

*"The Collision of  
Selves"*

*Finding  
Meaning  
in the  
Second Half  
of Life*

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the larger world. These instruments of adaptation allowed survival, for which we are grateful, but their autonomy in our lives binds us to a disempowered past and the cycle of repetition. We are summoned to leave them behind and endure the anxiety that always accompanies transcending the predictable securities of the past.

No freedom is possible, no authentic choice, where consciousness is lacking. Paradoxically, consciousness usually only comes from the experience of suffering and the flight from suffering is why we often elect to remain in the constrictive yet familiar old shoes. But the psyche is never silent, and suffering is the first clue that something is soliciting our attention and seeking healing.

### Chapter Three

## *The Collision of Selves*

“He has a terrible fear of dying because he has not yet lived. . . . What is essential in life is only to forgo complacency, to move into the house instead of admiring it and hanging garlands around it. . . . But why do such nights leave one always with the refrain: I could live and I do not live?”

Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*

**D**ESPITE WHAT WE SAY TO OURSELVES about wanting to know who we really are, there is a very strong chance that we will steer clear of decisive meetings with ourselves for as long as possible. It is far easier to walk in shoes too small for us than to step into the largeness that the soul expects and demands. Can we really bear to know who we are, with all those contradictions, all those other energies and agendas that do not conform to our ego ideal of ourselves? No one I ever met began a serious, sustained therapeutic conversation simply in order to have a good chat with a stranger. They made the first call because the strategies that had worked, or that they'd fantasized worked, theretofore had clearly played out. Most of us are brought into

therapy on our knees, or at best in a state of disorientation. The old map, the presumptive guidelines, the clear points of reference are not, for whatever reason, working anymore. An exception to this generalization comes to mind. One young man, in his late twenties, decided early on to come to therapy in order that he might "know himself" more fully. In his initial dream he found himself allied with a nefarious, manipulative con man. Together they were conceiving and executing schemes to bilk others. While he consciously repudiated these values, I reminded him that his own dreammaker had brought this shadow partnership to his attention. Abruptly, he canceled all future sessions. His youthful ego had claimed to wish to "know" itself, in order that he might gain even greater control of others. While we all have such shadow dimensions to our personality, how many of us are really willing to bring them to consciousness and accept responsibility for them in our relations with others? Yet why would we expect anything to improve in our lives if we do not?

A formal, committed therapeutic relationship provides a deeper, more objective, more informed conversation with oneself, through the engagement of another person who has our interests at heart. Many, however, fear the accountability that therapy asks, and seek their own path, or avoid getting on the path of self-discernment, and the damage to themselves or those around them continues. Either way, the invitation to meet oneself is seldom if ever solicited; it is rather brought on by outer or inner events that force one to question who one is, and in service to what values. A death in the family, the loss of a relationship, a termination at work, a serious illness, or an encounter with the 3 A.M. terrors, the so-called hour of the wolf—all or any may bring us to meet the stranger in the mirror for the first time.

What we initially see in the mirror is what we wish to see, the persona, not the instinctually grounded self. What we are seeing is

sometimes called the "provisional personality," the acquired behaviors, attitudes, and reflexive strategies through which we learned to manage the world the best we could. The provisional personality, an interwoven fabric of adaptations, may be far removed from the inherent Self, but, "for good or ill, it brought us this far," so we are afraid to let go of it now. However, life has a way of calling this provisional personality into question. For most of us, this fated encounter is a shocking and confusing appointment. One woman in her early sixties, whose husband was delayed by heavy traffic and torrential rains, experienced the first panic attack of her life, thought of selling the house, moving somewhere else of unknown location, and encountered her secret fears of abandonment in that two-hour period. She began to explore her dependencies and her secret terrors more honestly. A man, still on the career track, still invested in the notion that burdens most men, that their worth is a function of their performance, realized that he had topped out in his corporation, that there was no more "up" up there, and spiraled down into depression. Both had had an unexpected meeting with themselves, and found that their otherwise well-functioning lives were actually quite fragile, that their provisional personalities were gossamer floors over an abyss of doubt and dread. Still another man, struggling throughout his life to overcome the shame he felt he had inherited from his father's misdeeds, was driven to adopt an impossibly high moral and professional code. He never thought of it as a compensation for someone else's life, or a reactive burden that he had heroically carried, until he began to ask why his sons had grown alienated from him. Having sought to redeem his own life from the apparent "received shame," he rolled over the same impossible set of expectations onto his children and drove them away. All of these good souls were living as strangers to themselves, colluding with the power of early wounding and remaining captive to adaptive strategies.

Whoever has not discovered this truth about the fragility of our journey, and the pervasive power of our necessary adaptations to this vulnerability, is living in a form of self-delusion that psyche, fate, or the consequences of our acts will sooner or later bring to the surface. What we do then will make all the difference in the rewriting of history. None of us is pleased to encounter the false self, the necessary fictions in which we invest, until even we can no longer believe them. Naturally, we will avoid these unpleasant truths as long as possible, and will enter a deepened dialogue with ourselves only when exhaustion or failure or disorientation is no longer deniable. But our long-delayed appointments with the soul are meant to be taken seriously, and treasured, for the level of consciousness we bring to such moments will make all the difference for the rest of our lives—for ourselves and for our loved ones.

As we noted in the last chapter, we inevitably take provisional readings of whatever world fate first brings to us. Inevitably, we misread the world, overpersonalize it, and fall into the fallacy of overgeneralization. This “misreading” is of course based on the child’s or youth’s limited range of experience, constricted imaginative alternatives, and limited capacity for experimentation outside the range of the family or tribal sphere. This is how a child may be scarred by poverty, drug abuse, social discrimination, and so on—all forces that have nothing to do with the inherent potential of that soul, and have everything to do with fate, social inequities, and the thin membrane that separates our soul from the world around us. Even though we might later come to recognize that these influences had nothing to do with us, nothing to do with the infinite, precious soul that lies within us, the damage is done and we are invested in the mythologically charged value system called the provisional personality with all of its misreadings of self and world.

And all of us suffer from such fallacies of overgeneralization.

Certain core experiences quickly become precepts, attitudes, readings of self and world, and through repetition and reinforcement are, over time, “institutionalized” within and begin to govern how we reflexively function in the world. The key word there is *reflexive*. Perhaps 95 percent of our daily functioning is reflexive. External stimuli, or internal promptings, activate those old “readings” of the world and we respond in familiar ways. How else do patterns occur? None of us rises saying, “Today? Why, today I think I will repeat the same dumb things I did in the past.” But that is precisely what we do because so much is on automatic pilot, giving credence to the old saw that we are our own worst enemies.

Again, the wisdom of Greek tragedy cannot be overemphasized. All of them dramatize this universal confession: “I created my life; I made these choices; and, stunningly, this flood of unimagined consequences are the fruits of my choices.” From such humbling recognition comes wisdom at last. Mary, the mother in Eugene O’Neill’s autobiographical play *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, puts it this way:

*None of us can help the things life has done to us. They’re done before you realize it. And once they’re done, they make you do other things until at last everything comes between you and what you’d like to be, and you’ve lost your true self forever.\**

Mary is voicing the regret of many who come to face the world they have unwittingly created through the power of these unconscious forces at work. Sadly, it is sometimes only at the end of life that these fruits of unconscious choice come home to us. One of the most telling examples is found in Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century

\*O’Neill, *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Complete Plays, p. 212.

novella "The Death of Ivan Ilych," whose name might loosely be equivalent to the English John Johnson, or Everyman. Ivan lives strictly by the codes of his day; he has learned to adapt to the world's values rather than find his own. He expects thereby that life will continue to flow evenly and pleasantly. Then he is stricken with a terminal disease. He goes through the familiar sequence of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance, but not without being obliged to question the meaning of his whole life. Only in those last days, in the midst of humbling suffering and regret, does he come to live his life as a conscious, self-examining being. Though he is dying, such a turn to living with large questions, large perplexities, is what saves him by bringing him a more meaningful encounter with the mystery of his life. It would seem that creating our life is nearly impossible without coming to some kind of consciousness about these matters. Yet few if any of us really come willingly to that which is humbling. We are usually dragged there, along with our brother Ivan.

A mystery so profound that none of us really seems to grasp it until it has indisputably grasped us, is that some force transcendent to ordinary consciousness is at work within us to bring about our ego's overthrow. No, it is not some malevolent demon, though we often project our search for such a slippery spirit on our partner or our employer or even on our children. That force, paradoxically, is the *Self*, the architect of wholeness, which operates from a perspective larger than conventional consciousness. How could the ego ever come to understand, let alone accept, that its overthrow is engineered from within, by that transpersonal wisdom that has our being's interests at heart even in our darkest moments? This idea of beneficent overthrow is preposterous to the ego, for overthrow embodies the greatest threat to it, through the loss of sovereignty and the summons to live an agenda much larger and more de-

manding than the agenda of childhood adaptation and survival. No wonder the biblical admonition "Unless ye die, ye shall not live" strikes terror in every conscious being, yet offers a larger path.

These two force fields of conscious life, with its attendant repetitive stratagems, and the natural inclinations of the Self, with its goal of wholeness, compete with each other within each of us. The ego wishes comfort, security, satiety; the soul demands meaning, struggle, becoming. The contention of these two voices sometimes tears us apart. Ordinary ego consciousness is crucified by these polarities. Again, the paradox emerges that in our suffering, in our symptoms, are profound clues as to the meaning of the struggle, yet the path of healing is very difficult for the apprehensive ego to accept, for the ego will be asked to be open to something larger than itself.

Accordingly, stronger souls seek therapy; the more damaged seek someone to blame. Allen, a man with a marital gun at his head, snickered at a box of tissues in my office, so threatened was he by the possibility of his own unshed tears. His prognosis was not good, obviously, because he was so separated from his emotional life. The truth is, I could sympathize greatly with a person who felt so deeply that he had to scorn feeling, but sooner or later we have to be willing to face our lives. He had come to complain about his wife, not look at himself. As a result, he shortly terminated therapy and aborted his chance to have a real conversation with himself. If we shun this conversation, we will likely not be able to have a conversation in any depth with anyone else.

Another woman, in her forties, whose husband died suddenly, asked me the question, who would take care of her now. I said to her, gently, that *she* would take care of her, that unwanted as this traumatic loss was, she was at the beginning of her real journey. She got up and walked out. I presume she looked long enough to find

someone to take care of her. Another woman, grieving the loss of her marriage, asked the same question. I replied that it was her marriage she'd lost, not her life. She got it, began work on herself, and thereafter entered the most soul-satisfying time of her life. These are not made-up examples; these are real people who were hurting, who naturally wished protection, perhaps the arrival of the good parent surrogate, or some magic, but who had to face the truth that the real work required was a deepened conversation with their journeys. Some will accept the conversation, and some will not, and some will come back years later when they are strong enough to ask large questions and dare to live larger lives.

### *Depression's Therapeutic Gift*

What are the symptoms that help us identify that we are undergoing this kind of summons? Arguably the most common, and perhaps most telling, symptom is depression. There are many kinds of depression. There is *biologically based depression*, which typically slides in and out of family histories. Almost all studies indicate that this kind of depression may best be treated with antidepressant medication, especially when combined with some form of short-term therapy. And there is *reactive depression*, which is appropriate to a significant loss in our lives and tends to vary in intensity in proportion to the amount of energy we invested in who or what was lost. The child going off to college, the end of a relationship, downsizing at work or retirement—all can occasion a reactive depression, as the psychic energy that was once invested externally loses its object or container and reverts to the personal psyche. Only when this sort of depression lasts for too long a time (more than a few weeks or months) or substantially interferes with the person's capacity to function in daily life does it become pathologi-

cal. Grieving is an honest affirmation of the value of the original investment of energy. No grief, no true investment occurred.

But even with reactive depression in grief there is always a task that awaits us, namely the invitation, indeed the necessity, to examine where we may have been overinvested in the lost other, where it was carrying too much for us. When that energy returns to us, it is ours to carry, and ours to invest in ways that serve the developmental agenda our souls always wish from us. When our relationship leaves us, we may grieve its loss, and yet we are responsible for whatever aspects of our personality that relationship was asked to carry. For example, when our child leaves—the famous empty nest syndrome—we need to say: "Job well done." Children are supposed to leave; if they didn't, it would mean you had failed to empower them, ask enough of them to develop the wherewithal to conduct their lives without you. We may miss them, but if we cling to them we are not loving them; we are revealing our own dependencies. To love them is to empower them to live without us, as surely they will be obliged to in any case.

To grieve the loss of an intimate relationship is to celebrate what was received as a gift, but it may also raise the question of what we were asking of the other person that we need to do for ourselves. If we were, like Jack Spratt and his spouse, expecting the other person to carry a part of reality that we find onerous or difficult, then whose job is that, really? Even though together a couple may have licked the platter clean, each partner will be in a difficult place if they do not learn to cover the broader range of life's tasks themselves. Even amid the grieving, a reactive depression is always going to bring home to us an agenda for growing up. It takes a great deal of psychological honesty to be able to look directly at our sorrow and take responsibility for what personal task has now emerged.

But the sort of depression we most commonly think of when we

use the word *depression* is not that generated by our biochemistry, or the reactive withdrawal of energy in the face of outer loss, it is a phenomenon of intrapsychic dynamics that has huge therapeutic significance. (Actually, this garden variety of depression is today called *dysthymic disorder* in the psychiatric manuals, namely, an absence of or disturbance of strong affect for the conduct of one's life.) This form of depression is a manifestation of the autonomy of the psyche. The ego, the conscious sense of who we are, wishes to invest energy in a certain direction, perhaps in service to economic goals, but the soul has another agenda. It autonomously withdraws the invested energy, inverts it, and as it withdraws into the psyche it often pulls the ego in after it. We have each experienced this kind of depression from time to time, for there is a certain ebb and flow of energy that is common to us all. Indeed, a close cousin to this form of depression is boredom, or ennui, which means that the object or the goal that has carried our projections of psychological energy thus far no longer sustains the agenda of the soul. Even what may have been a good choice at one point has now been served, the task exhausted, and the psyche demands renewal, or greater balance, through investment in other values.

Invariably these experiences of loss will feel like defeats for the sovereignty of the ego. Wise is the ego, strong is the ego, that can stop reinforcing the old investments and ask, "What is going on here, why does the psyche not cooperate; what might its desire be?" Many people in therapy have learned that the way out of a depression is *through* it, asking not what I, the ego consciousness, want, but what the soul wants. Only the reorienting of conscious energies in service to other values will lift the depression.

In the course of our developing lives, we are all in service to certain norms, certain expectations—ours, those of our family, and

those of our culture—and moreover, we are obliged to choose every day, this but not that, and can never realistically meet the full range of the soul's desires. For these reasons, our choices are necessarily biased by our own security needs, insufficient permission to live our own life, constricted imaginative alternatives, and the limited options actually available at any given moment in our history. This biasing, this partiality, this limitation is frequently, and unintentionally, wounding to the soul. I think of a woman who, the child of two psychiatrists, grew up to be a psychiatrist in order to win their approval, neglecting the fact that her soul had another plan. Her true talent and calling was found in the arts, and while she was a caring and competent psychiatrist, her midlife depression deepened with each passing year. One might say that with each year her soul was further exiled from her constructed world, her depression grew as a sign of the psyche's protest. She was living in constrictive service to parental complexes, as we mostly do, and not in service to the larger summons of her talent. Why would she not be depressed? She was very good at dispensing medication to others who suffered biochemical depressions, but was so close to her own problem that she could not recognize intrapsychic depression when she saw it.

Sometimes these depressions take us over and leave us prostrate. At the bottom of this well, and there is always a bottom, there is a clear task and a summons. The task is to ask what the psyche wants, not what the parents want, not what the parent complexes want, not what the culture wants, not what the ego wants. The summons is to respond from the depth of one's being and risk giving the soul what it always wants—a larger journey.

Most of us did not receive permission to take our journeys so seriously. Seldom if ever can we go back and obtain that permission.

We have to seize it today from the depths of despair and doubt. When we do, the depression lifts. All of us, even while functioning at a high level, will carry pockets of depression, for parts of our psychological nature will have been thwarted, remain unfed, unacknowledged, unloved. All of those pockets will, of course, be part of our ongoing agenda, for they will come to the surface in different ways at different times, as various dimensions of outer or inner reality activate them. Each encounter offers the possibility of healing and growth, as we make conscious what has been left behind, repressed, or given no investment of energy.

Even when we bring these pockets of depression to consciousness, so often the way forward is fraught with anxiety as it takes us into new territory, asks more of us than ever before, and causes us to grow up by demanding full responsibility for how our lives turn out. But, as we noted earlier, this anxiety must be chosen over depression, for it is developmental, and depression is regressive. Anxiety is the price of the ticket to life; intrapsychic depression is the by-product of our refusal to climb aboard.

We can see hereby the huge therapeutic potential lying within depression. So often we experience depression as a dark herald with a grim countenance that tells us something in us is dying, has reached its end, is played out, and yet it really is announcing something new, something larger, something developmental that wishes greater play in our life. Clearly, a person, often with the help of a therapist, needs to differentiate the forms of depression; namely, does it come from a biological base, a reaction to loss, or an intrapsychic conflict that, becoming conscious, has great information for us about the next stage of our journey? Under every depression there is a still lower level waiting for us; it is the place in which we find the agenda of growth hiding. Rather than deny the pain, over-medicate, and flee the challenge of growth which it asks further of

us, we need to discover where our soul wants to go, long after the ego has exhausted its resources.

### *Relationship As Field of Fire*

Similarly, the field of intimate relationship almost always suffers disturbance when the psyche grows agitated. Intimate relationship is prized so highly by so many, and everywhere is broken and in disarray. Relationships have a tendency to disappoint because so much—too much—is asked of them. We seldom appreciate how much freight is imposed on us by our partner, or by us upon them. In the many agendas of our histories, the deep desire to heal old wounds, to repeat them, or to find the good parent in the other person rises to the top. Naturally, no one consciously sets out to find the parent in the partner, but the dynamics of those first, primal relationships are always present as we engage each other. Freud noted that when a couple goes to bed six people are present, for psychologically the couple brings along their parents as well. One might just as accurately consider fourteen present, for the parents' internalization of *their* parents, which came through to the couple in psychological transmission, are present as well. It gets rather crowded in such a small space, and quickly complicated. While more on the dynamics of interpersonal relationship will be discussed later, the field of outer relationship is always troubled when we are troubled within. Even if we can hold it together at work, who can do that the other hours of the day, every day? Intimate relationship offers the possibility of so much, and is therefore especially vulnerable to whatever is working unconsciously through us. What is not faced inwardly will play out in our external world: whatever burdens within will, sooner or later, burden without.

For relationships to survive this freight one needs luck, grace,



patience, and an enormous devotion to personal growth. The conflict and suffering that rises in relationship at midlife is an invitation to examine what agendas, dependencies, expectations, and sabotaging complexes are at work. Rather than accept this very onerous responsibility, it is much easier to blame our partners, or try to reform them, or leave them.

### *Projections Eroded, Projections Renewed?*

Similarly, we find in other symptomatic patterns—the onset of an affair, the nervous switching of external interests, the use of substitutes or overwork to anesthetize feelings, depression, turbulence in the relationship—that there is one common denominator: the erosion, if not the collapse, of projections. A projection rises from a neglected but dynamic value within us; usually it is essentially unconscious, but has a certain energy, which, when we have not attended it consciously, escapes repression and enters the world as a hope, a project, an agenda, a fantasy, or a renewal of expectation. No one rises in the morning and says, “I will make a projection today,” but we all do. What is unconscious, charged with meaning, has a certain dynamic autonomy, and is denied inwardly will appear in some guise in our external environment. Thus, we project our vision, or our parent’s vision, or our culture’s vision of the good life onto our jobs, our partners, our children, homes, and possessions, without knowing how much we are asking of them. We are counting on them to make us happy, bring us success, fulfillment, meaning, and perhaps even allow us to remain naive children a bit longer. Nothing external can carry such a burden of expectation for very long. The job for which we prepared and sacrificed proves demanding, repetitive, boring; our partner is cranky, controlling, fractious, limited, and mortal; our child is intent on becoming him- or

herself rather than making us feel better about ourselves by replicating and endorsing our values.

Our projections rise from issues, values, tasks we have not yet made conscious, so they spontaneously arise from the unconscious and enter the world in seductive ways. Thus, we jump from job to job, believing a promotion, a new title, a fresh start will do it; or the companion at the gym is suddenly surrounded by a celestial aura and magically promises the fulfillment of an archaic agenda while one’s actual partner proves flawed, limited, demanding; or the child within us, confused with this outer child we have borne, this *other* who has come into but is merely passing through our life, forces upon him or her the additional burden of being asked to carry our unlived lives, achieving what we could not, and continuing our narcissistic agenda for us.

Projections always pass through five identifiable stages. At the onset they feel magical; they literally alter our sense of reality and have a compelling power over us. This compelling power is understandable only later, if at all, as the power that some vital energy or value within our own unconscious has for us. So we are always, always, projecting some vital, meaningful aspect of ourselves upon the other, whether the “other” be career, partner, or child. In other words, we are seeing some unknown part of ourselves in the exterior world—no wonder it has such compelling power. (I have had people read my books and write me and say they want to become Jungian analysts, even though they have never undertaken a single hour of personal analysis, let alone sustained several years. This desire is understandable, for they are wanting a deeper relationship with the soul, but it is projected onto a particular job that has its virtues and its costs as does any other, and a very onerous training process. There are many other ways in which one can undertake a deepened dialogue with the soul, and with greater fidelity to the particulars of the individual psyche.)

After the luminescent power of a projection does its work upon us, the second stage begets disillusionment. The other does not carry through as expected. The other is not behaving or producing as we prefer. Then, thirdly, we begin to do whatever we can to reinforce the projection, to recover its pristine attraction. We redouble efforts at the job, seek further advancement. We start cajoling, hectoring, nagging, controlling, or withdrawing from our partner or child to bring them back into line with our projected expectations. Since this stratagem is doomed to defeat because the other is never the same as the content and agenda of our projection, this stage invariably leads to further conflict, confusion, alienation, and often wounding behaviors.

The fourth stage is to suffer the withdrawal of the projection. This stage almost never occurs voluntarily because we did not recognize that we were projecting in the first place. We withdraw the projection because we are forced to do so; the reality of the other simply will not conform sufficiently to our fantasy agenda. The discrepancy has become painfully evident, no longer deniable. The other is finally, and always, *another*, and not our intrapsychic content. (Often, this recognition occurs after the affair, after the job change, after the plastic surgery, or other precipitous choice.)

The fifth stage of a projection, if we reach that point at all, is to become conscious that a projection has occurred. This sounds easier than it usually proves to be. Usually, we will just renew the projections, for these agendas run deep and have a lot of energy attached to them. The erosion of a projection follows this predictable trajectory of discrepancy between the intent of the projection and the reality of the other, confusion or dissonance, disappointment or anger, renewed effort, and the experience of failure. In such moments we are invited always to become more conscious. If I grow depressed after having achieved, or failed to achieve, my goals,

what has the ego projected upon the world around me? Where does the soul wish me to go? If my partner disappoints me, can I look at my disappointment with myself and attend realistically to my own repair? Can I free my children from carrying the burden of my unlived life, as I wished to be freed by my parents?

Every failed projection is a quantum of energy, our energy, an agenda for growth or healing, and a task that has come back to us. Can we bear to take the step to own the projection, see that its agenda may not be realistic, may be infantile, may not have legitimacy when flushed out of hiding, and then redirect our lives more fully, more responsibly?

Talk is cheap. We seldom know ourselves well enough, are seldom strong enough, or conscious enough, to attend this task on a permanent basis. There are many places in the psyche of each of us that seek aggrandizement, healing, reinforcement, or even satisfaction of what Freud called "the repetition compulsion," the magnetic summons of an old wound in our lives that has so much energy, such a familiar script, and such a predictable outcome attached to it that we feel obliged to relive it or pass it on to our children. Thus we look for jobs that confirm our doubts about ourselves, partners who collude with our self-denigration, and so on—all in the face of reason and common sense—so great is the power of this split-off energy. Yet every projection is something important, something powerful *in us* that has come back to us. What will we do with it? Addressing the content and the issue raised by an eroded projection will initially feel defeating, but it is the chief way to become responsible for our issues and for addressing the possibility of a genuine change of course in life.

Being accountable for the content and issues embodied in our eroded projections is probably the chief service we can bring to our jobs, our partners, our children. As we lift the burden of our

unconscious traffic off the other, we free them to be whatever or whomever they are meant to be when we are not interfering with them. This principle of cleaning up our own backyard can as much apply to the conflicts between faiths, between nations, between social systems as it does to those between individuals. And just how many leaders of nations, ethnic groups, religious bodies are wise enough, brave enough, to take on the question of projection, common followers to personal accounting, and free the unknown but feared other from entanglement in their unconscious dynamics? How many wars are generated by the power of what we will not face in ourselves? And who among us is strong enough, or ethical enough, to say that we are our own problem?

### *Job's Abrogated Contract*

Twenty-six centuries ago, an unknown Hebrew poet took a story quite familiar in the ancient Near East and worked it into his own version, a version which challenged the orthodox understanding of his people. His struggle produced the archetypal drama we have come to know as the story of Job. Job is a good person, who, having done no harm to others, has a ton of grief fall upon his head. Naturally, he asks why, and how justice, as he perceives it, and the restoration of the old comforts, as he desires them, might be reclaimed. He is visited by so-called comforters who represent the orthodox tradition, which maintains that humans have a contract or covenant with God. If humans behave properly, God will bless them, they assert; since Job has been so severely visited by hardship, if there is a contract with the Divine, then it is only logical to conclude that Job has sorely erred, sorely sinned. When Job contests these accusations and proclaims his innocence, the comforters accuse him of either ignorance or dishonesty. Job even summons

God to be his chief witness that he has not done wrong, and therefore does not "deserve" such hardships. When God does appear to him, as a voice out of a metaphorical whirlwind, He tells Job that He does not have to answer to Job's idea of the agreement between them. It seems that the God of the universe will be bound by no contract, at least not one struck by humans. Job experiences a revelation, a transformation of perspective, and declares that his widely proclaimed piety was based on a hubristic assumption that his compliant behavior compelled God to treat him well. Job realizes that there is no deal, that such a deal is a presumption of the ego in service to its now familiar agenda, which promotes its own security, safety, and continuity.

Job moves from being a good little boy in the face of a stern but predictable deity, to a man who has been shaken to his core. He experiences a radical revisioning of self in the world, a crisis of assumptions that awaits all of us, in so many different venues. Each of us, from childhood on, engages in magical thinking similar to Job's, believing we can strike deals with the world and with the divinities. These "deals" are part of how we attempt to protect our vulnerable selves in an omnipotent and often inscrutable universe. (As a youth I believed that right conduct, right intention, and a lot of learning would bring control into one's life. But the psyche had other plans. Being so humbled by the psyche was the beginning of discerning the difference between knowledge and wisdom.) But such deals with the universe are our fantasy alone, and have little to no bearing on reality. Just as we try to live in smaller fictions in order to feel more secure, so our "deals" unwittingly diminish the world and those around us by seeking to contain and control their autonomy.

There are many modern versions of this presumptive contract we have with the universe. For some, the presumption begins in a compliant interaction with parents, and later their surrogates in

social institutions, who have explicitly imposed a code that promises reward when one behaves according to the rules. (Thus, we expect that the company for which we labor so diligently will not let us go when downsizing.) For others, it appears in the assumption that if one acts with goodwill, always, one will be met by goodwill, always. For others, the presumption takes form in the expectation that right practices, right spirituality, right diet, right analysis will spare one from cancer. Yet, sooner or later, life brings each of us not only disappointment, but something worse, a deep disillusionment regarding the “contract” that we tacitly presumed and served to the best of our ability. Who does not occasionally feel betrayed by the universe, though it is hard to identify a source of the “betrayal”? Who has not felt disoriented, when the plan which they presumed was in place, the map of reality, the directions on how to live, the expectations of productive outcomes—all seemed abrogated? As deep as the suffering may prove in our outer world, this other, spiritual suffering, this loss of one’s fundamental understanding of the world and how it works shakes the foundations of beliefs even more.

Periodically, all of us lose our understanding of the world, our means of coping, our plan for prevailing. Each of these nodules of regulation will be experienced as a crisis; it is a crisis of a belief system. Such a crisis is an existential wounding and a spiritual wounding as well. Not only do we suffer in the outer world, but we suffer in our very personal sense of meaning, and in our sense of relatedness to the mysteries of this world. The friendship we counted on, the protection we assumed would be there perpetually, the comfort that someone would pick us up and make it all right when we fell—a hundred, thousand permutations, all these presumptions are brought to earth. Robert Frost expressed our collective dismay at his turn of events in his sardonic couplet:

*Forgive, O Lord, my little joke on thee,  
And I'll forgive thy great big one on me.*

This betrayal by the other—by God, by our lover, by our friend, by the corporation—is a betrayal of our hope that the world might be manageable and predictable. As we grow older, we find repeated affronts to our sense of self, our capacity to control outcomes, and our presumptions of omnipotence. As the child once fantasized that its wishes governed the world, and the youth fantasized that heroism could manage to do it all, so the person in the second half of life is obliged to come to a more sober wisdom based on a humbled sense of personal limitations and the inscrutability of the world. How easy it is, then, for some to give up risking their lives in anything meaningful, or how easy it is to slip into cynicism and criticism of hope, or to numb out to avoid the pain of losing one more delusion.

Once again, out of the experience of suffering, an invitation is found. As our brother Job learned, our presumptive contracts are delusory efforts by the ego to be in control. We learn that life is much riskier, more powerful, more mysterious than we had ever thought possible. While we are rendered more uncomfortable by this discovery, it is a humbling that deepens spiritual possibility. The world is more magical, less predictable, more autonomous, less controllable, more varied, less simple, more infinite, less knowable, more wonderfully troubling than we could have imagined being able to tolerate when we were young.

### *Competing Agendas*

On his fabled journey home across the wine-dark sea, Odysseus had many obstacles to surmount. One was the Symplegades, the clashing

rocks that threatened to crush his fragile ship. We, too, are frequently caught between competing forces, opposing values, which we fear will sink our fragile souls. Even the elemental stages of life present us with competing agendas. We can see that the agenda of the first half of life is predominantly a social agenda framed as "How can I enter this world, separate from my parents, create relationships, career, social identity?" Or put another way: "What does the world ask of me, and what resources can I muster to meet its demands?" But in the second half of life, the worm turns, the agenda shifts to reframing our personal experience in the larger order of things, and the questions change. "What does the soul ask of me?" "What does it mean that I am here?" "Who am I apart from my roles, apart from my history?" These questions necessarily raise a different agenda, and oblige us to ask questions of meaning. If the agenda of the first half of life is *social*, meeting the demands and expectations our milieu asks of us, then the questions of the second half of life are *spiritual*, addressing the larger issue of meaning.

The psychology of the first half of life is driven by the *fantasy of acquisition*: gaining ego strength to deal with separation, separating from the overt domination of parents, acquiring a standing in the world, whether it be through property, relationship, or social function. But then the second half of life asks of us, and ultimately demands, *relinquishment*—relinquishment of identification with property, roles, status, provisional identities—and the embrace of other, inwardly confirmed values.

*About Schmidt*, the film starring Jack Nicholson, traces the plight of an Everyman who hits a wall when all the roles and people that supported his sense of self are removed. He is forcibly retired by his company, his wife dies, his daughter moves away, marries, and begins her separate life, and he is left utterly empty. He thrashes about like a zombie. At the end of the movie, he realizes that his only

spiritual or relational connection is a very tenuous link to an orphan he supports in Africa. This connection is very fragile, but it implies that he has to find new ways in which his soul may be expressed, or he will drown in depression and succumb earlier to death. To the film's credit, the creators do not provide a typical Hollywood ending; rather, they make clear that his former life has ended, and the task of forming a new one is just beginning. Was Schmidt ever really here, apart from the supportive structures he spent decades constructing? Did they not help him avoid the radical, necessary questions? Will he ever really be here, and find what he is now to do and be in this world? Those are the themes for another film than this one. What we delay addressing will, sooner or later, bite us in the rear, as *About Schmidt* so well portrays.

Beneath the symptoms, the variety of our stories, such a turn is occurring for all of us in the second half of life. The old sense of self wears thin, and the new is yet uncovered. Such moments of crisis are typically very painful, but they constitute an invitation to the ego to reorient its priorities, an invitation that the ego will resist until it is forced to do otherwise.

These continual "defeats" of the ego may finally, perhaps, bring it to the point where it begins to ask other kinds of questions. When the ego gets conscious enough and strong enough, or battered enough, it will be begin to say: "What new thing do I have to learn about myself in the world?" "Since I can no longer manage all this perplexity by my former understanding, what does the soul ask me to do in the face of this overthrow?" While the ego seldom frames these questions in quite this conscious way, it is usually led, through suffering, frustration, and defeat to demanding questions. If we stop running and turn to these questions, renewal, not defeat, emerges and we grow larger, often against our will. After all, who or what is asking these questions? If they are not asked

by the ego, or presented by our culture, they must be asked by the soul.

These “collisions” we experience periodically are in fact collisions between the natural, instinctual self and the provisional personality, with its attendant attitudes and adaptive strategies. As we have identified ourselves with the latter, the meeting with the former will be unwanted at best, and usually feel defeating and demoralizing. Such collisions occur not only at midlife but repeatedly, throughout the course of our lives. If we can bear to acknowledge this, such collisions indicate that *the soul is in charge*, doing its work, whether we like it or not, and is always urging us toward a larger life. What made sense of the world before frequently no longer applies, or is found inadequate to contain the new level of opposites. Yet from this dialogue between different identities, enlargement invariably arises. We may not want to grow, really, but we are really forced to grow, or we will regress and die, because the soul, the eternal dimension of our quite mortal lives, demands growth.

When the ego prevails, change is forestalled, and spiritual stagnation, even regression, sooner or later occurs. Even though we consciously resist change and cling to the familiar, when the soul is at work, we will change, quite apart from our conscious desires. As twelve-step groups say, “What we resist, will persist,” and sometime later impose itself on us, or on those around us. Something else, some larger energy, is at work in the universe, about which we know very little at all, and it has very little interest in our cautious plans, or our conscious understandings, as Job found out.

## Chapter Four

# Barriers to Transformation

“We would rather be ruined than changed.

We would rather die in our dread

Than climb the cross of the present

And let our illusions die.”

W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

**I**F OUR PSYCHE is programmed for growth, why is it so difficult to live these lives with their developmental agendas? Why do we stumble all over ourselves, repeat ourselves, recreate the pattern of parents whom we thought we’d fled? Why do we ignore the wishes of the transcendent that courses through each of us?

For starters, we must recall that the central, universal message of the world to the child is: “I am big and you are not; I am powerful and you are not; now find a way to deal with that.” Whatever strategy we evolve—approach/avoidance; trust/distrust; fight/flight; control/placate—has a tendency to get locked in as a core relational paradigm for self and world, a reflexive strategy for survival,