

Gerald G. May

A landscape photograph showing a river or lake in the foreground, reflecting the surrounding trees and mountains. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of orange and yellow, and the water is dark with clear reflections.

*From Cruelty  
to Compassion*

*The Crucible of Personal Transformation*

*Essays on Deepening the American Dream*

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## FROM CRUELTY TO COMPASSION

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### THE CRUCIBLE OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Sadly, as we were preparing this book for publication, our friend and elder, Gerald May, passed away on April 8, 2005. Gerry was a remarkable being whose clarity and passion touched all he came in contact with. During the winter, he shared with some of us his most recent manuscript, *The Power of the Slowing*, which ends with this passage:

What the Power of the Slowing taught me is what the Source of All is constantly yearning for: that each of us will know without doubt that we are loved, and that we are intimately, irrevocably part of the endless creation of love, and that we will join, with full freedom and consciousness, the joyous creativity that is Nature, that is Wildness, that is Wilderness, that is Everything.



A SINGLE SENTENCE has haunted me for over a decade. It is the first line of the Dalai Lama's foreword to Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's book, *Peace Is Every Step*: "Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way."<sup>1</sup>

On the surface the thought seems simple, almost obvious. We all know that individual changes in people affect larger social systems. But it is those last five words that catch me up: "it is the *only* way." The Dalai Lama's statement is far more than another simple encouragement to love one's neighbor; it is also a critique of all the other ways we human beings

have tried to bring peace and justice to the world. It says that they simply do not work.

As I have reflected on the Dalai Lama's words over these past ten years, I find myself sadly in agreement. War, violence, oppression, injustice, and countless other forms of human cruelty are endemic on this planet. They have been with us since the beginning of our species, and they are no less present now than they were ten thousand years ago. With modern technology, the cruelty we humans wreak upon one another is now more devastating than it ever was.

It's not as if we haven't tried to find better ways. It is impossible to count the vast variety of projects and programs humanity has instituted over the millennia to promote peace and justice. How many communities of peace have been established? How many new world orders have been envisioned? How many social, political, and religious systems have been established in the name of peace and justice? One might as well count grains of sand. All have been well-intended and many have encouraged real social change. Some have even created small temporary oases of peace in our troubled world. But the hard fact remains: they have not, individually or collectively, diminished the overall virulence of human cruelty. They have not saved us from ourselves. In this sense, they have not worked.

I am now convinced that our many programs and projects have not worked because they are all systemic remedies. Whether great utopian visions for society at large or simple moral and ethical principles for individuals, they consistently address our corporate ways of living together. But human cruelty is not, at its core, a systemic problem. Political, social, economic, religious, and other collective systems can worsen or minimize cruelty, but they do not contain its roots. Instead, the capacity for cruelty is innate in every human person. Because it is part of our individual human nature, the fault lies within ourselves, not in our collective systems. Any remedy, any depth-change from cruelty toward compassion, must arise within the nature of the individual human being.<sup>2</sup>

I did not come to this conclusion easily. In a quarter-century of practicing psychiatry, I tried to understand people's proclivity to cruelty as the combination of cultural influences and early childhood experiences. My assumption was that aside from certain genetic abnormalities, human beings are born pure, loving, innocent, and just. After birth, a child is subjected to extremely strong cultural conditioning and is formed also by his or her early experiences of trust, care, security, and the like. I assumed that if this early formation occurred in a peaceable and harmonious fashion, the child would grow into a just, compassionate adult. Conversely,

cruel and unjust behavior should be traceable to some disorder, some abnormality of nurture.

Looking back, I wonder how I could have been so naive. The evidence of real people in real life in no way supports such assumptions. The undeniable truth is that all children, no matter how well cared for, and all adults, no matter how well adjusted, are capable of terrible cruelty. To be sure, specific patterns of violence (for example, child abuse, rape, and murderous compulsions) are clearly molded by abnormal early experiences. But the violent potential behind such extremes, the primitive capability of and readiness for cruelty are not abnormal at all. They exist within all of us, all the time. They exhibit themselves daily, from small vendettas in workplaces to road rage on the highways, from family feuds to racial prejudice, from terrorism to national warfare. In truth, violence, cruelty, and injustice are horrifyingly normal.

To put it another way, childhood and social conditioning may shape how we express or restrain our capacities for violence, injustice, and other forms of cruelty, but the capacities themselves are inborn, “hard-wired” in our brains.

### **The Moral and Ethical Dimension of Compassion and Aggression**

In the raising of children and the maturing of adults, most psychological wisdom has assumed that it is important that tendencies toward aggression, regardless of cause, be restrained and overlaid by enhanced tendencies toward altruism. Normally this happens by instilling moral and ethical principles, but at a deeper level Sigmund Freud saw it as an ongoing competition between eros and thanatos, the life and death instincts. In his classic, *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*, Harry Stack Sullivan characterized healthy adult maturity as a state in which tenderness prevails.

Although it is logical to think that compassion needs to counteract aggression, two fundamental problems arise with a formulation that assumes that the process generally happens through the negative reinforcement of violent behaviors and positive reinforcement of altruism. The first problem is that such conditionings are culture-specific. They conform to local ethics and mores, which determine the behaviors that are to be suppressed and those that are supported. So while it may be wrong to attack someone who has simply insulted you, it may be right to defend yourself against a bully. It may be wrong to attack a family member, but right to brutalize an outsider. It may be wrong to wage war as an aggressor, but

right to do so in defense against aggression. Thus arise the endless conflicts in our neighborhoods and our world, in which each of the warring factions feels it is “right.”

The second problem with supporting altruism over aggression is more fundamental—it has to do with what happens in the individual. Effective conditioning usually produces people who function well in their cultures, but it does not actually change their basic perceptions or responses. Instead, we simply wind up with conditioned habits and ideas of what is right and wrong. For example, I am certain that it is wrong to lash out at another driver who cuts in front of me on the highway. I also know that to do so is likely to get me into trouble. But when the event actually occurs, my first reaction is hostility, my first impulse is vengeful. It takes at least a second or two to gather my wits and decide to act in a civilized fashion.

What, I wonder, would be the situation if something happened to actually transform my initial responses? What if my immediate reaction were one of sincere concern for the other driver’s welfare? What if I felt, right then and there, the desperation or confusion that the other driver must be experiencing? In this example, my outward behavior might not be very different, but it would arise in a completely different way and come from an entirely different place. There would be no suppression of aggression, no sublimating or redirecting violent impulses, no defense mechanisms at all. This, I think, would be an experience of true transformation.

For some, such a prospect raises fear. How would we survive if we did not use aggressive defense? And would not such a realization alienate us from our own culture? For others, the prospect is filled with hope, but it seems simply too idealistic, too good to be true. From my own experience, I can say that the fears that this possibility engenders occur more from thinking about it than from actually encountering it. It is very similar to the way an alcoholic might panic at the thought of never taking another drink—which is why AA so strongly advocates the “one day at a time” attitude. True compassion does indeed require us to relinquish our social and cultural bonds, as well as countless other attachments. But it does not necessarily lead to a sense of alienation. If the detachment occurs in the service of true compassion, the resulting feelings are far more tender than that.

Nor do I think the possibility of immediate compassion is too good to be true. I believe I have seen the inner transformation from selfishness to compassion happening to many people, and I believe I have tasted it within myself. I am convinced that although it is difficult, as the Dalai Lama said, it is a very real and practical possibility. And I am ready to agree that it is the only way, our only hope.



## Addressing the Roots of Cruelty

Although systemic programs and projects designed to promote peace and justice do not address the innate causes of human cruelty by transforming the inner lives of individuals, they can be effective in dealing with the consequences of human cruelty. Programs can bring aid to those who suffer those consequences and can, at least for a time, curb the inevitable tendencies of violence to escalate.

An analogy from western medicine may be helpful here. There is a long-standing public health model that describes medical interventions in the three categories of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention is real prevention; it disables the initial occurrence of a disease or disorder. Immunization against polio, for example, essentially eradicated the disease. Secondary prevention seeks to identify and treat (and hopefully cure) a disease once it has been contracted. Early screening tests for cancer are a good example. Tertiary prevention comes into play when a disease is fully established and cure is unlikely, as in chronic diabetes, permanent paralysis, or brain damage. Here the attempt is to prevent unnecessary pain and complications, and to improve the length and quality of life insofar as possible.

Using this analogy, systemic programs and projects are the most effective means we have for secondary and tertiary prevention of human cruelty. Just as in medicine, secondary and tertiary preventions are absolutely necessary for minimizing the escalation of cruelty and caring for its victims. But they have never been effective at primary prevention because they do not address the sources. Because the roots of human cruelty lie within each human being, the only hope for primary prevention is through the inner transformation of individuals.

In medicine, primary prevention relies upon a thorough understanding of the exact causes (etiology) of disease. The same is true for human cruelty and its three-part etiology: attachment (the most fundamental cause) and tribalism and revenge, which build on attachment. I emphasize tribalism and revenge not because they are the only expressions of attachment that result in cruelty, but because they create the most widespread and destructive forms of it.

## The Tyranny of Attachment

Aristotle said, "It is the nature of desire not to be satisfied, and most human beings live only for the gratification of it." I believe that at the heart of all habitual behaviors is the single driving force that the great

spiritual traditions have called attachment. It is at the root not only of all the behaviors we detest but cannot change, but also of many behaviors that we cherish and depend upon daily. And it is the very groundwork of human cruelty.

From a spiritual perspective, attachment is the complex of dynamics that binds our capacity for love and altruism to self-centered desires. The root of the word, *a-tache*, means “nailed to.” Spiritual traditions see attachment as nailing our capacity for love to something other than what it was meant for, such as when we make idols of our possessions and relationships. From a biological viewpoint, attachment consists of entrenched cellular patterns that result in behaviors over which we have little choice or control. In large part, our brains and bodies function by establishing attachments: habits to which we become accustomed and which result in significant stress when changed. When the patterns are deeply embedded and the stress of withdrawal from them is too great to bear, we use the term “addiction.” I have described these dynamics in detail in my book *Addiction and Grace*, and will give only a brief summary here.

In the brain, attachments are ingrained patterns of nerve cell functioning to which one has become accustomed. I often think of these functional patterns as streambeds, pathways engraved in the brain by the repeated flow of cell activity. Many such attachment patterns are necessary for daily life. Most of these take place without our conscious awareness: rhythms of autonomic activity, digestion and metabolism, habitual adjustments in temperature, heart rate, and the like.

When we do become aware of attachments, we often call them habits. Habits, whether we identify them as good or bad, are patterns of experience and behavior to which we become accustomed, like the expectation of daylight in the morning and darkness at night, the rituals we go through on arising and retiring, the familiarity we develop with our time zone, and so on. Similar habits develop in the ways we relate to one another in families and communities. Although these too are the result of ingrained patterns of nerve cell functioning, they are such a part of our normal lives that we almost never recognize them as such.

Most habit attachments remain automatic and only subliminally conscious until something interferes with them, such as jet lag when we travel to a different time zone, or when a family member suddenly begins behaving in an unexpected way. Then we become aware of the attachment because it causes stress until things return to normal or we adjust to the new situation.

We are very conscious of certain other attachments because we identify them as “bad habits” and struggle to change them. In childhood we



learn that we can correct some bad habits by willpower and self-discipline. Others, we discover, are intransigent; they persist no matter what we do. Life teaches us that there are limits to what we can control, even within ourselves. We may come to a realization like that of the Apostle Paul: “The good thing I want to do, I never do. The bad thing which I do not want—that is what I do!” (Romans 7:14ff). We label such unwanted attachments as neuroses, obsessions, compulsions, irresistible impulses, dependencies and codependencies, and so on. At this point it is probably simpler just to call them addictions, for the psychological definition of addiction is any behavior that willpower cannot change. Neurologically, addiction exists when the power of the cell patterns maintaining a behavior is greater than the power of the patterns attempting to change it.

Most spiritual traditions maintain that attachment—even to behavior patterns we identify as good—always represents a certain limitation of human freedom. These traditions say that by compelling us in one direction or another, attachment impedes our capacity for love. We could debate whether attachment to “good” behaviors is desirable or not, but it is very clear that attachment is the foundation upon which all our patterns of destructive behaviors are built.

It is attachment that makes us accustomed to our own kind of people and ways of life—and suspicious of those who are different. It is attachment that makes children refuse to share their toys and adults cling to their lands and possessions. In one way or another, attachment makes fundamentalists of us all, self-righteously protecting our most treasured beliefs and images. Attachment is what blinds us to others’ points of view. It is the sustaining power behind racism, bigotry, and all other patterns of intolerance. Attachment fuels all our patterns of grasping, clinging, acquiring, and defending—everything that makes us cruel.

### Us and Them: Tribalism

Attachment to one’s own in-group in opposition to others is widespread among animals and apparently universal in human beings. As National Council of Churches president Elenie Huszagh said in a recent speech, “In all of recorded human history, and no doubt even prior, humans have always managed to divide themselves into an ‘us’ and ‘them’ configuration.” Various called ethnocentricity, xenophobia, or tribalism, it has been extensively studied by social scientists. Studies like the “blue eyes versus brown eyes” games in children and “guards versus prisoners” experiments in adults are classic demonstrations of how quickly tribalism can be stimulated and how easily it can become vicious.

Tribalism is rooted in the pack instinct as seen in dogs, wolves, hyenas, and many other animals as well as primates. A deep, primitive attachment is established at birth between infant and mother. This bond expands to include close family members and finally other members of the pack or herd. Accompanying this bonding is an identification with the group itself and attachment to behaviors and attitudes that are acceptable to the group. Almost inevitably, these wind up being clearly distinguished from behaviors and attitudes directed toward outsiders. As biologist and ecological philosopher Garrett Hardin said, “The essential characteristic of a tribe is that it should follow a double standard of morality—one kind of behavior for in-group relations, another for out-group.”<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to understand the importance of in-group attachment and identification; an infant must learn the ways of the herd (family, community) in order to survive. What may be more difficult is why the group itself so commonly needs to define itself over and against others—the “us and them” mentality. This too has been explained on the basis of survival; a group has a better chance of defending against competing groups if it has a pre-existing attitude of suspicion or paranoia. In so-called primal or primitive societies, this may take the form of giving the name “people” to the in-group and considering all out-groups as less than human. Some researchers have proposed that such universal attitudes of paranoia toward others are not only behaviorally reinforced, but also genetically encoded.<sup>4</sup>

Shaped by both nature and nurture, tribalism is directly related to defining one’s own group against others, yet it is the result of innate processes within each individual. If for whatever reason an animal does not form such patterns of attachment, it is ostracized from the group or killed. Human beings who fail to form such attachments, as in autism, are generally incapable of effective functioning and require various forms of care.

Although the innate patterns of attachment that manifest as tribalism are clearly important for survival, they form the groundwork for some of the most destructive behaviors of which human beings are capable, from physical oppression, torture, and enslavement to outright genocide. Only when combined with revenge does tribalism get worse.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Universal Impulse Toward Revenge**

In contrast to tribalism, attachment to patterns of vengeance is not necessary for survival. Nor do we share it with other animals. Revenge is, I believe, a trait unique to human beings, and one to which we bring our endless human creativity. Revenge by one individual upon another is

always ugly and cruel, but when revenge combines with tribalism the result is holocaust.

Years ago in my book *Will and Spirit*, I wrote of revenge as being the paradigm of human evil. My reasoning was that other forms of destructive willfulness can be traced to some motive of self-preservation or defense, but vengeance seemed to serve no such purpose. Revenge certainly does not prevent recurrence of injury; it only increases violence and escalates animosity. Nor could I find any other way, no matter how depraved, in which revenge might be seen as self-serving. I concluded that it exists for no other reason than to get even. Yet revenge is an almost universal human reaction. Its role is obvious in all levels of human conflict, from ugly divorces through feuds within and between families, to the great ethnic atrocities that have so scarred our world. I have seen it first-hand in Vietnam and in Bosnia, and I have to admit I've felt its ugly movement within myself in my reactions to affronts by others.

The dynamics are obvious. One person or group injures another, who in turn tries to get even, and the conflict escalates. The destruction can become extreme and complex, but the vengeance that drives it arises as simply as a reflex. From the time we first develop self-identity as little children, our capacity for revenge is in place. It is horrifyingly *natural*.

I later learned of some studies of traumatized children in which an attitude of revenge seemed to prevent—or perhaps compensate for—what otherwise would have been paralyzing depression. At last I began to see how, at a primitive psychological level, vengeance does serve a certain self-protective function. It by no means prevents future injury, but it does function as a defense against facing the reality of insults or injuries *that have already been sustained*. In the absence of revenge, we would be left with the bare pain of our loss, the sheer awful *fact* of it. Without revenge, we would have to bear what may seem like bottomless grief and despair. We would have to see ourselves as weak, humiliated, degraded victims. As I have written elsewhere, vengeance stands ready to protect us from such abysmal feelings.

The impulse toward vengeance is a pattern of feeling and behavior that arises from attachment to our images of ourselves as being in control. It occupies our minds and hearts with thoughts about getting even. It consumes our attention with rage. It tempts us with the promise of a renewed sense of power and control if we can strike back and get even. All of this protects us from realizing the power of our injury and the depth of our vulnerability. Child psychoanalyst Anna Freud recognized these dynamics decades ago. “Young children,” she said, “react to pain not only with anxiety but with other affects . . . on the one hand with anger, rage and

revenge feelings, on the other hand with masochistic submission, guilt or depression.”<sup>6</sup> Revenge rises within human beings so quickly that it appears to be a reflex, automatic and without discrimination. The forms it takes may be shaped by conditioning, but the impulse itself seems unconditioned—as likely to occur in children as in adults and ready to become active with every injury, insult, or humiliation.

The vengeance impulse is so primal and automatic that it must be actively restrained or redirected to keep order in any social system. Parents try to train their children to control their temptations to strike back. Moral and ethical education seeks to reinforce this control: “Obey the golden rule,” “Turn the other cheek.” Society’s laws do the same, outlining precise boundaries as to how and when revenge can be extracted. Such restraints are absolutely necessary to allow the continuance of civilization.

But the effectiveness of these restraints is imperfect. As in my simple example of being cut off in traffic, the restraint of revenge may inhibit destructive behavior, but it does not prevent the impulse. Sometimes restrained revenge becomes seething animosity, eventually breaking out like steam from a cracked boiler. This kind of vengeance has created a new terminology for our modern language. A fired employee “goes postal,” killing coworkers. A teenager, sick of being picked on, gets a gun and “Columbines” his high school.

### **Liberation from Attachment**

Almost every atrocity and virtually every warlike or oppressive action can be traced to some combination of attachment to tribalism and/or revenge. Almost every enduring social injustice can be traced to this combination of forces, from smoldering class oppression through racial prejudice to the genocide of so-called ethnic cleansing. The same applies to all versions of warfare, from street gangs and drug wars to terrorism and retaliation. All are manifestations of our innate capacities to be cruel to one another, and all are grounded in attachment. The primary prevention of cruelty therefore requires attention to attachment itself and to the destructive patterns it generates.

Throughout human history, the spiritual traditions have most deeply come to terms with attachment. The insights from different faiths reveal a striking similarity. Buddhism is perhaps most forthright, claiming in its Four Noble Truths that attachment (usually mistranslated as “desire”) is the cause of human suffering and that freedom from suffering requires freedom from attachment. Other traditions may speak of it more in terms of sin or delusion, but all see attachment as a kind of bondage, limiting

the human freedom to be who we are meant to be. In Hebrew, a number of words that connote salvation have a two-letter root: Y and S, *yodb* and *shin*. This root directly implies liberation from confinement or restraint. Thus “being saved,” as used in Jewish and Christian traditions, essentially means being set free.

Freedom, however, is relative. Attachment is so much a part of our physical nature that complete freedom is not possible in this life. Since all organisms that possess nervous systems depend upon attachment to maintain homeostasis, total absence of attachment is incompatible with life. But as recovering chemical addicts and the mystics of all traditions know, freedom from *specific* attachments can and does happen. And such liberation, when it occurs, can bring with it an increased capacity for truly altruistic lovingkindness.

When one has experienced even a taste of freedom from significant attachment, it is clear that what has happened was not the result of discipline, willpower, or self-imposed restraint. Nor was it due to the implementation of a new and effective strategy. Instead, something inside oneself has been transformed. I frequently tell the story of an alcoholic man whom I treated in my early days of psychiatric practice. After years of relentless drinking, he experienced a sudden liberation while simply walking down the sidewalk one day. He never drank again. When I asked him to describe what happened, all he could say was, “On the way to the grocery store I discovered equanimity.”

One hears many such stories in the rooms of twelve-step programs where recovery is discussed. The explanations vary widely, but they share a common theme. Whatever takes place to empower recovery is not a result of willpower or self-discipline. It is not achieved by strategies and tactics. It comes instead as a mysterious, often unexpected gift of grace. And after receiving it, one is never the same.

In my early years of exploring the nature and treatment of addictions, I spoke with many people who had experienced such liberations. Most said that they were grateful for the various forms of professional help they had received. They valued the support others offered when they had given up on themselves. They appreciated the insights they had gained through therapy. They acknowledged the value of structured treatment and rehabilitation programs. Yet they all maintained that these things, alone or together, were not responsible for the transformation.

The professional help offered to addicted people, like programs designed to promote peace and justice in the world, constitutes secondary and tertiary prevention. Some of the people I interviewed said the medical treatment they received had saved their lives on more than one occasion.

Without it, their addiction would have killed them. But liberation from the addiction itself came from a wholly different source and in a completely different way.

The only word that my interviewees and I could agree upon to describe this source and way was “spiritual.” It is an overused and misused term, but it does communicate what people experience. At its core, “spirit” refers to energy, life force, breath of life, the power that both brings us to life and creates all our motivations.<sup>7</sup>

Of course different belief systems have widely varying ways of thinking about spirit. I use it to connote something not so much otherworldly or nonphysical, but rather something most profound and basic to existence. Matters of spirit are beyond our usual ways of thinking and understanding, not because they are above us in some ethereal plane, but because they lie deep within us, as our life source. Regardless of how one might conceptualize spirit, it always comes down to something profound that has the capacity to create and affect the very nature of who we are. It is only at this deeply personal level that the roots of human cruelty can be cut.

Spiritual transformation lies beyond the reach of our strategies and machinations; it cannot be achieved or acquired through willpower, wisdom, or technology. Every person with whom I spoke looked back upon their experience and called it a gift.

### Receiving the Gift

Although it is possible to describe the innate causes of human cruelty with some objective precision, I find the spiritual transformation of these roots to be much more difficult to explain. Not only do spiritual matters defy objective description in the first place, but attempts to do so generally must rely on religious and theological terminologies that differ among faith traditions and schools of thought within those traditions. Yet the difficulties are surmountable because there are common themes among the different spiritual traditions that, when taken together, can be very revealing.

For example, many traditions view experiences of liberation from innate attachment patterns as *gifts* rather than achievements or accomplishments. Although this gift quality is understood differently in major spiritual traditions, all of them recognize it. In Buddhism, which is largely nontheistic, the gift quality of liberation might be seen as realization of the essentially compassionate nature of creation. A Christian interpretation might see it as *charism*, a healing or deliverance by the Holy Spirit. A Jewish sense might see it as God’s mercy, *chesed*. Similarly, an Islamic interpretation could see it as a benevolent act of Allah, the *ar-Rahman*



(all-merciful) and *ar-Rahim*, (all-compassionate). Hindu interpretation as set forth in the *Tejabindu Upanishad* could see it as a combination of God's love and the effects of *karma* (“... to all ... whose hearts are given to the Lord of Love, He gives himself through his infinite grace”).

Despite differences in interpretation, the spiritual traditions acknowledge the inherent giftedness of transformation. When individuals realize this gift quality, it always seems to come as a combination of good news and bad news. The good news is that the essential Source of All is benevolent. It does somehow *give the gift*. The bad news is that we can neither earn the transformation nor achieve it on our own. In one way or another, we must *receive* it.

To put it mildly, most human beings dislike the receptive position. It seems too passive and vulnerable. We would much prefer seeing ourselves as captains of our fate and masters of our destiny. The desire to achieve and preserve autonomy comes from our attachment to a sense of separate self, and it is one of the most universal struggles in the spiritual life. Because of their differing experiences in society and culture, women and men tend to have characteristic reactions to the passivity, receptivity, and surrender associated with the spiritual life, but neither gender likes the idea very much.

As recovering addicts well know, movement into the receptive mode is often only possible after one has exhausted all one's resources and is forced to admit defeat. In recovery circles, this experience is called “rock bottom.” In Christian tradition, a similar experience applies to life as a whole. St. John of the Cross called it the dark night of the soul. In either case, it is a confrontation with one's inability to handle life autonomously. And although it may be accompanied by considerable despair, it also gives birth to a fresh openness to receptivity that is far less passive than one might think.

An ancient Christian model proposed by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in his *Treatise on the Love of God* or *On Loving God* may be illuminative in this context. Written in the twelfth century, this work is surprisingly relevant for our time. Bernard described four stages or “degrees” of the love of God. He called the first “Love of Self for One's Own Sake.” At the outset, most of us try to use our own efforts and abilities to overcome problems and gain satisfaction in life. Bernard maintains that sooner or later this will end in failure. We discover we are unable to control things enough to get what we want and avoid what we don't want.

However it happens, this realization leads to the second phase, “Love of God for One's Own Sake.” Although loving God for one's own sake may sound selfish and not very “spiritual,” Bernard does not disparage it. It is part of what he sees as a normal, natural process. The transition from

the first to the second phase is very like the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous's twelve steps: admission of powerlessness and turning to a higher power. For many people, it is also the beginning of a conscious, intentional spiritual life. Experiences differ of course, but Bernard emphasizes that there is always hope to receive some gifts of grace, some help or deliverance. And sooner or later, Bernard says, we *do* experience such gifts. They may not come in the ways we expect or even want, but they come.

The second phase may last for a very long time, with God imaged as savior, comforter, the divine source of help. These are true attributes of God, but most theologies maintain that God desires to be much more for human beings. Primarily, God desires a loving relationship. Thus Bernard says that at some point, again by means of grace, the person receiving the gifts becomes increasingly touched by the inherent goodness of the One who gives them. The love of the gifts themselves changes into love of the Giver.

This third stage, which Bernard calls "The Love of God for God's Sake," is a journey of growing intimacy and deepening devotion impelled not by possible gains or blessings but as a sheer expression of love. Finally, in Bernard's thinking, this love births a new and profound realization. Deeply impressed with God's goodness and deeply feeling the flow of love, people may begin to recognize how essentially good and loveable they themselves are. Here begins Bernard's fourth degree of the love of God: "Love of One's Self for God's Sake."

Bernard's simple model doesn't reflect everyone's experience, but it does have an uncanny similarity to the twelve-step model developed eight hundred years later. It is also consonant with a basic understanding of the Christian mystical tradition, namely that the entire journey toward liberation is surrounded and empowered by grace. Individual will and effort are important, but it is the divine gift that makes everything possible.

Further, Bernard's fourth stage of love indicates a critically important and often overlooked aspect of spiritual transformation. The sense of one's self, rather than being denied or destroyed, somehow takes on a new beauty and worthiness. As this realization begins to dawn, one recognizes that the old assumptions about passivity were completely illusory. I want to take a little extra time to describe this further here, because it seems especially important in our modern era.

### Transforming the Sense of Self

A superficial reading of nearly all mystical traditions seems to indicate that one's sense of one's self needs to be abandoned, that the "ego" must be relinquished. This assumption seems to be supported by concepts such

as “letting go and letting God,” surrendering and becoming passively receptive instead of actively taking charge of our lives. It is also supported by the classical distinction in Christian and other traditions between meditation and contemplation; meditation is what we seem to be able to do “on our own,” while contemplation seems to come completely as gift. I believe the primary cause of such misinterpretations lies in the assumptions we make about the relationship between the individual person and God (or, for nontheists, “ultimate reality”). Many of us develop a sense of ourselves as autonomous, independent, and irrevocably *separate* from God and the rest of creation. We may be *connected* in some way with that which is “other,” but we feel we must always remain distinct. Our society considers it a disorder or even a disease when this sense of an autonomous self is missing or diminished. To be healthy and whole, there can be no blurring of ego-boundaries, no “codependency,” no fading of the inviolate separation between self and other.

The spiritual traditions maintain that although we may usually experience ourselves as separate, we are in truth deeply, profoundly, unbelievably connected—even in union with one another. Christian mystics consistently echo St. Paul’s statement that we “live and move and have our being” *in* God (Acts 17:28) and St. Augustine’s proclamation at the turn of the fifth century that God is closer to us than we are to our very selves. In sixteenth-century Spain, St. John of the Cross stated unequivocally that “God is the center of the soul.” The intimacy portrayed here, and similarly in other traditions, is unfathomable to the rational mind. It clearly transcends the simple discriminations we make between “me and you,” “us and them,” and even the more intimate “I and Thou.”<sup>8</sup>

Although the mystics’ affirmation of essential unity challenges our experiences of autonomy and independence, it does not, as is commonly believed, negate the existence of a self. It simply gives the self a new meaning. Further, even while one is experiencing separateness, there is no need to disavow one’s sense of self in order to participate in receiving the gifts of grace. A case in point is John of the Cross’s frequently cited statement, “Pure contemplation consists of receiving.” At a superficial level, this seems to describe a completely passive role in which God “does unto” the person according to God’s will. But the Spanish word John uses, *recibir*, does not imply totally passive receptivity. Instead, it connotes welcoming, even welcoming with open arms, as one might receive a beloved friend into one’s house.<sup>9</sup>

Even when we understand these reinterpretations, our attachment to autonomy and self-determination is so great that we are still likely to be repelled by the spiritual language of surrender and receptivity. Paradoxically,

only when our sense of self begins to be transformed into a realization of essential unity can we appreciate that there never was a threat in the first place—that the process is moving not toward self-destruction but toward self-realization. And the self that one realizes in this transformation is resplendent, inexpressibly beautiful, and, as Bernard proclaims, completely loveable.

### Experiencing the Transformed Moment

Another common misunderstanding is that spiritual transformation happens in a linear progression and, once realized, is permanent. The mystics' actual experience belies this. St. Teresa of Avila, who was John of the Cross's most important mentor and spiritual guide, said that the longest time she had ever experienced realized union was "about half an hour." She also cautioned that "No one is so advanced in prayer that they do not often have to return to the beginning."

It seems to me that most people's experience is as Teresa described. There's a sense of spiraling or recycling in which one experiences moments of realization or short periods of freedom and compassion, followed by a return to old habits and reflexes. In the example I gave earlier of being cut off on the road by another driver, I might very well respond with sheer immediate compassion rather than rage. But the next day, in similar circumstances, I might find myself again having to restrain initially hostile responses.

In one sense, it is probably a gift that the transformed moment comes and goes. Only after the fact, between such moments, can we reflect upon and appreciate what has happened. Usually one has a very consoling sense of rightness about the freedom and tenderness experienced. Many describe it as a kind of homecoming. Others call it authenticity, a realization of who one really is, the way one was meant to be. This sense of rightness or authenticity eradicates any possible doubt that the experience was an aberration. One may not be able to describe or explain it, even to oneself, but there is no doubt that it was absolutely real.

There is also always a deep gratitude for the experience, but it is often accompanied by a kind of sadness or regret, even contrition that comes from realizing how unfree and self-centered one generally is in comparison to the transformed moment. It's a feeling of, "Why can't it be this way all the time? Why can't *I* be this way all the time?" This often prompts a prayer for some kind of mercy.

I doubt that anyone in this life ever makes it to a perfect steady state of freedom for unconditional love and realized unity. Such "nonattach-

ment” does not seem possible for embodied human beings. But there is an inner movement going on that has a direction away from the compulsions of cruelty and toward freedom for love. Perhaps just as important, the process builds a growing appreciation of oneself in the world. It could be called self-knowledge, even wisdom. As in Bernard’s fourth stage of love, there is a deepening sense of the beauty and preciousness of one’s own being and with it a similar appreciation of all creation. At the same time, there is a growing familiarity with one’s tendencies toward selfishness and separation.

The process can be likened to walking the terrain of one’s own being in the world, learning first-hand the landscape of one’s soul. Our growing knowledge and deepening wisdom give us confidence to recognize freedom and to act in love. Such wisdom encourages sensitivity to self-centeredness and the capacity to restrain actions that arise from it. Confidence grows along with humility, and together they encourage deeper dedication, a more radical giving of ourselves to the ways of love. And over time, the moments happen more frequently. They last longer. We appreciate them more, desire them more, trust them more and are increasingly open to welcoming them.

### Confidence and Consolation

The confidence experienced in transformed moments can be so consoling, so joyful as to seem ecstatic. It is completely different from the usual self-confidence achieved by shoring up one’s sense of personal competence and autonomy. It is a form of self-confidence to be sure, but the whole experience of “self” is changed so that it is no longer secured in separateness but rather is discovered in unity and communion. In much the same way, Teresa of Avila discriminates between the consolations that happen in meditation and those that occur in contemplation. In meditation (the activities we feel we are doing through our own intent and effort) we may often feel a quiet calm, a peaceful centeredness, a sense of being wide-awake and right here. Teresa uses the term *contentos* to describe these good feelings, the consolations of meditation. She says such feelings arise in our senses and encourage us toward God.

As good as these *contentos* may be, however, Teresa says they pale in comparison to the consolations that happen in contemplation, which begins when autonomous effort eases and one becomes more receptive to divine action. She calls contemplative consolations *gustos*, and says they arise not in our own senses, but in the presence of God’s very self within

us. They arise in God and overflow into our senses, thus becoming our experience. In short, the *contentos* of meditation are sensory experiences achieved by our own calming and centering, while the *gustos* of contemplation are God's own joy, freedom, and love becoming our own.

This description sounds as though experiences of transformation are always happy and pleasant. This is decidedly not the case. To put it simply, whether the experience is happy or sorrowful depends upon the situation at hand. In transformed moments, attachment to self-image is eased and one ceases to see oneself as separate. Thus one *feels with* (the literal meaning of "com-passion") the situation. If the situation is beautiful and harmonious as in a pristine natural setting or in loving and peaceful human relationships, the primary feeling may be one of sheer delight. But if the situation involves angry conflict, injustice, or other sufferings, the feelings will not be pleasant at all.

This is true in any authentic realization of things as they are. As the sense of separateness eases, one joins the surrounding reality. There is no "rising above" anything here. It is instead an "entering into." From a theistic perspective, one joins not only the joy and sorrow of the world, but also to some extent joins God's own joy and sorrow.

Yet even if one encounters deep sadness in a given moment, the sense of consolation, the *gusto*, remains. As one sheds tears of pain with those who suffer, the sense of goodness and rightness in simply being there is wonderful beyond all description. Even in the fear of risking one's well-being in responding to a situation, the rightness remains, the realness remains, and this, I think, is the ground of true confidence. In this confidence there is no sense of being on a mission, no feeling of carrying out God's will, no identified cause for which one might sacrifice oneself. True confidence never rests on explanation, rationalization, or any justification whatsoever. It arises simply, cleanly, as a direct response to the reality at hand.

### Humility and Humor

In our usual way of thinking, confidence and humility might seem contradictory, but in the transformation of which I'm speaking they become one. The key lies in *realization*. I have used the term *realization* many times here, and it is important to explain that it does not refer to conceptual understanding or comprehension. Often in fact, it occurs in profound unknowing, in complete absence of understanding. Realization, as I use it, means *making real*. In other words, it is a direct, immediate immersion



into things as they absolutely are: no preconceptions, no interpretations, no judgment. It is oneself becoming true. Like the transformation itself, this kind of realization is not a matter of personal initiative or accomplishment; it simply comes as part of the gift.

Confidence and humility are unified in the realization of one's rightful, natural being within and responsiveness to a situation exactly as it is, irrevocably interconnected and interdependent. True confidence arises only in this atmosphere of interdependence, where nothing is isolated or cut apart. Pride and arrogance come from a separated sense of self, which is set over and against something or someone else. Humility comes from the realization that one's own being is rooted—as is everything else—in all being. "Humility" comes from the Latin *humus*, "earth." In one sense it connotes lowliness, but in another it means groundedness, being rooted in the earth. For some people, this kind of humility comes gently and gracefully. For others, it may involve considerable feelings of humiliation; arrogance must be defeated by learning that one cannot handle things on one's own. In whatever way it comes, humility arises with confidence—and also with *humor*, another word with a similar root.

I do not know how to explain the sense of humor that grows with realization. It seems to be a kind of buoyancy, an irrepressible lightness that survives all suffering and loss. Perhaps in part it expresses the relief that comes with learning that not only can one not handle things on one's own, but one does not have to. Perhaps it comes from a growing appreciation of divine play, the endless exuberance of creation. Maybe it comes from the sheer experience of freedom. And it probably includes recognizing how silly we all become in trying to understand ourselves and control our destinies. It is likely a combination of all these things with something far more profound: a wisdom perspective that eludes understanding and words.

There is no doubt, however, that humor grows along with confidence and humility. I have seen it too often to doubt it. I have found it in the writings of all the mystics I have quoted here. I have seen it in hospices and cancer wards, and in the rooms of recovery where people laugh so hard at their own tragic stories that they cannot continue to speak. I saw it in an old Bosnian grandmother who, after crying over the loss of her entire family, suddenly winked and announced she was in the market for a new husband. I saw it in a Tibetan Lama who, when asked what it was like to have his country occupied and its people dispersed, smiled and winked and said, "Sparkles." Whatever the humor is, wherever it comes from, it is inevitable. And I am deeply grateful for it.

## Vulnerability and Innocence

Normally we use a multitude of devices to defend ourselves against pain and insult. It is as if we walk through our lives wearing armor, shielded as much as possible from any assault. We let our guard down only in particular settings where we can feel trusting and safe—and even then most of us maintain a certain vigilance for danger. This defensiveness results from repeated experiences of being psychologically and physically hurt; we learn where the threats lie and adapt ourselves to avoid them. One could say, as did Sigmund and Anna Freud, that a major task of early childhood is to develop effective defense mechanisms that allow us to function without being damaged.

It would be an exaggeration to maintain that this childhood quest is directed solely toward achieving invulnerability. Because human beings require openness and availability to others, the developmental process is delicate and complex: too much defensiveness and one becomes isolated and unable to connect, too little and one's sense of self is undermined by victimization. Thus "normal" childhood development seeks a functional balance of defense and vulnerability. Through years of psychological effort most of us have achieved such a balance, and we naturally seek to maintain it. Viewed from this vantage point, the prospect of transformation can seem very threatening. Openness to things just as they are is a clear invitation to radical vulnerability.

To be vulnerable literally means "able to be wounded." Much as we might want to avoid it, this is precisely what true transformation calls for. The call has been repeated through millennia in one spiritual tradition after another. We can ignore it, but the meaning is undeniable. It is the clear intent of Jesus' admonitions and examples of turning the other cheek, loving one's enemies, and taking up one's cross. It is exactly what the fourteenth-century Tibetan Vow of Mahamudra expresses: "For the boundless suffering of all sentient beings, may I be filled with great unbearable compassion." Mohandas Gandhi stated it precisely in describing *ahimsa*, his path of nonviolence: "Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering."

It is not surprising that human beings have always been intimidated by such challenges, nor that we would try our best to reinterpret them in less threatening, more domesticated ways. Still, the invitation is clear: to enter into this life just as it is we must become vulnerable. A saving grace—paradoxically remaining hidden until the experience of transformation itself—lies in realizing we are not separate and that the self-images we struggle so

hard to establish and protect are just that: images. Grace lies in the indescribable joys of freedom and love that Teresa so aptly called *gustos*.

There is also a saving grace when we remain centered in the present. We normally conceive of a situation in terms of what has gone before it and what it may lead to. For example, if I am to visit a dying person who is suffering an agonizing illness, I may be besieged not only by the person's immediate pain but also by the suffering, fear, and desolation they have experienced in the past and the specter of the dying soon to come. When I add to all this my own personal fears, doubts, and hopeless desires to make things better, it may indeed seem too much to bear. I have to gear myself up to go at all, and I am likely to be tense and tight in the meeting.

But if by some miracle I am given the capacity to simply be in the present moment with the person just as they are, the burden is suddenly lightened—not only made less heavy but also somehow filled with light. In that light, freed from causes, consequences, and self-concerns I can truly meet the person, join a precious moment with them. There may be sadness there, to be sure, and I will be open to sharing something of their pain. But who knows? Perhaps there will be surprises of joy and laughter as well, and maybe even hope.

In that kind of moment, empowered by grace, one finds oneself not only vulnerable but innocent. *Innocent* comes from the Latin *in-nocere*, meaning “not yet harmed.” When one enters a situation fresh, just as it is, vulnerability and innocence are synonymous; one is able to be wounded, but not yet wounded. This pristine state only lasts for an instant, of course, but then the next moment comes, and the next. And in each moment innocence is immediately reborn. Perhaps, where it counts, one truly does become like a little child.<sup>10</sup>

The inner experience of transformation, then, consists of an irregular but growing realization of the fundamental falsehood of our separateness. To put it another way, when we do not feel or see ourselves as separate, we realize unity. The precise feelings in such times are largely determined by the situation, but even very painful feelings are likely to be accompanied by an indescribable sense of freedom and availability, an openness to everything around us and a lightness that frequently becomes filled with joy and humor. Confidence, humility, vulnerability, and innocence also characterize this experience, but they are not generally sensed as separate feelings. Instead, they simply become manifest in our responses. All this happens in a general absence of understanding and comprehension—what the mystics call “unknowing.” Yet somehow a deep wisdom emerges that allows for incisive and wholly accurate responsiveness to the situation.

The ground of that responsiveness is compassion, and it becomes manifest in moments of liberation from attachment, the primary root of cruelty.

### What Actually Changes?

All major spiritual traditions in some way address the possibility of liberation from attachment. It may be called salvation, conversion, metanoia, enlightenment, realization, any of a variety of other names. Regardless of the names and the different theologies that lie behind them, there is a consistent sense of a new way of being; one that is more loving and less cruel. I believe modern science has come to a place where we can begin to appreciate how this new, more loving way of being might be expressed physically.

I have made a case that the human capacity for cruelty is innate, “hard-wired” into our brains. I also propose that our capacities for compassion, tenderness, and justice are just as innate, just as organic as are our violent capacities. In his superbly integrative work *Zen and the Brain*, neurologist James Austin cites a number of research studies that support this idea. Such studies demonstrate, for example, that newborn babies cry when they hear another infant crying, that actual behavioral responses to assist others are evident by the second year of life, and that most children demonstrate a sense of justice and sharing by the time they enter elementary school.<sup>11</sup>

Austin concludes, as does Zen master D. T. Suzuki, that compassion is a “native virtue.” Austin says that the “primitive, biological roots” of compassion may go back to “highly instinctual interpersonal behavior: the way small fellow creatures huddle together, finding warmth while sharing it.” He goes on to speak of the “young seedlings” of compassion that are naturally rooted in human beings and, given the chance, “ready to grow taller.”<sup>12</sup>

Austin’s metaphor of the seedlings of virtue is strikingly similar to one used four centuries earlier by Teresa of Avila. Asked to describe her experience of prayer, she likened the human soul to a garden. God dwells in the center of this garden, she said, so it is natural for us to want it to be as beautiful and bountiful as possible. She proposed that the flowers in this soul-garden are the virtues, and that it is our role to tend the garden. But she quickly asserts that it is not our job to till the soil, or to plant the seeds, or even to pull the weeds, for God has already done all that. Our role is only to see to the watering of the garden, and the water is nothing other than prayer.

Just as our capacity for cruelty is part of our nature, so is our capacity for lovingkindness. True transformation, then, consists not in the repression or layering-over of vicious impulses, but in the actual decrease of such impulses and the consequent emergence of deep, wholly natural impulses of tenderness and love.

Neuropsychological studies as well as the experience of countless spiritual authorities indicate that neurological patterns that function like streambeds to conduct strands of our behavior exist within us for vice and virtue, for cruelty and kindness. It seems to me that only two possibilities exist for positive transformation of these patterns. The first involves actual structural change. Certain points in the streambeds of cruelty might actually be eradicated, thus preventing the flow of activity through them. Austin uses the term “etching” to describe how this might happen, much as an acid might etch away precise points on a piece of metal. He also suggests that more global changes may take place in brain areas resulting in decreased destructiveness and increased openness to the flow of compassion.

The second possibility involves functional change, perhaps without any significant alteration of structure. My experience in working with chemical addictions indicates that although seemingly miraculous transformations can eradicate a specific addictive behavior completely, the patterns and pathways of the behavior often remain intact. This is why, for example, people in twelve-step programs speak of themselves as “recovering” rather than “recovered.” It is why so many recovering alcoholics know that no matter how long they have been sober, a single drink can start the behavior all over again. It may also be why it is so easy to identify remnants of self-centeredness in the lives of even the most realized saints. And why the human journey toward compassion is nearly always one of fits and starts, steps forward and steps back. At least in terms of addiction, it seems to me that although the brain may change in both function and structure, it does not forget. To the extent that transformation of the brain might be structural, it is easy to understand how certain impulses toward cruelty might be wholly eradicated. Some or all of the cellular patterns comprising such impulses simply disappear. The streambed no longer exists.

If instead the changes are primarily functional, the old pathways remain, at least as a potential, but they have ceased their activity. The streambed remains, but it is dry. In either case, fresh, new, and spontaneously compassionate responses become possible. And in either case, what one first experiences can be a loving and accurate response to the real needs of the particular situation.

I am certain that functional transformation can occur; I have seen it happen. It is entirely possible that structural transformation may also occur. Either way though, I am convinced that the new way of functioning, the transformed way, bears little resemblance to the old. The expression of true compassion does not coalesce into residual cellular patterns. The flow of lovingkindness does not form a streambed. Instead, it is fresh and new in each moment, arising spontaneously. It is unexplainable and unpredictable. In contrast to all patterned manifestations of attachment, tribalism, and vengeance, true compassion has no pattern whatsoever. It is completely unconditioned.

The compassion, altruism, empathy, and love that emerge through transformation are radically different from what we normally mean by those words. We normally think of them in terms of ourselves: imagining what another is feeling, then extending ourselves for the sake of the other's well-being. But the transformed qualities are not based on ourselves; they arise with absolute spontaneity from the deep source of unity. No one can predict what form they will take.

Transformation comes as a gift and its manifestations are beyond references to ourselves and are outside our control. This raises a perennial question: What can I do, if anything, to help free myself from cruel behaviors? How can I grow in true compassion? Is there anything I can do to become more receptive to the gift?

## What We Can Do

The different spiritual traditions tend to come together in recognizing a giftlike quality in the process of transformation, but they diverge markedly in their understandings of how one receives that gift. Most traditions emphasize practices and disciplines such as prayer, meditation, service, scripture study, participation in rituals and worship, moral behavior, and so on. A number also maintain that adherence to specific beliefs is necessary, for example, "No one comes to God without accepting Jesus," or "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet."

At one extreme, it is assumed that such practices and beliefs will acquire merit and earn the gift as a reward for one's efforts. "Obey the commandments and you will gain eternal life. Disobey them and you will be eternally damned," or "Practice meditation with diligence and you will achieve enlightenment; otherwise you will remain trapped in illusion." At the other extreme, there is a sense that spiritual practices and disciplines bear no particular relationship to the giving or receiving of the gift; they are simply ways of prayer, of expressing one's concern and love. The gift



is given when and how the Giver chooses, regardless of a person's intention and effort. Most commonly, there is an implicit middle-ground assumption that practices and beliefs somehow help prepare an individual to be more open and receptive to the gift when it is given, but do not necessarily make it happen.

In the Christian mystical tradition this "faith and works" question bears directly on the classical distinction between meditation and contemplation. Meditation is understood as the intentional effort one puts into disciplines of practice whereas contemplation comes as a sheer gift of grace beyond all effort and intention. The gift of contemplation is understood as synonymous with the gift of transformation as I have described it here, characterized by relative nonattachment and free loving responsiveness to the immediate needs of the situation at hand. As the gift of contemplation grows in a certain moment, the effort of meditation relaxes and finally, in moments of realized unity, ceases altogether.<sup>13</sup>

As I have indicated, the most common understanding is that meditation somehow prepares a person to receive the gift of contemplation. Perhaps the self-referencing patterns of the mind "learn" how to relax. Perhaps over time, as Austin postulates, meditation actually interferes with established pathways. Or maybe, as many of the mystics maintain, the self-knowledge gained through meditation leads a person to humility and surrender. Although all these explanations may bear some truth, I do not think one can conclude that there is any direct cause-and-effect relationship between meditation and contemplation.

I say this because I know of a number of people who frequently seem to manifest the compassion that comes from contemplative transformation without ever having meditated in any formal way and who do not hold to any formal religious tenets. Similarly, I have known and read of experienced meditators and fervent believers who do not seem to have grown in compassion and tenderness. An extreme example of the latter might be the traditional training of Japanese *Ninja*, originally established to prepare finely tuned assassins in the service of warlords. Ninja training included meditation practices very similar to those of Zen and belief systems similar to those of Taoism. It is clear that such practices resulted in many qualities associated with contemplation, such as present-centeredness, panoramic awareness, and immediate, incisive responsiveness. Yet the whole intent and effect was geared toward enhanced warfare. Similarly, I have encountered some people who have engaged in meditative practices and held traditional beliefs over time who, at least in my judgment, seem to be more self-centered and isolated than when they began.

My point here is that meditation practices, belief systems, and other spiritual disciplines—even those that are most contemplatively oriented—do not automatically and necessarily lead to a spiritual transformation characterized by true compassion. Christian and other theistic mystical traditions hold that what makes the difference is a loving God, who plants the desire for freedom and compassion in us and nourishes it toward fullness. A Buddhist interpretation might pose that the ground of everything, being compassion itself, has a similar effect.

Regardless of tradition, a person's deep desire and intent—the person's motivation for embarking upon a conscious spiritual journey in the first place—plays a very critical role. Somewhere, somehow, a person must *want* to love and be loved, must yearn for peace and justice. This desire may not be conscious at all in the beginning. As in Bernard of Clairvaux's stages, one often begins with what seem like completely self-serving motivations—more to be loved than to love. Yet the assumption is that somewhere beneath awareness, the person has willingly said "Yes" to all that love entails and requires. I can think of no better expression of this than the well-known words of Dag Hammarskjöld:

I don't know Who—or what—put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone—or Something—and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.<sup>14</sup>

Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, whom I have quoted several times, say that God loves all persons with an "esteeming love," a love that is endlessly respectful of each person's unique personality, strengths, weaknesses, and desires. With many other Christian mystics, they affirm that God does not move actively within a person without first being welcomed. When loving transformation happens, then, it comes as an answer to a prayer—even when one may be unaware that one has asked for it.

Herein lies what, to me, is the greatest mystery of human transformation. How do I know if my heart has said yes? How can I know what true willingness is? I suppose it could be said that if one even cares about the question at all, one has already said yes, somehow and somewhere. I am old enough and have been through enough now to trust the yes in myself. Yet when I think of the population of this earth, I do not know how or why it seems that certain hearts say no. What might it have been, in the hearts of Hitler and the other notoriously destructive villains of history, or in the many ordinary people who grow crueler rather than kinder as

they get older—what was it that turned them against the tender invitations of Being?

I have looked into psychology for an answer, and come up empty-handed. To be sure, it must be a deeply good thing for a child to grow up in a family where mercy and justice are both taught and modeled. And it must be helpful for spiritual practices to be undertaken within an authentic tradition and in a community of mutual support and accountability. But I have seen what—in my judgment—are screaming no's emerge from the best of such settings. Conversely, I have seen yes's come to life sweetly and victoriously in people who suffered terrible abuse as children and who themselves have repeatedly committed the most vicious crimes against others.

Many Christian contemplatives say it is all God and finally nothing other than God. God gives everyone the desire in the first place. As St. Paul said to the Greeks in Athens, "God created us to seek God" (Acts 17:27). And as St. Augustine echoed, "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless 'til they rest in thee." And the mystics go on to say that it is God who empowers our willingness, our yes. While I agree with it, this answer leaves me almost as unsatisfied as the answers I sought in psychology. It leaves something out. If God empowers us to say yes but does not *make* us do so, I am still left wondering where the no's come from. It is a question I must leave to better theologians than I am; it is a mystery I do not expect to solve.

### The Seductiveness of Activism

Even though I do not know how or why people respond the way they do to the deepest spiritual invitations of life, I am convinced that yes's are happening all around us all the time—and that they far outnumber the no's. I am also convinced that the yes we say to compassion and justice must be nurtured inside of us. As I have said repeatedly, the primary prevention of human cruelty requires primary attention to the interior transformation of individuals.

To do so in this modern age is difficult. For one thing, we human beings are so accustomed to being motivated by attachment that we have trouble conceiving of being motivated by anything else. We all too often equate nonattachment with inaction. The popular understanding is that contemplation and action are different ways of being, sometimes in balance and sometimes in conflict. We have lost the great mystical promise that loving and effective action happens *within* contemplative living. Similarly, we continue to suffer reverberations from our European history that

made people terrified of quietism, anything resembling not-doing. In this environment, any spiritual attention to the inner life other than for psychological self-improvement is viewed with suspicion. It has been called navel-gazing, self-absorption, New Age, a sign of the decadence of western self-determination. In my experience, much of this fear and suspicion arises from the concern that people will use their personal spirituality to opt out or “cop out” of their moral and ethical responsibilities. From this perspective “letting go and letting God” implies being a passive bystander in a wounded world that cries out for service and action.

I confess that I think this kind of fear is groundless. It is itself an aberration, a straw villain. In all my years of life, of practicing psychiatry and being a spiritual companion to others, I have seen my share of neurotic and psychotic distortions of spirituality. I have encountered spiritual rationalizations for psychological phenomena—and vice versa. And of course I have experienced the common use of religion as a tranquilizer or an outright escape: “It’s all God’s will,” or “Let God sort them out.” And I have met up with deep cruelty that is rationalized on the basis of religion. But in my experience, none of these distortions has been accompanied by serious attention to one’s inner life. And for good reason: they are all defense mechanisms, and any real interior attentiveness would show them up for what they are.

In all this time I have yet to see one single person attending to the inner spiritual life who has been led to cop-out from life’s responsibilities. What I have seen is the opposite; that people often feel so compelled to act, so immersed in doings that they neglect their interior life, leaving it impoverished. In many cases I am convinced that activity is used as a defense against interiority, a means of avoiding an encounter with what’s really going on inside. It seems to me that the greater danger for our time is not escape into passivity and inaction but escape into the busyness of *activism*. I am convinced that monk and writer Thomas Merton was understating the truth when he said, “Absolute quietism is not exactly an ever-present danger in the world of our time.”<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes I wonder if some of the world’s great contemplative souls have not themselves been seduced by the temptations of activism. To be sure, inner realization always calls forth action in the world; this is precisely the way true compassion becomes manifest. But it is not always easy to discriminate between what is truly called forth and what is merely given into.

When I look at my beloved Mohandas Gandhi, for example, I see how he was a great spiritual teacher as well as a powerful activist. And I see that at many turnings he chose political activity over spiritual guidance. In

the process, he and his influence liberated India from Britain's rule. To be sure, the whole of Gandhi's life, much like that of Jesus', was and is spiritual guidance for the world. But I look at India today, a nuclear power at the brink of war, filled with the very ethnic and economic inequities Gandhi so valiantly opposed. And I cannot help but wonder, might Gandhi have given more to the world, had a more lasting impact, if he had been able to give more of his life to teaching and guiding others spiritually?

In contrast I look at His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a man who has to attend to countless political issues and could so easily be wholly taken over by them. Yet he always seems to remain first and foremost a spiritual guide and teacher. There is no way I could ever make judgments about such things. I have far too much trouble discriminating between my own invitations and impulses to even begin to judge someone else's. As I say, it is just a wondering.

But I would pose the thought that in today's turbulent marriage of outer action and inner attentiveness, action is by far the more abusive partner. The contemplatives have forever been saying that there need be no conflict whatsoever. At best, they say, outer action and inner attentiveness do not constitute a marriage at all, but a perfect union. At best, action *is* contemplation and contemplation *is* action. But such a realization of unity can happen only through inner transformation—a transformation that, as the Dalai Lama says, is difficult but is the only way.

### Is the World Ready?

One person, hearing the ideas presented here, responded simply: "The world is not ready for this." I agree. The world has never been ready; it isn't ready now, and without a God-given global dark night of the soul, it is unlikely that it ever will be ready. Throughout history only small and diverse pockets of people have found themselves on the inner path of liberated compassion. They have never for long constituted the mainstream life of any organization or religion, never developed a lasting program or project to change the world, never managed to stem the overall course of human cruelty.

The fact remains, though, that such individuals continue to appear in every generation, and there are perhaps more of them than one might think. Occasionally some are called into major public action and thus enter the spotlight of world attention. More often their outward actions are ordinary and nondramatic. From time to time they are drawn together in their shared desire for love and in their common hope for a transformed world. Alone or in small communities, they will probably always

pray and work for the liberation of humanity. They know, or soon discover, that the contemplative way of inner transformation can never be turned into a project or program. It cannot be taught, learned, packaged, evangelized, or institutionalized. Yet because they know it is the only way they yearn for it themselves, and support and hold out hope not only for all who are ready to listen, but also for those who cannot hear at all.

I began this essay with a short sentence that haunted me. I want to close with a (very much longer) sentence that reassures me. Not long before his death, Thomas Merton wrote in a letter:

The contemplative has nothing to tell you except to reassure you and say that if you dare to penetrate your own silence and dare to advance without fear into the solitude of your own heart, and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you and with you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and God are in truth One Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step* (New York: Bantam, 1991), p. vii. Here is the rest of the Dalai Lama's first paragraph: "Wherever I go, I express this, and I am encouraged that people from many different walks of life receive it well. Peace must first be developed within an individual. And I believe that love, compassion, and altruism are the fundamental basis for peace. Once these qualities are developed within an individual, he or she is then able to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony. This atmosphere can be expanded and extended from the individual to his family, from the family to the community and eventually to the whole world."
- 2 "Nature" comes from the same Latin root as "natal" and "nativity." In a literal sense, it means "close to our birth."
- 3 G. Hardin, "Population Skeletons in the Environmental Closet." *Bull. Atomic Scientist*, 1972, 28(6), 37ff.
- 4 R. P. Shaw and Y. Wong, *Genetic Seeds of Warfare: Evolution, Nationalism, and Patriotism* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
- 5 For an excellent overview of this topic, see the article by J.M.G. van der Dennen of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Groningen,



- The Netherlands: "Ethnocentrism and In-Group/Out-Group Differentiation," in V. Reynolds, V. Falger, and I. Vine (eds.), *The Sociobiology of Ethnocentrism: Evolutionary Dimensions of Xenophobia, Discrimination, Racism and Nationalism* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 1–47. This article, from which I obtained a number of cited sources, is also available at <http://rint.rechten.rug.nl/rth/dennen/ethnocen.htm>.
- 6 A. Freud, "The Role of Bodily Illness in the Mental Life of Children." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 1952, 7, 69–81.
  - 7 Spirit is archetypally associated with that most basic evidence of life: breath. For example, the same word is used for spirit and breath in Latin (*spiritus*), Greek (*pneuma*), Hebrew (*ruah*), and Sanskrit (*prajna*), among others.
  - 8 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book III, Chapter 6.
  - 9 John of the Cross, *Commentary on the Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, Second Redaction.
  - 10 I am indebted to my dear friend and colleague Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, for sparking my thinking about vulnerability and innocence.
  - 11 Cited in J. H. Austin, *Zen and the Brain* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 648–650; M. Hoffman, "Is Altruism Part of Human Nature?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1981, 40, 121–137; and M. Hunt, *The Compassionate Beast* (New York: Morrow, 1990), pp. 50, 204.
  - 12 Austin takes the term *native virtue* from D. T. Suzuki, *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930), p. 297: "Zen does not teach to destroy all the impulses, instincts and affective factors that make up the human heart; it only teaches to clear up our intellectual insight from erroneous discriminations and unjustifiable assertions, for when this is done, the heart knows by itself how to work out its native virtues."
  - 13 There has been a long-lived confusion over the possibility that a certain form of contemplation can be achieved through practice. This has generally been called "acquired contemplation" as distinguished from "infused contemplation," which is the sheer gift. This entire notion is a distortion of the classical understanding, and stems primarily from an early misidentification of the writings of John of the Cross. For an excellent treatment of the sources and consequences of this misunderstanding, see J. Arraj, *From John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding and What It Means for the Future of Christian Mysticism* (Chiloquin, Ore.: Inner Growth Books and Videos, 1999).
  - 14 D. Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 205. Hammarskjöld wrote these words in 1961, a few months before he was killed.

- 15 T. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 91.
- 16 T. Merton, Letter written August 21, 1967. Quoted in H. Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1972, 1981), p. 42.

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