or unintentionally by our thought word or deed (this does not necessarily have to be done in person, or in writing, it can be done in your heart, depending on what you and God truly feel is most skillful). (This process also includes forgiving others for the hurts they have caused us; and forgiving ourselves for the hurts we have caused ourselves (intentional and unintentional self-created suffering)).

4) **NEW BEGINNINGS, JOYOUS AND LOVELY CREATION FROM CHAOS.** The shofar at the start of Rosh HaShannah is designed to "wake us up" to the task we need to do .... There are over 100 shofar blasts during the Days of Awe ceremonies and services, each with different meanings .... to wake up; fight the "evil" impulses, to gather our strength for the task, and finally, having gone through the honest judgment of where we are, if we are given the gift of life for another year, to hear the final long shofar blast calling us forward from the chaos, confusion, struggle to a new beginning, renewed, refreshed, ready to again try once more to climb back on the path ...

The shofar is a simple, plaintive sound, like a cry from the heart .... a call to evaluate our actions and improve our ways, as expressed in the verse: "Awake, sleepers from your sleep, slumbers, arise from your slumber--examine your deeds, return (to) your Creator.

As a wise Rebbe once said, "The gates between heaven and earth are opened, and things that were beyond us suddenly become possible. The deepest questions of our heart begin to find answers. our deepest fear, that gaping emptiness ahead of us and back behind us as well suddenly becomes our ally. Heaven begins to help us.

"May we each learn to build the holy sanctuary of our life calmly and courageously, with purified will, and renewed strength, on a soil

which has been cleansed by your reflection, your forgiveness, of self and others, and your intentions ....open yourself once again to let the divine wisdom help you perform the task of your life in cheerfulness and gladness, rejoicing on earth in the presence of the sacred.

A message to me this year. A message forward to myself in the future. And, if the universe allows, a message to Joie, and to my children and even grandchildren one day.

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Shalom.

Down below are a few lights. Above are a few stars. I feel myself at a center point, a space between two reflections, heaven and earth, inside a mirror.

Which way do I head? Where is my true home? In the night sky...or someplace below? Vertical uncertainty. If I return to earth, will I ever have a place where I belong? Will I ever be someone other than the wandering Jew? Perhaps it is just a state of mind, yes? All is impermanent, right, Roshi Akishige? Life is "just a narrow bridge", Kol Ha'olam kulo Gesher Tsar me'od"...Right, Rebbe Nachman? I look at the picture Akishige gave me of the sumi-e painting. The small person on the bridge, the misty mountains ahead. Horizontal uncertainty.



Even if all is uncertainty, a narrow bridge, impermanent, there is a part of me, at least for a short time on that bridge, that would like to have a resting place, even if only a tempoary sukkah. Yes, impermanent, but a home even if looking through a porous covering to the sky and the stars.

Do I have the courage to head down the hill? What if I turn and slip and fall on the descent? I feel the fear of going past the wolf on the wall going to the basement. What wolves might there be ahead? I remember the first time I descended an escalator, and was afraid of going down and being dragged into the unknown when the stairs folded into flatness at the end. What if...? What if...?

Yet there is another part of me, amidst all these scattered slipshod thoughts drifting through my mind, that feels myself being pulled away from the sky and stars, while by their light being guided back to earth. I can feel a force, like a tide, drawing me. Toward the next phase.

Yes, now, yes...even amidst the confusion and uncertainty...yes...I sense I am ready, finally ready, to take the first step back toward the lights below.

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In my mind, I have created these two tracks about the nature of the universe, and hope they are sturdy and trustworthy enough to carry me forward down the mountain into the next phase of the story.

I have gone through my past, like an archaeological, historical dig, to find out where I fell off the old tracks. I have searched amidst the Humpty Dumpty fragments of that shattered self to try to find, reconstruct, and create a new self, including exploring and seeking to understand areas of myself that I didn't even know were influencing me, I've searched for what might be my piece of the cosmic puzzle, or my place in the indifferent universe—in work and love.

New beginnings. A blank canvas. An empty page. A new chapter of the Book of Life and Death is now ready to be written. For now, the answer for me is to go back and commit to an ordinary life, carrying forward as much of the memory and taste of the sacred experience as I can. To be once more re-inspired to see the many as holy and part of the One, and also to continue to work to remove my own dust and plagues, knowing it's impossible to completely succeed, but still continuing to try.

I feel myself letting go of the rope to swing to the next tree. I turn around from the end of the pool and push off. I raise my hands, as the roller coaster, from its height in the hills of Safed, begins to descend into the life below.

My answer is to enter the unknown, with a few degrees less fear. I don't really know what I want to do with my life. I don't know if I'm ready to make a commitment to Joie. But I am ready to make a commitment to life.

And that's a start.

Shalom. Hello.

Hello to life. L'chaim. As it is written in Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah, "Choose life."

The Book of Life and Death, the book of the Torah.

A book can become like a good friend in the writing, as well as in the reading. Sometimes each step feels like a slow-going effort, like a climb up Sinai, taking one plodding stride after another. At other times, as in the story Joie read me about the Golden Tree, there seems to be a current that pulls you along and into it, if you allow and trust.

Each beginning has its endings built into it. Genesis and Exodus. Deuteronomy and the death of Moses. The alpha and omega, beginnings and endings.

Each ending creates the potential for a new beginning. Simchat Torah celebrates the ending of the cycle of the Torah with Deuteronomy, and the beginning with Genesis. The death of Moses occurs in sight of the promised land, but also as Joshua is entering the promised land.

I think of Lin Zscho discussing tai chi and the yin yang cycles. Yin naturally flows into yang, yang into yin. "If you get upset and confused when things are too quiet, or too active, then you don't understand the truth and wisdom of the Tao.... the Tao does not move upward toward a fixed point. Rather, it turns and bends back upon itself until the self comes full circle and knows that at the center all things are one."

In Christianity you have Christmas, the birth; and Easter, death and resurrection, a return.

I look up at the moon. At what point does its revolution around the earth begin and end? Or is it a revolution without either beginning or end. I think of the moon creating the waves in Carmel by its force. I think of Prem Devi's metaphor of the ocean and One without a Second. Am I one of those waves?

#### WAVES

undulating heaving, gently swaying  
beneath the moon's guiding hand

waves swell, pick up speed,  
foaming, churning

crashing, cresting, colliding create

diamond fragments,  
glistening as they shatter and are hurled,  
thrusting toward the sky,  
only to gracefully descend and merge back into the  
ocean, the source from which they came and have always been  
And once again, patiently, tenderly, and raucously,  
the dance continues

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When I was younger, my family would keep a growth chart. On any particular day, it didn't seem like I was growing. But when they would measure me at different time intervals months apart, I could see growth. This feels like a similar period in my life to see growth, as I look back nine months to John in Jerusalem, then another nine month to Johannes at Stanford.

I can see a small evolution in me. Perhaps not a great not a great enlightenment experience like Saul to Paul; or Jacob to Israel, or Buddha. But some some small understandings, and gleaning; more evolution than revolution.

Below it is Simchat Torah, the festival of the dance. We look back to the beginning of Genesis. We look forward to crossing with Joshua into the Promised Land. Moses is dead, but we will cross this Jordan, strong and courageous.

Simchat Torah, on the one hand, celebrates linear historical time, a trajectory, an upward evolution where Deuteronomy ends, and Joshua, entering the Promised Land, begins.

But Simchat Torah also conveys cyclical time as, after this festival, we return in our reading of Torah to "In the beginning" and start once again at Genesis. Is that beginning again merely a circle? Perhaps the return to "the beginning" and the forward movement into the Promised Land is both/and, both linear and cyclical. And each time we return to the "beginning" rather than just a "circle", there is a revolution, and we can see from a higher plane of wisdom.



Maybe that is the revelation, the connection of different "times", the connection of evolution and revolution. What a time to have this insight, on Simchat Torah, a time of revelry, where both times (past and future) join in the ongoing present!

And for me it is a time of no more hiding. At Purim we wear masks. Now it is time to take the mask off. Here I am. Trying to become a revealed person, bare before God and myself. It says in the Mishna, "Whoever rescues a single soul it's as if they have rescued the whole world."

I'm trying to rescue me.

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Another crossing of the waters. Like at the Reed Sea. The dance connects us. Now at Simchat Torah, and after the Reed Sea, it is the wisdom of Miriam, as that wise spiritual woman in the Passover story (and within each of us) reminding us to "dance."

The "Moses" part of us tries to lead us forth from our narrow places, the Pharaoh part of us sabotages us and holds us back, and the plagues are the "samsara," negative events that keep occurring unless we learn the lessons--as individuals, as a society. In crossing the Reed Sea, we start the journey from our narrow places. We symbolically seek to wash away by that crossing those parts of us we wish to leave behind, and baptize ourselves into a new birth and new beginning.

However, even though crossing the Reed Sea is a major accomplishment, in fact the desert and wilderness still lie before us. Crossing the Reed Sea, metaphorically, symbolizes the transition from a lower, more enslaved state of consciousness to a higher one. Yet there is a long way to go on the journey to the Promised Land.

Miriam is the wise woman who teaches us to joyfully dance as a way to

celebrate each step of our progress on the Passover journey. Miriam dancing with her "timbrils", arms high, head thrown back, willing to rejoice completely in the moment.

And so it is on Simchat Torah. We are to throw ourselves into endless circles of dancing and allow time to become lost.

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If the journey is a continuous cycle where you don't ever really reach the final point until death, if life is always a game of becoming, then we need moments to step and rest. If there is no ultimate climax, as my younger self Johannes realized, then the holidays--the holy days can be a time to remember to pause, reflect, and dance.

If I were to write a story, I'd want to begin it with a similar type of merriment and dance. Maybe with Johannes, the lawyer-to-be, on the weekend of Purim, where, in laughter and joy, we are enjoined to become so drunk, in such an altered state, that we cannot tell the difference between the evil Haman and the good Mordechai. I'd want my story to move from Purim without God, to Passover with God, to Simchat Torah, in a linear, yet spiraling "revolutionary" cycle. From Johannes using the Song of Songs only for sensuality and seduction, using the law only for status and acclaim, to the Song of Songs as celebrating both sensual and spiritual beloveds, and the Torah and law as an evolving tree of life, the reason for the dance at Simchat Torah in the sukkah.

I imagine myself walking, almost floating down to the sukkah, where all guests are assembled, past and present. I feel myself drawn into the dance, holding hands with the past and present, and I somehow find myself between Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan holding their hands. No, that's not true. I chose to place myself there, between my God parents. I fluidly let myself dance in western dosey do square dance meets the hora. Soon that I am dancing between my parents. I notice a great feeling of tenderness and thankfulness coming up in me toward them, who gave me life, and who protected and loved me as

best they were able. I am then between my blue eyed grandma who gave me unconditional love and lawyerly grandpa, who gave me the drive to the best that I could.

Now between loving worrying Sunday Brunch Nana and red-canary loving meshugina Grandpa Dave. My brother and sister. I say hello and good bye to each of them in the dance, holding hands and letting go past and present. I say good bye to Elizabeth Mery, and Richard, Mac, Judke and Kasim, while all of us dance, like some wild Matisse painting.

I feel the conscious good-byes, the endings. Breathing out.

And yet, for as long as I am allowed, I feel the beginnings, a breathing in.

As the dance continues, I hear Joie leading us in a round of Hava Na Shira, encouraging everyone to pick up different harmonies. She even repeats the story her grandmother told her that everyone must sing...either to praise God for our good voices...or for "revenge."

All of us are still holding hands. I am listening to my breathing, allowing it to fill me on the inbreath, and letting go, surrendering on the outbreath. "Hava na shira." Let us all sing. Joie's voice is angelic, lifting my heart, my soul. I think to myself, "When the heart is ready, the beloved appears." Her voice goes higher, for the next part of the round. Others are joining in. It's hard for me to breathe. Letting go. Air out. I feel the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet's hands give mine a squeeze, then let go. I know the class has ended. My eyes are closed. I feel them leaving the room. My parents leave the room, my grandparents leave the room. I consciously say good-bye to all the invited guests, one by one.

As they leave, I hear Joie continuing to sing Hava Na Shira. Her voice ranges still higher. The next part of the round. Voices from outside and above and around join with her, including mine. Even those with a lousy voice have to sing loud too. I am indeed part of the group, the sanga, the family.

Yes, I'm crying. No, I don't care. Yes I'm aware that I'm letting go and breathing out. I'm hearing our voices rise, the beauty of the notes. I'm feeling each tone and note and sound, knowing that each will disappear as quickly as it arises. I'm experiencing the beauty of the moment and the sadness of the moment. Breathing in gratefulness, breathing out, singing as loud as I can. Hallelujah. Hallel ja. Praise God. As I begin to descend toward the sukkah, I feel myself simultaneously climbing Jacob's ladder. "Every step goes higher, higher."

\* \* \*

After taking just a few steps, I pause, remembering dreams I recently discussed with Joie, the first involving Jacob's ladder, the second about seeking more light, and the third prosaic.

In the first dream, I'm working with a contractor to build the home of my dreams (in my dream!), in which I have a sculpture studio. We are building stairs, trying to make the angles interesting so they don't just go straight up, but wind around like a spiral. Then it begins to rain. The roof is leaking and the house is dripping with water. I'm scared, feeling helpless, don't know where to turn for rescue. The contractor is no longer there. I'd been creating a sculpture with hands reaching out--as prayer, to help, to receive help? If the sculpture gets ruined by the water, I don't know if I have the ability to create it again. Then the dream shifts and there is a young boy, about five, crying. He sees that I'm crying too. I tell him I'm really going to miss him; and my last words to him are, "Remember, you've always got a friend in me that you can call on."

When I shared this dream with Joie, I told her I thought the staircase represented Jacob's ladder to heaven. The circular structure is symbolic of a spiraling revolution toward the heavens.

She interrupted me to ask what a revolution means with reference to a staircase. I was a little annoyed, first and I don't like being interrupted when I'm in the middle of a thought. Secondly, because the answer to her question seemed so clear to me. Did she really need to ask it? But I took a breath, realizing she's giving me a gift to even listen to my dreams. I replied that my old tennis buddy Richard, who had studied architecture, once

explained to me that there was a minimum of about twelve steps per revolution in constructing this kind of stairway. I boastfully told him I had a spiral staircase in my home in Kansas City. He told me he had two in his home in South Africa. She laughed, and made some comment about our competitive one upmanship. I was a little embarrassed that I'd told her about that incident, but I smiled sheepishly as well, and then continued with my dream, because I wanted to hear what she thought about it. I continued my interpretation:

The falling water is that which I can't control. Is it Noah's flood? God's tears? seeing God's (and my) creation in danger of being destroyed? My doubts about recreating the sculpture might parallel my doubts now about whether I have the ability to keep going on this path?

Her interpretation, insightful and uncompromising: "Initially you feel helpless, afraid, not able to cope - but when the boy appears, it brings forth your higher, more trusting, competent self." I like her explication. She's looking for the best in me, and trusts me more than I trust myself. I told her my final interpretative thoughts:

I also felt that the boy is me, my inner child. I'm ready to raise the boy, protect him, and not desert him. I no longer need the "contractor's" help. It's ok to grow up and mature, to let go of that childish phase and trust that I won't desert myself.

\* \* \*

She liked that interpretation. I love when she looks at me with admiring eyes. It makes me feel hopeful...and loved.

I then proceeded to tell her the second dream.

I'm taking some kind of test. The proctor is being nice to me, favoring me over another student whom I know is much more tech savvy than I am. To take the test, I need more light, which he tries to find. There were some light bulbs that were missing or had burned out.

I told Joie that my interpretation was that both I and the proctor [also me?] are seeking more light. A test involves being "judged" as well as some "competition." I've created a situation where I am "more" special; but of course I'm the other guy, too; less favored but more competent. And I'm also the

proctor (and the test!) I am the one who judges, the one who helps, and the one who shows favoritism.

I was pretty proud of this interpretation, and she was again complimentary, then added: "Interesting insight about the test. Are you testing yourself to see if you are worthy in some way?"

"How about the test is life: the proctor is God; and you want more illumination!"

She's brilliant.

\* \* \*

I didn't share with her my third dream. Partly because it seemed so clear. Partly because it deals with death and loss, and that's a topic that she--and I--are sensitive talking about.

The prosaic dream.

I'm driving down a road to a cemetery and hit a dead end. I realize as I turn around that, even though my car is modest, the people at the end of the road are really poor and will steal whatever they can of what I have. I feel tightness, fear.

INTERPRETATION. The timing and interpretation of this dream seem so obvious. In waking life our group of wise elders are talking about death and mortality, and I dream of driving to a cemetery. Not that interesting. And, of course, my car arrives at a dead end. Again, pretty literal...What about the poor people? They may symbolize in real life my fear of having what I possess taken away/stolen from me (including my life). Perhaps also they represent some guilt at my life of privilege, even in my current circumstances. But why if I'm at the end of my road, and don't need anything once I'm gone, do I fear losing it? Perhaps it's really just the fear of letting go, and loss, and fear of death. What an obvious dream! Maybe with such a challenging issue, my unconscious didn't think it needed to be very creative.

As I rethink the dream, if I go to India instead of being with her, does this mean I'm afraid of the poverty and need I'll find there? Also, could the dead end could also apply to our relationship? An ending. Is that also a reason I didn't share with her--too sensitive a topic?

\* \* \*

As I continue my walk down the hill toward the lights below, I'm feeling a tender glow within me toward Joie. She's someone with whom I can share everything. And I love the way her mind works. So creative.

Why, then, is there still a part of me that wonders whether this is a beginning, or an ending? That wonders whether this this isn't the right time for me to say good-bye to Joie and head to India? Is that wisdom or the cowardly lion running from relationship in fear? Why can't I make my story like the Indian fairy tale of the Golden Tree? Will I ever watch my child dance, even dance with my child? I think of what Lin Zscho told our group: "We have a saying: 'One generation plants the trees; another gets the shade.' We have received much shade from our elders. Now it is our turn. At the time, I felt he was talking about planting shade for me. Will I have the opportunity to shelter the next generation?"

Lech lecha. Go forward, go inward, from the house of your father to a place you do not know. I was once like a Pied Piper in Golden Gate Park. I was a muse to children. Can I refind that inner joy? Will there one day be grandchildren that I dance with on my stooped shoulders? Jacob blessing his children and his grandchildren. God dancing with God.

As Shabbat ends, I image the havdalah candle burning, past, present future all woven like its candle wicks, illuminating messengers of light, angels of heaven and earth flapping their wings with whooshing sounds.

\* \* \*

I stand up and raise my hands to the sky. I feel like Zorba dancing. Thank you Kazanzatkis. Thank you all who have seen the darkness and been able to still choose life and go forth. Thank you Doestoevsky, "My hosannas have been forged in the crucible of doubt."

It is through words and books that they have shared their journey.

It is through words that I'd like to share my journey.

Maybe the story shouldn't start at Purim, but at a time of chaos and confusion. I think of the meaning of Rosh Hashanah, the opportunity to bring creative order out of chaos, the birth of the Universe. A time of birth. I think of Christmas, the birth of Jesus. Son of Mary. I like the idea of beginning with the first word of the Bible, Bereshit. In the beginning was darkness and the void. The moment of chaos from which creation, revelation, wisdom can occur.

And the first letter of Bereshit. B in Hebrew, is beth, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, after the silent aleph. Beth. Mery Elizabeth.

Beth, as in new beginnings. You, Beth, were a new beginning, it was you who really opened me to the world of the spirit. Thank you.

Beth, as in house. The house of God, BethEl

From the first letter of the Bible, beth, in Bereshit, in the beginning to the House of God, Bethel. Elizabeth, it was you who birthed me, as John, so I could seek to enter the House of God.

Tonight we dance, accompanied by the music of flute, guitar, and the rustling of angels' wings, while carrying the Book of Life, the Torah. On Sukkot we circle round the Torah scrolls, symbolizing the essence of the book at the center. Sukkot, with a full moon, reflecting the sun's light on the majestic hills of Safed. The next stage after Rosh Hashanah's new moon. And Simchat Torah is the next stage after the solemnity of Yom Kippur, a celebration in which we make seven circles while carrying the Torah. Now, instead of circling around Torah scrolls as on Sukkot, we circle with them around an apparently empty space. Empty and full. The xujing, The Void and Ein Sof. The One. A taste of the messianic.

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If I want to go back down the mountain, and decide to turn my journals into a book, a story about this journey, how openly am I going to address



sexuality in the book? Past, present, future? How would I feel about Johannes' "sex" passages?

I remember my creative writing professor discussing literature and sex and our society's complicated relationship with the two. He first gave a couple of examples from the art world, so we could see this wasn't an issue limited to literature.

One anecdote he told was about the Vatican being annoyed at the nudes in Michelangelo's Judgment, so Michelangelo painted a snake over the genitals, biting them. I like this thumbing his nose at his employers! Another story was that Goya painted a picture of Venus in the nude. Then because of the outrage in Spain, he painted a clothed version. In addition to censorship of nudity and sexuality in art, there was also often a quite demeaning and pejorative view of women expressed. Reuben's Sampson is posed in a brothel, slumbering on Delilah's lap, her breasts sensually exposed, when co-conspirators cut off his hair. Cupid and Venus are in the background. This depiction seems to suggest woman as temptress, seductive and untrustworthy. Sexual attraction as danger.

The Medieval Christian Church viewed the sex act as something to be avoided whenever possible; nothing sensual was sanctioned beyond the bare minimum necessary to ensure the continued existence of the human race. Saint Jerome saw women as the gate of the devil. Eve was the temptress responsible for man's fall from innocence. Dante also has dark depictions of women and their sexual sins and enticement to lust. The prostitute flatterer Thaïs in the eighth circle is doomed to scratching herself with nails dripping with excrement as punishment for her sexual misconduct. And Dante's perfect version of womanhood? Beauty, purity, and passiveness, embodied in his life long love of Beatrice, placed on a pedestal. That passivity of the ideal woman was also reflected in the early Christian evangelist Timothy who felt

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.

In the modern era, the Catholic Church has several books specifically condemned by the Holy See for their too explicit depictions of sexuality, including modern classics such as *Madame Bovary*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *Ulysses*.

The professor pointed out that this view of sexuality and women was not limited to the Catholic tradition. In Buddhism, sexual desire can be understood as one of many desires, all of which can bring suffering. There are a range of views on this teaching, but all involve "escaping" sensual desires, from mindfully avoiding and letting them go, to creating aversive images to diminish sexual urges. In terms of the former, Buddha said,

One, always mindful, should avoid sensual desires. Letting them go, he will cross over the flood like one who, having bailed out the boat, has reached the far shore.

Other texts are more explicit, suggesting ways to minimize sensual desire by reframing it not as carnal delight, but as ugly and repulsive.

From a Hindu Vedic perspective, Ramakrishna described "women as poison" in their sexual guise. The only positive image he had of the female half of the species was non-sexual, a mother comforting a child.

Freud criticized the Victorian era's repressed sexuality, though he also held the view that each individual possessed only so much eros and that eros often could be put to better use than sex by sublimating it into other societal activities. Though predating Freud, Balzac expressed a similar view, fearing that to have an orgasm would deplete him of energy for writing, a view echoed by D.H. Lawrence.

Later writers, like Thomas Wolfe and John Cheever, felt that sexual energy enhanced their writing—if properly sublimated?. And certainly there are writers who believed the issue of sexuality was a central part in their writing, including Nabokov, Lawrence, and Joyce, and their work is now considered classics.

So where are we now? We've moved considerably beyond that Victorian prudishness with our Summer of Love just two years ago, "Hair" and the Age of Aquarius.

So how to represent sex in literature? My professor cited William Styron who argued

Artistically explicit sex does illuminate character when it's done well with sincere artistic intent....not gratuitous.

He concluded by saying it was up to us to wrestle with how, if, and to what extent we choose to depict sexuality and women in our own writing.

As I think about this lecture, I am aware that only male authors were discussed. At the time, I didn't even notice. Now, under Joie's influence, I've become more aware how women don't get their fair share of recognition in any field, including how they feel about sex, how that is expressed in literature, and the ways women have been portrayed by men—temptress, put on a pedestal. How would I deal with sexuality and views of women?

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How would this historical understanding of sexuality and women apply to me if I were to write a book? Johannes, named after Kierkegaard's Johannes in Either/Or, loves the challenge of sexual conquest. And it brought him a lot of pleasure. His sex life is a large part of his journals, and his advisor on his own seductive adventures was Ovid:

Ye lovers lend me your ears. My enterprise is fraught with danger, but without danger, where would courage be? The object I aim at is not easy of attainment.

Certainly Johannes has a high libido, and he invests a lot of effort in gratifying his desires, but his behavior also is often depersonalizing of the women with whom he engaged. In his effort to reach different "bases," and his keeping score, he is almost a caricature of the Greek god Priapus, a fertility god often represented with a disproportionately large and permanent erection. If I were writing about Johannes, I'd want to show these limitations, but I'd also

like to nuance them with an honest portrayal of his inner life, and acknowledge that some women found him charming, at least for a while. He never forced himself on anyone, never used anger or intimidation, from fear of being like his father, and liked to view himself as a gentleman. His libido was what he was born with. Did he use it well? Part of the story could be the arc of learning to recognize the problems he's causing by that libido, for himself and others, and also, to realize how he views women in a limited and narrow way.

If I were creating that portrayal, how explicit should I be in describing Johannes' sexual encounters? As Styron said, does it help illuminate his character, done artistically and not with gratuitous intent? That is the fine line I'd like to seek.

How should I portray Johannes? It would be easy to dismiss him as a monster. His callousness, his treating women like objects, the hurt he causes others are all pretty off-putting. Yet as Johannes evolved, he came to realize the problems related to his sexuality, particularly as he tried to open himself to a more real and authentic relationship with Mery. He feels betrayed and emasculated by Mery, like Solomon was by the temptress Delilah.

But he also realizes there were some lessons he could learn from the time he spent with her about himself and his flaws. Certainly about how he was often insensitive, objectifying, and even demeaning of her. And also lessons she taught him about sensitivity to the suffering of others, and about the life of the spirit.

Johannes evolved into John, and from John's perspective, Johannes' pursuit of the flesh was simply wrong and debasing. In satisfying his sexual urges, Johannes seemed oblivious to the feelings of the women he encountered. To John, Johannes was like the character Proust described in *Remembrance of Things Past* -indifferent to the suffering he causes. Further, John saw satisfying the desires of the flesh as a major barrier to realizing the life of the spirit, which is where one's

yearning and focus should be.

As St. Augustine of Hippo shared in his Confessions

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

I love that passage. One arc in the book could be the shift from love of the flesh to love of the spirit.

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Is it really so simple? Can you just transfer love of the flesh into love of the spirit? Part of me wishes it were so simple. John sees the life of flesh and sexuality versus spirit as an either/or. The life of the flesh is wrong; the life of the spirit is magnificent. But that is not where I want to end the book. For I have found sensual moments with Joie that felt truly spiritual, like Buber's I-Thou. Times when through relationship and the flesh I have felt God.

I think of Prem Devi's rising chakras, from the sensual to the sublime but all connected, a much different view than John's either/or that flesh and spirit do not mix. The view of woman as temptress, like Delilah, is one that I still fear, but less so, as my trust of Joie grows. And I certainly don't see women as Timothy did, requiring them to be quiet and submissive. I love talking with Joie, to hear how she understands the world and life. I love her strength.

And when I turn to the spiritual side, I have seen both the beauty and the challenges of a spiritual life, at times not trusting in an all loving God and benevolent universe which I so want to believe in. Of course I also have a

distrust in my ability to sustain and maintain a loving relationship with a beloved.

Even as Johannes sought sexual connection and gratification, he erected barriers so as not be overtaken and overwhelmed by true love. He feared the potential dependency if someone loved him; and he feared being dependent upon another if he loved them. Basically, he was afraid of the vulnerability of love. And I know that some of him still exists within me. Is it the same with the spiritual life? Is there a distrust that just as a relational beloved can hurt me, so can a relation with the Beloved Shekinah? Can I trust either completely?

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I'm aware that, in exploring both sexuality and spirituality, there is an underlying yearning in me, wanting more, longing to uncover and discover the mystery. The short skirt, the cleavage. Aren't those part of the mystery, as much as the ineffable inscrutabilities of the universe? It's as if you see a store being remodeled, with brown paper covering the windows, but then glimpse a tear in the paper. Don't you want to peek in?

There is a part of me that wonders whether we should avert our eyes and not peek in. Maybe the search for the beloved--in relationship or in spirit-- is too burning, too hot, too close to conundrums and perplexities better left unsolved. Maybe better just not to look and see what's inside.

Yet, isn't that curiosity innate? And doesn't our sexual curiosity, if channeled properly into the other chakras, help ensure our evolutionary survival? If we can channel the eros energy into our heart, and love, a love of the beloved, a love of ourselves, and a love for all humans, seeing the Namaste "God-like" within the other, that we are all brothers and sisters, doesn't that also help ensure our species' survival.

Perhaps it's more than mere curiosity. What else was Johannes searching for in sexuality and women? Was he trying to prove to his father that he was a real

man, and thereby receive his father's admiration and love? And, Freud, is Johannes' unusually high sexual drive, though clearly biologically driven, also enmeshed with a mother either emotionally not available or at times too available and intrusive? Was Johannes seeking not just sexual experiences but also, though he may not have realized it, validation and unconditional maternal love from every woman in his life, to prove to his mother that he was lovable?

And yet, at the same time, although he may have wanted validation and "unconditional maternal love" he couldn't accept the unconditional love he yearned for from women because he mistrusted it - because of his mother's untrustworthiness. If he kept the relationships purely sexual, the art of the conquest, a game, he thought in this way he could maintain control and avoid vulnerability and loss of control to another.

Could he, can I, learn to love ourselves, let ourselves be loved, and trust both? Can I open myself to that vulnerability? And, could this love be connected to a higher level parental love, from God, holy Father and Mother? Isn't he, aren't we all seeking to know that we are forgiven for our mistakes, seen for who we are and loved unconditionally as we are?

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I wonder if there isn't a way to nuance and explore the energy of Eros more thoughtfully and wisely. Rather than a Freudian model, or a Balzacian belief that in giving love (or having an orgasm) we limit, diminish and deplete ourselves for other activities, maybe it's like a candle, that when you pass the light to another candle, both are lit and more light comes into the world. Prem Devi has taught me about the chakras, how our sexual feelings can be a spur to, integrated into, and channeled toward the crown chakra. Within this framework, flesh and spirit are in harmony.

Al Hazrumi once told me about a text he'd studied, *The Perfumed Garden of Sensual Delight*, a fifteenth-century Arabic sex manual and work of erotic

literature by Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Nafzawi. Al Hazrumi explained that there are many words for love in Arabic. One is a camel losing balance and feeling dizzy on the road. He said that experience of love is similar to the Sufi dervish dancers, turning and turning, seemingly in circles, but with each turn leading to a higher plane of consciousness, like an upward revolution and spiral.

In Genesis it says, "It is not good for man to dwell alone."

And then there is the Song of Songs. As Rabbi Akiva said in the Mishna,

If other books of the Scripture are holy, the Song of Songs is the holiest of the holy.

The Song is intimate, sensual, passionate. It breaks down borders between sensuality and spirituality, body and soul. Though God is not mentioned, lovers encounter the divine each time they gaze into each other's eyes. Might there be a way to channel desire into romantic love as a conduit for genuine intimacy? To love another person may be a way to see the face of God. Unconditional love can point us to the eternal Thou.

Now, more than ever, I believe I understand that lovely line in the Song of Songs. And yes, if we were to get married, I would want our wedding rings to say

*I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.*

\* \* \*

I'm driving in Southern California with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet in the back seat. I pull out of the parking lot onto a one way street. I look to my right and see only one car, about sixty yards away, and so decide there is time to turn left onto the street. After I go twenty yards or so, I look into my rear view mirror, only to see the car is now within several car lengths of me. It then pulls to the right of me, speeds past, pulls back in front of me, and then within the next ten seconds or so, pulls into a left turn lane to the left of my lane. His lane has a red left turn light, my lane has a green light, so I continue up the road past him. As I pass him, I wave.

I look back to see the Rebbe's and Dr. Lisbet's reaction, expecting a smile of approval. Instead, I see they are talking amongst themselves,



and then Dr. Lisbet says, "Do you realize you cut that person off?" "No, I don't think so. I think he was just being a jerk."

"Then why do you think he pulled around you, then cut back in front?"

"I'm not sure. When I turned to look, there was clearly room for me to enter the road."

"So, you didn't intentionally cut him off?"

"No, of course not, especially with you two as backseat drivers." I smile.

They don't smile. Dr. Lisbet continues, "It appears you then unintentionally caused the car behind you some suffering, by interfering with his desired rate of speed."

"That certainly wasn't my intent."

"Ok, fair enough. Then how did you feel when he pulled around you and then pulled back in front of you?"

"Since you were in the back seat, I took a breath and just watched my mind. I thought, hmm, that's not a dangerous move. So don't get upset. But I did feel some annoyance when I saw him on my right passing me, and then more irritation when, within the next few seconds, he pulled into the left lane in front of me." I might have directed an expletive toward him under my breath, but I don't share that with my passengers.

"Do you think he was sending you a message?"

"Yes, and in so doing he was intentionally creating unnecessary suffering in me."

"Perhaps. Or maybe he was peacefully driving and just wanted to get around you, at his pace. he may have had no intentional desire to create suffering in you, and in that case your annoyance was merely the story you were creating and was solely your issue."

"Perhaps." Now I'm getting annoyed. "But why didn't he just peacefully take a breath and stay behind me since he was going to be turning left anyway? And why did he cut so quickly back in front of me?"

"So, you feel he should have taken a breath? And what lesson might he have taught you?"

Now I'm really annoyed. I hope they aren't charging for me for this. "To take a breath, too, even when someone is acting like a jerk?"

They both nod approvingly.

"And his cutting back so quickly in front of you? Do you think he was perhaps, albeit not very kindly, also trying to teach you a lesson that you made a misjudgment, and to be one step more careful with your actions?"

"Point well taken. Thank you."

We drive in silence. I start reflecting on my feelings as I passed the driver when he was stuck at the stoplight; when, after all his machinations, he was forced to stop, and I continued whizzing past him. Whatever annoyance I had turned to glee. I'd won!

I wish the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet weren't in the back seat. In my mind, I can hear them diminishing my glee, saying, hmm, was there a contest? You two are going in different directions, other than for a brief one minute encounter on the road.

I have a ready response, which even as I formulate it, I know is only partly true. "My wave was to send a teaching lesson, letting him know it really doesn't pay to speed and be annoyed. See, fellow driver, your lesson is to slow down, and just pause behind me. It got you nowhere faster." But I also know that my wave was really sticking it to him, giving him a finger, saying you were a jerk. I knew that would get a rise out of him, and I could just drive off a winner.

There is still silence in the car. But my mind continues to whirl. I know that I had to face the fact that, in that moment, there was part of me that was inflicting intentional suffering on him. And I was doing it for no reason other than to relieve my own annoyance, and create the ending to the story that I wanted: with me as victor.

I look in the rear view mirror again and see the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet have their eyes closed. They are holding hands and smiling.

I wake up. It's hard to believe I was dreaming. The dream is so logical, so detailed, with such coherent dialogue it almost doesn't seem like a dream. As I rub my eyes I realize I once again I have to thank the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. Even in my dreams, they are teachers, asking, inviting me to pay attention to each action. Without them in the car, I would have just driven on, content in my victory, and learned nothing. I was again reminded of Dr. Lisbet's saying how if you pay careful attention to your day, (and now night—in dreams) you will see how subtle the emotions and thoughts are that are constantly going through you and that a person is only as safe to be around as their willingness to reflect on themselves, and to work on removing the dust.

I do a brief repeat of my nightly prayer of forgiveness. Even though it was only a dream of my own mind's creation, I ask the other driver's forgiveness for my actions toward him, and any hurt I caused him by my thought, word, or deed. I forgive him, and I forgive myself for the hurt caused, intentionally, or unintentionally, by thought, word, or deed.

It is easy to do, for, after all, as Dr. Lisbet said, we are all parts of the dream.

And this time the lesson from them came without any charge!

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As I take a final calming breath before beginning to walk down the hill, I see the indistinct glow of the lights below. In every synagogue here, and all over the world, people are dancing, celebrating, carrying the Torah in joy. I feel the happiness of all the dancing going on tonight, but I know that I am being drawn to one particular light. There I will dance with my friends. Once

more before saying a conscious good-bye and thanks to each of them. A good-bye that I know is just a beginning, for they will always be in my heart and mind and soul guiding me.

I think of the last time I danced--at the Fillmore, feeling so self-conscious and awkward Who'd have thought that that dance, with Johannes' attraction to Mery's flesh, would lead led to Elizabeth Mery giving birth to John, albeit painfully, and his/our search for the world of the spirit. Without meeting her, I wouldn't have even considered the idea of coming to Israel. Then, though my grandmother Nana hated the idea, and resisted, it was her guidance that led me to Lieutenant Judke, who found place for me on a kibbutz on the Sea of Galilee. Now, I'm back in the Galilee hills, in air. And all that came before is linked to a dance at Safed on Simchat Torah.

Was that just a series of "coincidences"? Or was there some "divine counsel?"

I remember my psychology professor talking about the trick of mental revisionism. We look back at our lives and try to make connections so that our fate seem inevitable, not the random chance of life. We want to believe there is meaning and coherence. We look at the stars and make a big dipper and little dipper. We use the two outermost stars in the bowl of the Big Dipper to find Polaris, the North Star, which also marks the tip of the handle of the Little Dipper. Is that something God created and we uncover a pattern? Or are the stars random, and we discover and create a pattern? Has my story unfolded in an organic design even if I couldn't realize it at the time? And what about the future? You just never know what the future will bring, how and if you are being guided even as you take step after step

\* \* \*

When I think of past, present and future, Kierkegaard, Zeke, and the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet enter my mind. I think of Zeke at Pebble Beach telling me that

in the golf swing you need to move backward to gain the momentum to go forward.  
And Kierkegaard saying that life is lived forward but understood backward.

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet told me they admired how I was willing to go through my past to recognize my dust and mistakes, and not minimize or deny them. I was willing to feel a range of emotions.... anger, rage, helplessness, sadness, guilt, shame, regret. Then the task was not to feel overwhelmed by these emotions, but see what could be learned to help clean the dust and learn more skillful habits for the future. Something Dr. Lisbet said at the time was so powerful I wrote it down:

You must also realize that you are not bound by your fears, your failures, or your past. Once you recognize and learn from the past, once you can offer a healing forgiveness, you set the foundation to nourish your hopes, your vision for the future. You are a person of strength and courage with the power to change the past and create the future.

I remember my psychology professor discussing the Greek term *metanoia*, "changing one's mind," which was used by the American psychologist William James to describe a process of fundamental change in an individual's personality. The process was a form of the psyche healing itself of unbearable conflict by being broken down and then being reborn in a more adaptive, positive way.

Zeke, Kierkegaard, the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, William James, the Greeks.  
So many tributaries are helping guide me to a similar stream of wisdom.

\* \* \*

I know there still may be unlearned lessons that will haunt me, creating samsara, until I "get it." How do I know if and when I can trust? There is no 100% assurance, is there? I couldn't completely trust my parents. I don't even know if I can trust my own feelings. I know I, and I believe all people, have dust. But without trust, aren't I always fearfully hiding from life?

There is no faith without doubt. Thank you, once again, Paul Tillich. So, with faith and doubt, I go forth committing myself to continue to see my dust,

and to being honestly and authentically open to and not hiding from all that life can bring.

\* \* \*

I remember my creative writing professor telling us that some journeys are about the destination, some about the quest and the questions. Is mine about both? I haven't finished living this story. In fact, I've just begun to write it.

\* \* \*

At one level, this journey began with Johannes, eighteen months ago, at Passover, in which he was trapped in the narrow places of his closed, enslaved soul. Now I have seen a promised land of potential, though I don't feel I, like Moses, have entered it. But I know it exists; can exist. So, as one journey, one cycle, one evolution and revolution ends, another begins. John in the wilderness helped point the way. Now, I, Jacob, in climbing the ladder, have wrestled so many messenger angels to become my higher self. I still have a long way to go to reach my potential, but I'm still young and life is lived in living.

:At last yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all in the same place, here at Reb Luria's grave. Would Akishige say I'm resting for the moment in the "eternal now"?

Over the crest is the next stage. It seems in life, each of us has to go over crests where we can't see the other side. Like Grandma in death. The final crest of the physical plane, for all of us on the near side of crest, off the page, is the unknown, where we project our hopes, fears, and desires. As Jacques said about death, "High interest, low information."

But even before death there are many unknown stages. The unknown. The abyss. Is the leap into the abyss, through the abyss, or across the abyss? Or going down my two self-created tracks, is it straddling the abyss? Is the leap life affirming, death defying, or death embracing? What I can say is

that I have committed to consciously embracing life, and to not retreat from the abyss. I now understand the abyss as leading to the future, a chance of renewal, to go forward. I am willing, to the best of my ability, to engage and wrestle with what life offers, including death, including love.

God told Moses to take the first step into the water, and trust that everything would be well, and lo and behold, the waters parted. It is time for me to take that first step down the mountain and trust that the "tracks" I've created will carry me forward, to trust, as Moses, that the waters will part, and/or that I can swim. Even though I may not be able to touch the bottom, I can keep myself afloat. What other choice is there, really? Existentially, to act as if it is going to work out. As Deuteronomy commands, to "Choose life."

\* \* \*

In tennis, when you serve, you have control. But when the ball is returned, you don't know exactly where it will be hit, and you have to improvise. It seems in life, sometimes you can plan, sometimes life unfolds organically in its own directions, sometimes you have to adapt to what life brings--what is sent your way. Can I create from these permutations of control a dance, like tai chi?

I want to believe in the best, not the worst, in human nature. I want to be like the humanistic psychologists, not the Freudians. I like the idea of the pure soul, not original sin. I wonder if this isn't similar to my wanting to believe in a benevolent universe, not an indifferent one. Perhaps this is where I need a tolerance for ambiguity, as well as an understanding of the lessons of Akishige's three stanza poem representing of simple, complex, simple wisdom.

As Prem Devi would say, simple wisdom is to bow with a Namaste, looking for the god and goddess-like aspects of every person, to try to see all people as the face of God, our Buddha nature.

But I know the simple wisdom of pure souls always acting with awareness and compassion is not the whole story. It is more complex than that. I want to

believe in a pure soul, but I also see dust. I know I have dust, and I know others do too, and this makes both me and others not completely trustworthy. There still are unlearned lessons within me, that will haunt me, creating samsara, until I "get it." Until we are all dust free--and is that even possible?--how can I completely trust others, or even myself, as Dr. Lisbet shared with me? There is no 100% assurance, is there? I couldn't completely trust my parents. I don't even know if I can trust my own feelings. I know I, and I believe all people, have dust and commit unskillful thoughts, feelings and actions. So who is totally trustworthy? But without trust, aren't I always fearfully hiding from life?

My sense is complex wisdom involves needing to be vigilant to notice and try to clean our dust, polish our mirrors. We must also protect ourselves from the dust of others, as in the ward-off gestures of the tai chi form, Fair Lady Works the Shuttle, ready for whatever comes on four different sides--dealing with the dust of others.

What is simple wisdom on the other side? Perhaps it means both/and. See the best in myself and others. When I see dust, to be kind and non-judgmental and compassionate toward it, to "Embrace the Tiger, Return to Mountain." See the dust, work on polishing the dust and continuing to improve, and all the while gently carrying oneself toward the holy mountain.

I think of my father. What Dad didn't offer was an example of a physically and emotionally trustworthy person. You never knew whether his stories were true, or fantasy. And he told them so many times, it's unclear whether he even knew. You never knew when his emotions would explode.

If I make it through this struggle, if I ever find someone who can love me, if I ever have children, --ifs that from my current situation seem so improbable---that will be what I want as my gift to them. I will strive to know myself so well, and have such emotional and physical control, that they will find me trustworthy. And I will try as hard as I can to ferret out my

deficiencies, my weaknesses, my blind spots. Then I will ask their forgiveness for those that I was unable to see...and ask them to grow beyond my wisdom and compassion with their children, my grandchildren.

\* \* \*

Simple. Complex. Simple.

There is no faith without doubt. Thank you, once again, Paul Tillich. So, with faith and doubt, I go forth committing myself to not hiding from my dust, to being honestly and authentically as open as I can to self-discovery and non-defensive self-reflection. I vow to work on cleaning the dust from my mirror, to allowing the universe to be a teacher of my soul. I will try, wherever I am, to be "the soul of the place." And to see the best in others. Thank you Rumi, Thank you, Kaballah.

I can imagine Prem Devi, Akishige, and Lin Zshao giving a Namaste/gassho bow to each other, followed by a tai chi bow with closed fist, covered by open palm.

\* \* \*

I remember Jacques saying that life is tumultuous - an endless losing and regaining of balance, a continuous struggle, never an assured victory. Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account.

As a young child, I remember being in bed, afraid, when my parents were going to leave me after reading a night time story. I told them there might be



monsters under my bed or in the closet. They would wrap me in an "imaginary" magic blanket that they said would keep me safe from all monsters. And it did. I imagine that magic blanket around me now. God? My parents? I feel myself truly held by a loving mom and dad. I feel the unconditional love of my blue eyed grandmother and my grandfather Dave with his off-kilter meshugenah smile also hugging me. The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet's caring. The Sangha's embrace. Joie's love.

I remember my creative writing Professor saying that some journeys are about the destination, some about the quest and the questions. Is mine about both? I haven't finished writing this story. In fact, I've just begun to write it. ..

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We dance in what seems like a circle. But I believe it can be more. As Akishige said about the Zen tea ceremony--the same event and form done just the same way, but we change and evolve. We don't have to come back to the same samsaric place, but can rise and little higher in our evolution. I think there is the opportunity each time we circle, to climb a little higher on the ladder, like a spiral, an evolution, a revolution.

I remember seeing Israel from the plane, and having such hope. I know that for me the world always looks better when I'm further from it. I smile thinking about the bubble gum I stepped in at the airport. I need to be careful not to crumble the first time my foot trips on the way down, or I step in an unexpected pile of dog shit. I remember awakening a few nights ago, and going to the bathroom, where I found Joie pulling off her glasses while reading on the toilet, going poo. The first time I'd seen her in glasses. And taking a shit. I need to remember the words of Lin Zscho, the Tao is everywhere, even in excrement.

Ten thousand joys. Ten thousand sorrows. Ten thousand Joies?

\* \* \*

Until I was thirteen, safe in my castle, surrounded by my loving parents, I believed in unlimited possibilities. I was told by mom, and believed her, that I could be whatever I wanted. In sports, coached by dad, I felt I could always keep myself together under pressure, and through practice I would always be able to get the best out of my game. I may not have had the most talent, but I tried really hard, I was willing to learn from my mistakes and I always strived to improve. I thought this effort guaranteed success.

Then yes, I faced some challenges, and all was not well. The castle vanished. I learned that I had a violent, abusive father, and a suicidal depressive mother. With the loss of my blue-eyed grandmother, I learned that death exists; and that I had lots of personal "dust" that kept me from being a loving, wise, compassionate person. I was relationally challenged.

But I faced it these limitations, and learned. Perhaps that is the goal, face all of what life throws our way, keep working on mental and emotional training. I know from my weight training days that you can't strengthen a muscle without fatigue, and to fatigue it, you need to really push it, challenge it beyond what's comfortable. Perhaps the same mentality is needed in life as well - that is, we don't really change until those moments when we are forced, or force ourselves beyond what we thought were our limits, and that's when we grow the most.

Maybe, as with the pressure on a lump of coal or the irritation of a grain of sand in an oyster and the grain of sand, something good and ennobling can come from all my thoughts and confusions, my yearning, pain, anger and sadness. I've had to do a great deal of homework to evolve to where I am. Do I have a long way to go? Sure. But I still want to believe, as I did when I was a boy, that is possible. That I have become a better person than I might

otherwise have been without my life's challenges. As Dad said, "Hit it to him again."

As I feel this confidence, and realize I have made progress, however imperfectly, I recognize a part of me wants to optimistically encourage other people to clean their dust, and strive to improve who they are and clean their dust. Yet, even as I write that, I also see a flashing warning sign. The danger is ego. Look at how much progress I have made. And if I can do it, why can't others? I notice a harsh judging of those who say it's too hard to change, I'm not willing to make the effort required. It's not worth it. Those attitudes seem lazy and self-defeating. Perhaps that's true. But it's also true that a condescending and self-righteous attitude is not their problem, but mine.

The world, indeed, can be a university for the soul. There is still much to learn, many ways to grow, to evolve, to aspire toward: "Wherever you are, be the soul of the place."

I realize that even with all I've gone through this past decade, there is a part of me that still has the confidence of that thirteen year old boy.

World, here I come.

\* \* \*

Down below is the succah. We are instructed on the final day of Succot, Simchat Torah, to "be happy and dance." That instruction comes after dwelling in the flimsy sukkot structure as a way to empathize and understand the plight of people unfortunate enough to have no permanent dwelling place. I still have not yet resolved how we can both have empathy for those who are homeless, who live lives of anguish, to witness the pain of another and at the same time still feel happiness. When I'm joyful, I seem to forget that others are ill, miserable, starving, dying. I don't want to ignore or minimize their struggles, yet how can you wholeheartedly enjoy life when at each moment someone else is hurting?

I supposed I can take some solace I that I'm now not just focused on my suffering, but at least having empathy for others' suffering. Though I still bring it back to me, now asking how can I be happy if other's are suffering. Progress?

\* \* \*

Is there a wise way to address suffering? Certainly one valuable insight is not to spend too much time worrying and suffering over future "what might happen" events, especially if this worry removes current joy in the present. This is what Akishige called "unnecessary suffering." I remember that Reverend Noel, in response, cited Matthew 6:34: "Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."

I wish the Rebbe were here. He might have said that worry is embedded in the Jewish soul, the cosmic "Oy vey!" "We Jews worry about everything without taking the time to identify what is important and what isn't," he once told our class I think of my sweet Nana, constantly scanning for dangers. "Jews worry for a living; history compels them to be always vigilant. Even in good times, when there is a level of security, acceptance, and power unparalleled in history--like in America today--they worry they might lose it."

But what about present suffering. Mine and others? And inevitable future real loss?

\* \* \*

Looking back, from this Safed vantage point, when I think of my suffering, no matter how much angst and pain I felt, it was really quite mild compared to others. I think of Victor Frankl in the concentration camps. He believed that even in the most dehumanized situation, life has potential meaning. Facing inconceivable misery and anguish, he thought of his wife and the truth that love is the ultimate and highest goal to which we can aspire. Contemplating his beloved, he experienced courage, even happiness that helped him endure his excruciating circumstances.

Frankl's ability to find meaning and the will to live even in Auschwitz challenges me to toughen up, to not allow myself to be so overwhelmed by the relatively inconsequential first world problems I'm facing.

The above is true, yes. Yet even those immersed in the privilege of the first world must face death. Is that really so inconsequential? Perhaps death is easier for them than for those in poorer conditions because of the level of care they can access, but nothing shields any of us from our demise.

How do we find joy in life knowing the inevitability of Buddha's messengers. As Jacques, put it, we don't know about life after death, but what about life before death." How do we live a meaningful, authentic life knowing of inevitable suffering. He said that "Death can make us ask the question, how do I want to live."

Is the question, really, on balance, whether the suffering of life is outweighed by the joy? Or maybe that's not even the right frame. Maybe the question is, as Akishige shared, whether we can find a way to see joy and suffering not as in a battle, a tournament, but as phenomena we can view from a calm, soft, witnessing mind that creates a spacious context and seeing independent of both and from which life emerges. From this calm centered place perhaps we can learn to see life for what it truly is, encompassing both its joys and sorrows?

I'm reminded of the poem mom gave me at 16 by Kipling: "If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those impostors just the same"

\* \* \*

I think of Akishige sharing Buddha's wisdom of life as ten thousand joys, ten thousand sorrows. Do the numbers even matter? What if the joys and sorrows in life weren't equal? Would we be happier if it were a ten thousand joys and 9999 sorrows; or 9999 joys and ten thousand sorrows? I sometimes feel as if a single sorrow contaminates all joys. Yet at other times, one joy can bury all sorrows. Does that make any sense? And doesn't any joy eventually end

in sorrow and loss? I think of Grandpa and Grandma. This too must pass. Buddha's messengers--aging, illness, death-- always win in the end. Other than aspirationally, how can I face that honestly and consciously and directly, and then still sing "How happy we are in the house of the Lord"?

A path between the Scylla and Charybdis where you can see suffering, in yourself, in others, and work to help address it, but not be so caught up in a singular focus on all that is wrong, all the dust, all the pain, that you lose sight of any joy and happiness? A path that avoids objectifying those who suffer to such an extent that you live without concern and compassion? Is it a balancing on a tight wire? A soft mind watching all, feeling and tasting all, not hiding, and yet not being overwhelmed?

Sometimes life can seem like a battle, and it seems every moment requires fighting or at least forming battle plans. No one can live like this all the time. That's why it's so important to take an "oasis" day, like Shabbat. An Oasis moment, like the Ashrei. To stop and appreciate the first buds of spring, glorious. A feeling of hope, renewal, joy; and in the fall, color of the leaves, like the maple tree at Stanford, the oak trees outside my Kansas City home.

And during non-Oasis times, or it's just difficult to keep suffering at bay? Dr. Lisbet was helpful to me in trying to share how I could connect my own suffering to others. She told me that "If your primary goal is to avoid pain, then being human isn't the best way to attain it; anytime you care about something you've set yourself to get hurt." She then quoted Nietzsche "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in the suffering." She continued by sharing that one way is to use the suffering to be sensitive to the suffering of others. "Remember the Tibetan Buddhist practice of Tonglen, that we discussed. Take your suffering as a way to breathe out compassion for others that are suffering." Certainly I have seen in my own life how suffering

and adversity can be an impetus for learning, hopefully making me a better person, more compassionate, more empathic.

\* \* \*

When I reach our sukkah, I will raise my hands high over my head and dance with total joy and love. With Joie. I see her sparkling eyes. I hear her singing Kol Hanishema. "She's touched your perfect body with her mind...." And her heart and her soul. She is my bridge over troubled waters, part of my dance, as I am part of hers But dancing and embracing life while not hiding anything, or from anything. I am no longer in the first stanza. It's not clear that I've really completely gone through the second, even though I've seen glimpses of the third stanza.

Where will our dance lead? I don't know. Is it the last dance? Shalom as good-bye? Is it the first dance of a new chapter? Shalom as hello?

I take a deep breath, hearing and feeling all the angels around and within me. What I do know is this is a story I want to tell. I have a beginning. So now I can conclude with an ending, which, at the same time it circles back to the beginning, also involves my going forward into an unknown future. Yielding to the roller coaster's gravitational pull, riding the newly created tracks, I feel myself going over the summit. My hands raise. I let go and surrender . . . Wheeee. I feel the downward momentum into the unknown begin to quicken as I find myself starting to yell an expletive, "SHI--" Is it from fear of the future, elation, excitement, an oh my god, what's happening kind of exclamation?

Yet I also feel a strange calmness pervade me as one cycle ends and another one begins. I see an image of Joie and me walking toward the sunset. She puts her arm in mine, and we link, then our heads bend toward each other, touching. From behind, you see only one form, and you can't tell where one begins and the other ends. I imagine they are feeling like they are in the

house of God "BethEl". It is a beginning... it is an ending....it is a beginning....

Shalom as peace.

I look at the crossword puzzle, the alpha now replacing the omega, a complement to the previous draft. When he created that draft, John had just come from Bethlehem to Jerusalem on Christmas day. He was able to once more begin to write, and was looking at the crossword puzzle he'd been creating. It was Chanukah, the darkest night of the year. He hoped to point the way out of the darkness into greater light. For himself. For the world.

From the world of Johannes and the flesh to the world of the spirit.

He envisioned himself as a kind of John the Baptist, pointing the way to Jesus, birthed on Christmas, symbolized by what could be seen as a cross in the middle of his crossword puzzle, created by the horizontal and vertical "Bereshit"...in the beginning. . And yet John the Baptist was a Jew and Jesus was a Jew.

He also wanted to be a bridge-builder between traditions, the two he was becoming familiar with, Judaism and Christianity. In his daily morning prayer, he asked God to "Open the eyes of the blind." In some ways, his prayer was answered. His eyes were opened and he did grow into a deeper understanding of Judaism and Christianity.

But he also wasn't yet aware of the other traditions he would learn about, in Safed, or the sages he would meet. John didn't know anything about Ramakrishna, or Taoism, or Sufi masters, or Buddhist sages.

I think of Prem Devi sharing with us Ramakrishna's wise words, "May the Golden Face of the Beloved rise over the horizons of my limited perceptions." And a sharing of ways to integrate and harmonize the flesh and the spirit.

From my vantage point, filled with the multitudinous wisdom of all the traditions, I see the vertical and horizontal lines of the crossword puzzle not



as a cross but as a plus (+) sign. I know now there are many paths up the mountain, always more to learn.

John also didn't know about the possibility of the joy that comes from relationship with a beloved. But I do. Suspended between the lights of the stars above, and the lights of the city below, I recall a dream about Joie and me. We were dancing wildly, and we both knew each of us was going to have a stupendous orgasm. Life was happy and fulfilled and nothing could go wrong. Remembering the dream, I feel my lingham, my shaft of light, beginning to rise amidst the lights above and below. Mind and body, universe and earth connected. Eros as life force. Many lights in the darkness.

I remember from the Rebbe's letter "When the heart is ready, the beloved appears."

\* \* \*

Is my heart ready? How will I know?

It feels like a leap into the unknown, and I don't do well without structure.

I remember summers after school ended when I just a little kid. I liked the structure of school, and when the year ended I tried to come up with projects to fill the time. One thing I did was to take out one of Grandpa's legal pads and start to write numbers...trying to see how far I could get. Each day I'd write some more. My goal? I wondered if I could I make it to something one of my math teachers said, called "infinity."

I'd alternate that (fruitless, although of course I didn't know it at the time) pursuit with leafing each page of the dictionary. I'd turn the first page, seeing a big mountain of pages ahead, but didn't feel discouraged because I knew I could make it through by the end of the summer. I didn't read the words, just the numbers of the pages.

And indeed, when summer was over, I'd always finish turning the pages of the dictionary. I saw lots of words, but never learned any. Perhaps my new

structure would be to now go through a dictionary to learn every word on every page. Ok, good, some sense of humor is still intact. That will help on this next phase of the journey.

In those summers, I'd get my numbers into the tens of thousands, But of course, I never made it to infinity. This didn't bother me because I realized I would try again next summer. Mom and Dad both asked me about this ritual. When I told them I was trying to get to infinity, Mom said she admired my determination and consistency, but one night I heard her whisper to dad that she thought I might have something called "OCD" and wanted to make an appointment for me with her psychiatrist. Dad gave her a little hug, smiled, and said, "It's just a phase. He'll grow out of it. I actually admire his goal....trying to seek what he doesn't have and is always beyond his reach. Keeps him out of trouble."

And for Johannes, that seeking, that quest, became women. And after each one, turning the page to the next. But what he was seeking was beyond his reach. For John, as he wrote in his journal, the counting toward infinity, was really for a "spiritual longing to encounter the infinite."

And now?

I know the infinity symbol looks like a figure eight on its side



One theory is that the symbol comes from the lower case omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet. But rather than signifying an ending, it is an endless curve. Beginnings and endings intertwined? Limitlessness? Eternity? Is that two people connected? Eternal love?

Now I am still seeking. Both the infinite outside and the infinite inside. Alone? With a beloved?

I remember once sitting in my room at the end of summer camp. I'd packed up all my stuff and sent it home. There was nothing left in the cabin but memories in an empty room. If that were a short story, it would end there. The ending ends in emptiness.

But that is also the beginning of the next stage of the journey. Then...

\* \* \*

...and now.

The next stage of the journey continues...toward the Promised Land. And, at the same time, on Simchat Torah, we begin rereading the Torah, going back to Genesis. We once again dance. In our hearts. As a community. With a beloved. I think of a conversation I had with Joie about writing. She told me a word her grandmother told her: "b'kitzur", in short, as in to make a long story short.

I smile. Too late...

\* \* \*

I think once more of the poem she wrote when she was a child "Love is entwined with all of its kind."

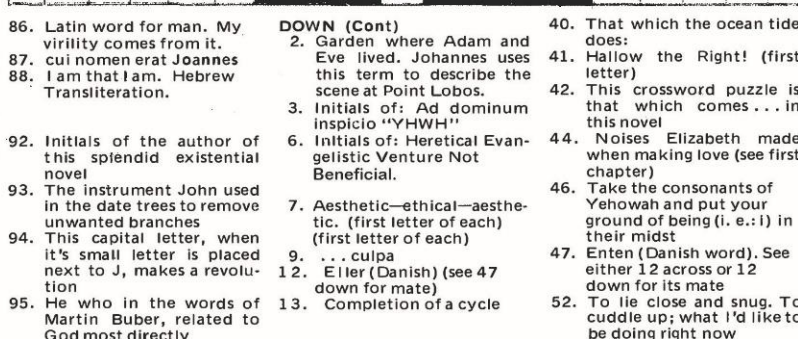
I pull out the cross word puzzle and look at it one final time.

It has served me well. But now this phase has come to an end. It's time to turn the crossword puzzle over...

...and let the new beginnings emerge...in my life...in my story, in my novel.

**ACROSS (Cont) 5.**

81. Singing: Third tone of musical scale



## DOWN (Cont)

- TRANSLITERATION

8 across. First word of the Bible, In the beginning, first four letters:

--	--	--	--