

# ***The Hard Work of Freedom***

***by: Ross Gray***

***Copyright © Ross Gray, 2019***

## ***Acknowledgements***

Thanks to all clients, students and practitioners who have enriched my life over these many years.

Thanks to John Ballantrae for keen insight and bold words, rousing me to action.

Thanks to brother Ken for showing how to commit to writing, and for his example of finding joy in the midst of all kinds of tough stuff.

Thanks to Randy and Taigen for wisdom, support, love, and bagels.

Thanks to Sharon for teaching and practicing together.

Thanks to Ruth and Jon for showing the way.

Thanks to Benten for lighting up my life.

Thanks to Kerry, passionate collaborator, for enthusiasm, support, and willingness to keep stepping off the cliff together.

## ***Preface***

It's hard! Don't let them tell you otherwise.

There are at least a million inspirational self-help books urging us to be our best selves, to be free, to throw off our fetters and touch the sky. Telling us that everything is possible if we just will it to be so. It sounds so easy!

When I was a kid I went to church. What I remember most was how the message in the sermon would leave me feeling helpless, excruciatingly aware of the distance between the possibilities that were evoked and my reality. Like how we should love everyone and yet here I was entirely intent on punching my little brother for being such an annoying little twit. Years later, I recall that same cycle of hope and despair reading *Be Here Now*, an invocation for the possibilities of being vital and awake in our lives. A couple of hours after the rush of excitement about what I'd read I was despairing by how lost I was in thoughts, unable to bring even the smallest amount of awareness to my movement through the world.

It's hard to be our best selves. Hard to be free. But we long for these possibilities nonetheless.

We long for more because we know in our bones that there is more. More to who we are. More to life than we usually experience. We're drawn towards possibility like moths to the light.

I'm a psychologist and I've been meeting with people for decades to talk about what causes them suffering. I've heard their longing for so much more. I've done my best to support their searches. And people do become freer, do expand what is possible for them. Through hard work, they change. They find more.

I'm also a mystic. What I mean by that is that I'm someone who knows from direct experience that I am more than myself, more than that configuration of characteristics that most of us identify with. And that I also know from direct experience that reality is much more than what most of us usually think. That it is bubbling with an unseen vitality that can be experienced everywhere, all the time. As a mystic, I am committed to pursuing the greatest possible freedom and awakensness in this lifetime.

The mystic stance is incredibly affirming in that all of us have the possibility of direct access into a full and vital life, far beyond what we usually imagine for ourselves.

But, I repeat, it's hard.

Why is it hard to claim our birthright to be free and awake to the vitality of life? Because we are so taken up with trying to nail things down. Who we are? What the rules for living are? How we can get ahead? How we can control things to our benefit? How we can be sure we know what we're doing? How we can get people to like us? We want to

organize everything, put it all in its place, and get what we want. Our agenda for how things need to be precludes the possibilities of mystery.

Why is it hard to claim our birthright to be free and awake to the vitality of life? Because we are distracted. By our thoughts. Racing around like monkeys in a cage, reviewing and reshaping past and future. By our addiction to stimulation. These days I'm seeing a new wave of psychotherapy clients, young adults unable to sit quietly in a room without a device. Allergic to peace.

Why is it hard to claim our birthright to be free and awake to the vitality of life? Because we don't believe it's possible. We make these efforts and they don't bring the great results we hoped for, and so we despair and give up. Or we make some effort, and make some changes, but then decide that's enough and we settle for modest improvement. Or we keep seeking for more and more but only if it doesn't make us too uncomfortable or cost us too much. We expect it should be easy.

Why is it hard to claim our birthright to be free and awake to the vitality of life? Because the path for moving forward often seems mystifying, or unclear. For example, when I first flew off to search for freedom at a Zen Temple I encountered monks in robes, gongs and bells, incense, chanting, strange terminology, and people hitting other people with sticks. These props are in no way necessary for mystic experience, although for a while I thought that freedom could only be found through such means.

Summarizing so far: It's hard to be free. There are good reasons for why it's hard. And yet, there is this incredible possibility. We are all inherently drawn towards this possibility because we all know it deep down. And it is entirely available to us all. There is nothing secret, nothing hidden. We just need to do the hard work of discovering through direct experience what we already are, already know.

Which leads to why I'm writing this. I'm interested in helping people decide if they want to do the work of getting free. And I'm keen to support those who want to find their way to greater freedom, greater vitality in life. I plan to write about the gateways to freedom so that they are readily apparent to all those who are looking. These gateways are all around us, all the time.

I also want to look at what is required, and what steps can be taken, towards making change. I want to go beyond good intentions, exhortations to exert willpower, and empty promises.

I start with the gateway of owning our lives. Where we stop relying on the frameworks of others and choose how we will be. Acting and taking the consequences. Becoming fierce about taking responsibility.

I move on to the gateway of opening up. Going beyond the known, refusing to be hemmed in by boredom. Opening through the senses. Opening to feelings, especially difficult ones. Opening beyond our beliefs about ourselves and the world.

Then there is the gateway of investigating the self. All the ways to learn about the habits of mind that run us. To begin to expand and loosen the patterns that bind us, making room for other possibilities. And exploring beyond the usual sense of self, where freedom takes on entirely new dimensions.

The gateway of compassion reveals all the ways we can extend beyond self-interest, free ourselves from small lives, and open up our connection with everyone and everything, all the time.

Finally, there is the gateway of preparing for death. When we bring impermanence into the center of our lives it makes the preciousness of our moments so vibrantly clear. We are released beyond the usual preoccupations with safety, control and certainty. We are released to go free.

The gateways that I describe are each valuable in their own right, but are most powerful when undertaken in combination. How to proceed is up to you.

For those who become really interested in further pursuing the possibilities of freedom, I address inevitable questions and challenges that arise along the way. And use my own experience to reflect on balancing the benefits of getting help with the ongoing effort of owning our lives.

Please take none of what I say on faith.

Reflect. Experiment. Investigate.

I don't want to convince you of anything. I simply offer what I know from experience. You decide if it has merit.

## ***Own Your Life***

### There's No Guaranteed Right Way

The first time I met with my teacher Ruth she told a story. It went like this.

There was a warrior living in a village, but he felt like something was wrong, that he was missing something important about life. He scoured the village for answers and people gave him lots of answers but they didn't satisfy him. So he travelled to the east, to the west and to the south, destinations that were sometimes visited by people in the village. He had some experiences and heard some ideas but nothing really surprised him and he remained dissatisfied. That left the north as an option, but it was taboo country. Rumour said that it was dark and dream-like, that things appeared and disappeared in flashes and that the wind blew strongly. So that's where he went. And he found it to be exactly like he'd heard. He stayed. He learned how to live in the dark. How to be vividly alive with the continuous uncertainty and the relentless not knowing. He changed. Eventually, he came back to the village. It looked different to him now, more like things were in the north. Nothing was solid or certain like it had seemed in the past. But he no longer felt that something was wrong with his life. He could live freely, making his own decisions, resting in the truth of how things were.

I think the warrior in this story is like you and me. In growing up we learned how to fit in to our version of the village. We were taught by family and school and institutions and the media what to believe and how to live. We were trained to be citizens of our city and the country and the world. When I was growing up there was a fair degree of uniformity in this training. These days there is way more diversity in beliefs, and all kinds of formulas about the best way to live, displayed boldly on the internet. But what remains the same are the attempts by others to get us to comply with their fixed world views and our own hope that there is a right answer and an ideal way to live and that we can avoid the terror of not knowing.

A lot of the people I meet are trying to find a place to fit in, and are concerned about getting it right. They want to fit in properly within a world view that they can rely on, that will support them, and keep them safe. They want to be sure that they are living the right way, and that their decisions are entirely defensible. But in reality they often feel unsure about their choices and anxious about the lives they're living.

The story of the warrior points at how all these systems of belief, mainstream and otherwise, can't be counted on. Instead, we need to learn to live in the dark, which is to make our own way based on our experiences. We are all making arbitrary decisions all the time about what's important and how to live and we can either do so by following other people's rules or we can own our lives and make our own choices.

Don't be too intimidated by anyone else's so-called truth. They don't know the truth! And don't spend too much energy seeking high and low for the right answers. The right answers are the ones you come up with.

Of course, other people can be helpful. And systems of belief are useful as reference points. We shouldn't ignore what others have to offer. But ultimately we are responsible for our own lives. Taking up that responsibility is hard. It's also courageous.

### Stand Up for What's Important

So we are all involved in this ongoing exploration about how we are going to live our lives. When we come up with some kind of answer, at least for the time being, we need to be able to support ourselves to follow through. This means being willing to set boundaries, which are the places where we're willing to stand up for ourselves. If, for example, I decide I don't want to eat meat then I need to be able to exercise power to ensure that I don't eat meat. It's no small matter to stand up for ourselves. Many people won't like our boundaries. And there will be parts of ourselves that don't like them either.

Maybe you recognize that there's something that causes you to feel or act in a way you don't like. The challenge is to set a boundary and be willing to do whatever it takes to not do that thing. Some people I see in my work get in trouble pretty much whenever they drink alcohol. They try not drinking very much but that doesn't work; they still get into trouble. After months or years of trying to continue drinking without causing trouble they finally realize that they can't do it. This is the kind of place where a boundary becomes essential.

The ability to set boundaries successfully makes you a powerful person. You can't be pushed around by life, or by your own habitual patterns. I'll talk more later about what I mean by habitual patterns, but for now it's enough to say that these are the ways that you've learned to behave through your experience growing up and which you now perform mechanically, as if they were the natural and necessary way of being in the world.

Boundaries you set are yours and you can do what you want with them. If things change and you don't want a boundary you can just drop it. We get to choose and keep on choosing.

### Curiosity Leads to Better Choices

Choosing is not an easy thing. As I've been saying, we tend to want someone else to assure us that we are making the right choice. But even when we're willing to make our own choices there is always the question of whether we can be wise in our deciding. Do we have enough information? Have we opened ourselves to whatever there is to know?

Say you were deciding what kind of college course you wanted to enroll in (assuming you wanted to go to college). Have you checked out what's available? Do you know what kinds of experiences other people have had at the different colleges? Have you explored enough in the area of your interest to be pretty certain you really are interested? These are all places to look.

The key here is cultivating curiosity and being willing to open yourself to all kinds of information. Not shutting down because of overwhelm. Pay attention to how things affect you. If you visit a college how do you feel? Do the students seem engaged? Are the teachers burnt out?

But in addition to looking around in the world there is also looking inside. Do you know what your biases are in approaching new challenges? Are you likely to overestimate your capacity or underestimate? Do you tend to avoid challenges in order to avoid failure? Are you attending more to making money or to your excitement for learning?

The more we understand about ourselves and how our minds work the more likely we are going to be able to make decisions that work for us.

But still, we would like guarantees.

### We Can't Know How it Will Go

I was talking with a client lately who is having a tough time deciding whether to leave her relationship. She's spent a lot of time talking with her partner and a lot of time thinking about what works in their relationship and what doesn't work. But she is frozen in indecision. She doesn't want to make a mistake and later regret her decision. Will she regret later staying with her partner if they never get closer and she misses her chance to have children and a happy family life? Will she regret leaving her partner if she is unable to find a new partner and ends up just missing her old life? She wants to know in advance the outcome of her decision.

So this is a really important dilemma and it's one that we all face. The terrible truth is that we can't know the outcomes of our choices until they happen. Even the seemingly best decisions can go entirely off the rails. This is the terrifying part of owning our own lives. We are always stepping off a cliff, not knowing what awaits us below. And we don't like that.

At some point we have to decide that we have enough information to make a decision even though there is actually endless information that we might yet gather. It usually doesn't take all that long to know what we actually need to know. In the Samurai tradition in Japan it was taught that warriors should not take more than 3 seconds before acting. Waiting even that long could result in death when you're dealing with people carrying swords. Better to be instantaneously responsive.

### Be Willing to Take the Consequences

In sports people often talk about being willing to take a hit for the team. A hockey player will go into the corner of the rink chasing the puck, knowing that he is going to get slammed by an opposing player. It's a price he has to be willing to pay to be successful. So it is with our lives. We have to be willing to take the "hit" of our decisions. And that's hard. If I decide not to pursue a health problem with my doctor at my next visit I will take the hit of further erosion of my quality of life. If I decide to seek out more aggressive

treatment I will have to take the hit of time off work, and if the treatment goes badly there will be the hit of living with new insults to my quality of life. I must choose and be willing to take the consequences of my actions with as much grace as possible.

It takes courage to take responsibility for our lives. We have to be like the warriors in this story, making the best decisions that we can in the dark, willing to take the consequences of our actions.

### Recognizing the Gateway

This gateway is about choice and about action. Every time we are faced with a choice, big or small, we have a chance to practice being free. We can let go of preconceived notions and look at how things are and decide how we will act. We will need a lot of practice to get good at this. But talk about opportunities! Our lives are a long succession of opportunities to choose, to step off cliffs and see what will happen.

### Beware the Underbelly

With every gateway there can be distortions and exaggerations that can lead to suffering. And so it is with being active in owning our lives. Probably the main problem that can result from becoming a powerful actor is that the thrill of it all can become addictive and lead to ruthless pursuit of everything you want. I understand this one because I admit I do get a little thrill from coming to the edge of the cliff and stepping off. But when pursuit of that thrill leads to ignoring the effects of my actions on others I stray into territory that ultimately makes us all unhappy. Many of the people we might think of as predatory in this world have a strong capacity to choose actively. This capacity needs to be balanced with compassion.

The other problem I see often with people's active choosing is that it is based on a belief that they can control things. When it turns out they can't control them absolutely, they just choose more extreme actions and try again. We see this in disorders like anorexia, where the attempts to be thin enough just go on and on. And in exercise fetishes where people push their bodies to places bodies were never intended to go. In owning our own lives we are going to get into big trouble unless we simultaneously acknowledge that we have limited control.

### Things You Might Do

Take a chunk of time and reflect on what's important to you. Make a list.

Take a chunk of time and reflect on things that you engage with that aren't important. Make a list.

Make a plan for how to move towards what's important and away from what's not.

Choose one thing. Decide where and how to take a stand. Examples: Stop eating sugar for 100 days. Do sit-ups every day for 100 days. Keep a dream journal. Ask a question

every day that you're afraid to ask. Sit alone in your room and do absolutely nothing for 15 minutes a day for 100 days.

Whatever you choose, support yourself in doing it. Say encouraging words to yourself. Build in rewards. Start a support group. Take a blood oath. Whatever it takes. Build the muscle.

If on day 78 of your 100 days of sugar-free existence you go to the corner store and buy 17 chocolate bars and eat them all at once, don't resort to despair and brutal self-criticism. Be curious about what happened. It's all information. What triggered you? How could you better anticipate the triggers and your reaction? What alternatives might there have been to how you responded?

Choose again.

Experiment with choosing differently. Smile at everyone you meet one day. Next day frown at everyone. Speak up in class on Tuesday. Say nothing at all on Wednesday.

Experiment with choosing quickly and decisively. When you go out for lunch close your eyes and point at the menu. Order whatever you are pointing at. Take the consequences and don't whine.

Identify somebody who's really good at being ruthlessly decisive. Follow them around for a while. See what you see.

Take up a martial art or hockey. Practise taking hits.

## *Open Up*

### Investigate Boredom

My step-daughter Benten is 15. I've been teasing her for a few years now about the potential benefits of mounting a study of the experience of boredom. Perhaps she could get really interested in what it means to be bored, and what might be done about it. I admit to being a pain, but it really isn't as crazy as it sounds.

Boredom means you don't want to have the experience that you're having. If, for example, we were sitting in a dentist's waiting room it might feel like we were wasting time, and that there would be nothing about the room or the experience worthy of our attention. Everything there is already known. Chairs, magazines, bodies, breathing. So instead of opening up to the experience we shut down and seek something better as soon as possible.

Boredom for me is a sign that I'm rejecting my life in the moment. I think we are all constantly rejecting our lives, and that we usually live within a small bandwidth of what we could be living within.

### Savor Openings that Happen

Have you had that experience where you're doing nothing in particular and then suddenly something jumps out at you and you're startled into wide awake. It's like a window opens into a state of wonder. Maybe you look up and see clouds all lit up with pink and red. Wow! Or you hear an aching guitar riff through an open window. Or a hawk cries piercingly as he passes above you. Or you inhale the sweet scent of lavender on your pillow when you crawl into bed at night.

Sometimes these openings come right out of the blue, not connected to what we'd usually think of as beautiful or attractive. One time years ago I was shocked by a man's hand as he was giving me the receipt for the gas I was buying. For no reason at all I was startled by how incredible and quite glorious that ordinary hand was, reaching towards me. Another time I was sitting on my meditation cushion late at night and the sound of a car engine turning over transported me into vivid awareness. These little openings come along for most of us once in a while, reminding us that there is more life in life than we are usually letting in.

Sometimes people have bigger openings, what psychologists have called "peak experiences". With these experiences there is an intensification of sensing and feeling and people often report wonder, awe, ecstasy, profound well-being, a sense of the interconnectedness of everything, and an opening up of time and space. Why do peak experiences happen? Well, they can be facilitated by psychedelic drug use, prolonged meditation and sensory deprivation, but just like little openings they can arrive out of the blue. They are fortunate openings into the nature of reality, varying in depth and profundity. And they remind us of our birthright to experience life vividly.

## How to Open Up

What do I mean by “open up”? Say something is happening. You’re going to walk from your bedroom down to the kitchen for dinner. Most often, people make that kind of journey without much awareness. We’re on our way somewhere and the purpose is to get from here to there. We are not open to the experience. Perhaps we’re thinking about what we were just reading or anticipating what might happen after dinner. But we’re not really present. To open up would be to bring attention to the journey, to the particular sensation of feet rising and falling, to the swing of the body, to mood, to the smell of the dinner wafting up. We could lean into the experience. Throw open our arms to embrace whatever is happening. We could treat our experience as if it’s something we want, are curious about, instead of something to get through so that we can get to something better. Like dinner.

Babies are good models for opening. They look with wide eyed curiosity. What’s that!? How about that!? Was that a face? Where did it go? They are taking it all in, delighted by the ongoing discovery.

Opening up need not be dramatic, exciting, or especially intense, although it can include all of that. It’s a welcoming approach to whatever is happening, even if that’s dozing off to sleep.

Opening up has no bounds. We can open more and more to what we see, hear, taste, touch, smell. We can open to our feelings and thoughts and bodily movements. Be more and more aware. We can open so deeply that we lose track of the line between ourselves and the world. Opening can be at the heart of spiritual experience.

## What Stops Us Opening Up?

As we grow up, we start to make decisions about what’s worthy of interest and what’s not. Otto, my PhD supervisor, was intrigued by how children move from an understanding of the world in which everything is of interest, and in a sense “play”, to a world in which there are strict categories of work and play. Suddenly, Lego and Barbie are play and really worth doing while washing the dishes and making the bed are work and to be avoided at all costs. Increasingly, as we grow older, we tend to construct our worlds so that we are alive and alert in narrower and narrower fields of play. Need it be so? The cost to our happiness is huge.

It’s important for us to be able to differentiate and make choices between possibilities. But we don’t need to cage ourselves in by designating only tiny territories of experience as being worthy of our lively attention.

What gets in the way of our being open to life? Our desire to be efficiently functional and move things along to whatever is next. We want to move as quickly as possible to get to our dinner. We want to eat our dinner and clean up so we can get to t.v. or homework or Facebook. School comes to be mostly about getting good marks, or just surviving. Certainly not something to be savored! Work comes to be about making money, supporting family vacations, saving for retirement. We’ve learned to value achieving outcomes but not so much the process of living.

Of course there is merit in being functional. There are things to do, places to go. But the intention to “smell the roses” that people often extol is too often just lip service, or a quick side trip tacked on to the “real” activity of being productive and successful at what we do.

What gets in the way of being open to life? Our rigid preferences. If dinner consists of chicken, rice and squash there will be opinions about that. I think it would be fair to say that lots of kids are not going to be thrilled by the squash part of that hypothetical dinner. Their preferences will make them less than open to the squash experience. They already know they don't like it and so they'll be more likely to just choke it down or ignore it than to come to it with curiosity and interest. How many thousands of experiences do we rule out because we've already decided we don't like or prefer them?

Don't like hip hop music. Don't like vegetables. Nor conservative politicians. Nor feminists. Nor figure skating. Nor playing darts. Nor people who are interested in fashion. Nor brown-skinned people. Nor white-skinned people ...

We can't avoid having preferences. But we can hold them lightly, remain open to experiences beyond our box of favorite toys.

What gets in the way of opening to life? The attempt to protect ourselves. We don't want to pay attention or open up in places that might cause us unhappiness or distress. Better not to open to the baby's crying. Or the homeless man sprawled next to the sidewalk. Or to the feeling of anxiety about our performance at school or work tomorrow. Better to ignore, distract, deflect, numb ourselves. Better to eat compulsively, smoke weed, play video games, watch hockey, read a mystery novel. There's nothing inherently wrong with any of these activities, except they are often used in the service of shutting ourselves down and excluding vast parts of our experience. They are safe places to escape to where we won't have to experience the pain (and joy) of being alive.

That's the thing about opening up. It's not really possible to be strategically selective. When you open up to beauty, you also get ugliness. When you hear the joyful brass band you also hear the wailing violins. When you feel the ecstasy of grabbing life you also feel the anguish of losing what you love. When we are open we get it all.

Sometimes we may need to protect ourselves from too much difficult stuff. But more often we just want to live in a bubble where we pretend everything is ok and suffering doesn't exist. We would rather have a bland superficiality than to know the depths of being human. When we open ourselves to our full experience we feel vitally alive, but it hurts. And that's hard.

What gets in the way of being open to life? Our desire to be in total control. When we open to life we are embracing, rather than clamping down and insisting things go the way we want. If you're really stuck on that 5-year plan, and aren't willing to adjust at all in the face of changing circumstances, then you may want to avoid opening up.

Of course, insisting on being in control is ultimately unwise because of the impossibility of controlling life. I've learned this the hard way. I continue to learn it. My lifelong pattern of wanting to plan and organize never works the way it's supposed to. It interferes with

my ability to be responsive to life as it comes. And it inevitably kicks in strongest right when I most need to open up and experience my fear of losing control.

Lots of people don't want to hear that they aren't in control. They want to believe that by thinking positively or planning perfectly they can control reality and ensure that everything will turn out peachy. But life is bigger than our self-interested plans. We can influence some things and we can respond wholeheartedly to whatever happens but we can't force things to go the way we want.

Not with prayer, not with affirmations, not with magic, not with bullying, not with money, not with popular support, not with a strategic plan.

Sorry, it just ain't so.

### Opening Up to Feeling

The Tibetans describe emotions as "ornaments of the mind". Like beautiful objects hung from a Christmas tree, for our appreciation. We might think of some feelings with such a welcoming attitude. Say, for example, love and joy. We tend to like those experiences. But we may not be as welcoming of other feelings. Anger, jealousy, sadness, hopelessness. These we would probably rather not have hanging on our tree. We tend to want to get rid of them. Or not have them at all.

Opening up means including and allowing all of the feelings that rise up in us. None needs to be rejected or cast out. Rumi, the Sufi poet, puts it this way:

This human being is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unwanted visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrow,  
who violently sweep your house  
Empty of its furniture, still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
As a guide from beyond.

So, there is this wonderful possibility for us to be in touch with our feelings, not shut them down and keep it safe. It's wonderful, and also hard.

One of the reasons people don't like difficult feelings is that they're afraid they will be consumed and overwhelmed and once that door is open they'll never be able to close it again. So they keep them away as best they can.

A young man started therapy with me last week and told me about some anxieties he had about his work. But he went on to say that he was mostly happy with his life. Towards the end of the session he mentioned, seemingly in passing, that he was curious about why he had impulses to throw himself in harm's way. Off a bridge or in front of a car. It was a mystery to him because he didn't feel suicidal or depressed. I wondered out loud whether there might be a despair that lives inside him at least some of the time. He immediately seized on my words and told me about other thoughts he occasionally had about if he died and whether he would be missed or whether it would make any difference to anyone. He had no awareness of any feeling of sadness or despair connected to these thoughts but it seemed likely they were lurking behind the scenes. He admitted to me that he was afraid if he allowed himself to feel despair that he would be doomed. I suggested that it might be possible to feel despair and still have a satisfying life. That maybe it was just part of being human to feel that way sometimes. He was curious.

Another, probably more common, reason for avoiding difficult feelings is that we learn in growing up that they interfere with getting what we want. In my family, for example, anger was unwelcome. If I was angry with my dad I would be met with moral outrage, as if I was showing deep disrespect for his authority. If I was angry at my mom she would be hurt and I would sense how I was a disappointment to her. Anger at my brother or sister resulted in parental blame for my failure to be a good big brother. Not surprisingly, I learned to suppress and control anger in the service of gaining the positive affirmation of my parents.

In some spiritual traditions emotions are described as sources of energy that can fuel our being awake to life. If we can bring our attention right into the heart of the raw emotion it will enliven us. Maybe we can thoroughly feel anger without needing to suppress it. And maybe we can feel that anger without having to discharge it at somebody else, which is really just another way of getting rid of it (temporarily). Feelings provide information that can help us make choices about how to proceed but they need not compel us to act impulsively or destructively. The discipline of just experiencing feeling is not easy, but it's possible. Like anything worthwhile, it takes practice.

### Recognizing the Gateway

Opening up is a gateway that reveals itself to us whenever we notice that we are shut down or lost in thought or engaged in repetitive behaviour. How many times does that happen in a day? If we are bored we can bring our attention to our experience, welcome it instead of judging it as inadequate. If we are repetitively looping through thoughts of the past and the future, we can open to the sensory and emotional reality of now. If we're stuck in endless online games or the same old pointless arguments we can interrupt the repetition and open to everything that we've been trying to avoid. This gate is very wide. We just have to keep walking through.

## Beware the Underbelly

How can opening up be problematic?

When we try too hard. Generally, opening up feels good, but as I've said it can also lead to pain and too much, too fast can be counter-productive and even traumatic. I'm talking about bad trips on psychedelics. And extreme psychotherapy interventions aimed to break down defenses and force emotional openings. Intense deprivation experiences. Or immersing ourselves in images of people suffering severely. I'm not saying we shouldn't take risks to help ourselves open to life. I am saying to assess the risks and your own readiness before stepping off the cliff. And be sure that you have support to deal with possible fallout. Sometimes, for example, at a meditation retreat a participant might get really upset by the experience of opening up and feeling that he's losing control. Experienced teachers will have ways of helping the person to slow down, regain equilibrium, and carry on.

There is a danger of becoming too enthralled by or dependent upon the method used for opening up. The first time I smoked weed as a young man I was blown away by my experience of the color green. Who knew there were so many shades? Who knew that green vibrated with a deliciously green energy? I am thankful for that particular opening. But for many years now I have been clear that substances do not create openings, they simply facilitate them some of the time. But they also come with their own effects and distortions and dependencies, most of which don't ultimately serve the ongoing work of opening to life.

Meditation retreats are very popular and helpful in the work of opening up. But there are lots of people eagerly waiting for their next big retreat with the belief that that's what spiritual practice is all about. One retreat after another. Getting high and then going back to ordinary life and then going and getting high again. Retreats aren't necessary, merely facilitative. And ironically, too much investment in the form of the retreat can distract people from seriously practising opening up every day, wherever they are.

## Things You Might Do

Take an astronomy class. Go birdwatching. Hang out at art galleries.

Lie on your bed with headphones and listen to a symphony. Or maybe *Talking 'Bout the Smiling Deathporn Immortality Blues* by the Flaming Lips.

Dance. A lot.

Bite into an apple as if you've never tasted one before and never will again.

Take up yoga or t'ai chi or chi gung.

Follow David Suzuki's advice and walk in nature at least 30 minutes a day. Soak it in.

Follow my advice and go to a busy mall and sit by the fountain and open up to the noisy chaos of it all.

Experiment with welcoming every feeling you have. Become a connoisseur of emotion. Track what feelings you're trying to avoid. Let yourself finally savor the fullness of the one emotion that you have been hiding from forever.

Sit in a dentist's waiting room and see if you can be curious about the experience. Take it all in.

Do a case study of boredom. You're the case.

## *Investigate Your Self*

### Getting Curious About Ourselves

I don't know about you but I find it hard to nail down an answer to "Who am I?" There seems to be a widely held assumption that we should be able to come up with a good answer, a fixed truth about our identity. Introverted, not extroverted. Ambitious, not lazy. Artistic, not scientific. Pessimistic, not optimistic. Radical, not conservative. And so on. And then we can just know ourselves, and how we are unique and different from other people. And we can feel good about that self or bad about it (or both). Then it's game over. We are who we are, and that's a relief. Except then minor or major adjustments probably need to be made over time, which are known as self-improvement.

But wait a minute! How do these identities come into being? And what do they really mean for our possibilities for freedom and awareness?

### Self as Pattern

Let's go back to that wide-eyed baby. Things happen and she experiences them directly, with little or no interpretation or opinion. Her brother is wearing a green shirt. She sees green. She doesn't think "that looks really good on him". She doesn't frown because she likes blue better than green. She is kind of like a mirror, responding to things without any added interpretation or bias. Reflecting them the way they are.

As we grow up things change. We develop associations to objects and events. A young child has a grandma that is really mean, criticizes her a lot. Grandma wears a rose-scented perfume. Later in life the girl, turned woman, doesn't want roses in her garden. She forms instant dislike to women who wear rose perfume. And she doesn't know why. She believes she just doesn't like the smell of roses. This is how habitual patterns form.

It might have been different for this girl if Grandma had made her feel like she was special and loved. Then, perhaps, she would delight in roses, and as an adult have a garden replete with rose bushes.

Let me give a couple of examples of how patterns come to run our lives.

I had a client. She grew up in a very volatile home, lots of yelling and hitting. No one paid any real attention to what she needed or wanted. The only way to get any attention at all was to yell louder or hit harder, but even then the attention she got was hardly what you'd call caring. So she grew up feeling nobody really cared for her, and looking for someone who she could trust to care for her. But, quite understandably, she was incredibly sensitive about the possibility of people not caring for her. And so she walked around like an open wound, hurt by any word or action that might conceivably indicate a lack of concern or respect. And it would seem to her that wherever she looked there was confirmation that she wasn't worthy of care. And then when she would feel the hurt of that rejection, she'd fly into a rage and want to yell or hit people. She came to see me to help deal with her anger.

I had another client. She was an only child to parents who sacrificed a lot to send her to the best schools and to all kinds of intellectual and cultural enhancement programs. What mattered to her parents was that she should be a high achieving successful person, and a good match for a high status professional man. Doing well was what they paid attention to and praised her for. Pretty much everything else was discouraged as a distraction. Playing with friends, watching videos, going to camp. So she worked hard. Really hard. And she came to see anything not connected with success as frivolous. She learned to suppress her needs, her desires, her feelings. She came to see me about struggles she was having at university. Yes, her marks were good. But she was so anxious about doing well, and graduating at the top of her class, that she had developed sleep problems, had started pulling hair from her head, had her first panic attack. And periodically, as the pressure mounted, she would snap and get blind drunk and embarrass herself in public. Which made her feel guilty that she was letting her parents and herself down, and motivated her to get back to pushing herself towards her goals. And on it would go.

Much of what we are doing in our lives is driven by patterns that developed at another time. The patterns initially developed as ways of trying to avoid painful things and get good things. They were adaptive for the particular version of reality that we grew up with. But the adaptive strategies got automated, and became habitual orienting mechanisms for every new situation that comes along. So now we are no longer dealing directly or freshly with what comes our way. We make assumptions as if the old situation out of which the patterns formed is the same as the current situation. And it almost never is.

These patterns that develop are typically outside of our awareness and operate automatically, like machinery. And we come to identify with our unique configuration of patterns. The machinery running us is what we usually think of as our identity.

The terrible thing about pursuing the agendas of these old patterns is that they can never be fully satisfied. There isn't enough success in the world to satiate the feeling that you need to be successful to gain love. After every success, the same old feeling comes back again. You're stuck in a loop where the only response that seems possible is to keep trying to achieve more so that you can be worthy of love. The patterns just keep running, over and over, repeating in new ways in our lives, keeping us stuck and blind to how it really is. Like a machine!

While patterns exist for everyone, the more understanding and empathic and supportive parents and teachers and society are, the more people will feel they have room to experiment with different ways of being. And the less likely they are to cling tightly to habitual ways of doing and being.

It's also true that lots of our experiences don't have much of an emotional loading for us, and are thus less likely to be tied up in patterns. Say the woodpecker that's been drilling holes in the shed in the backyard. I don't have a lot of complicated feelings about him.

He's just someone to be curious about. So there are all these places where we are not so influenced by our histories and we can come to them relatively cleanly, without bias. We can experience them more as they actually are.

Nevertheless, for everyone there is an overall shaping that goes on, and an internal program about how-to-be, informed by outdated habits and stories. Put more succinctly, in the words of my former therapist, "We're all bat-shit crazy!"

But, can people be run by patterns and still have meaningful choice?

### Self Beyond Pattern

Fortunately, we can become aware of the patterns that run in us. We can become interested in our lives. And that interest opens the door to the possibility of meaningful choice.

How do we become aware of our habits of speech and action? Through observation. Ultimately, the task falls to each of us to do that work. But it's really hard. For the same reason that the fish can't give a description of water. His whole life is water so how could he possibly be able to see it for what it is. Getting help will make it easier. Books to suggest approaches. Someone to give you feedback or point things out. Therapy can be especially useful for this work. Much of what I do as a psychologist involves helping people recognize the patterns that are running, usually outside of their awareness, that cause them suffering.

What do we do when we become aware of our patterns? Well, it's hard to learn the truth about how things work inside us. It can lead to shame. So maybe we just feel bad and stop our investigating. Alternatively, we might like what we find and do nothing to change. If, for example, I recognize that I often alienate friends and family when I tell them frankly what I think of them, that will only be a problem for me if I don't want to alienate them. If I'm fine with that outcome, and believe strongly that people of substance always speak the truth in an uncompromising fashion, then my patterns will have my blessing to keep running the show. If, however, I would like to have the option of less fractious relations then I might be motivated to investigate further.

Investigate further means getting to know the patterns intimately. Not just that I am outspoken. But what kinds of things trigger my outbursts. And what happens inside me when I'm triggered and feel insulted or irritated and want so badly to put people in their place. What do I say to myself about them? Whose words were these originally? How do they link to my own experiences of being put in my place? And so on. We want to shine light on the darkness within. We want to know the machinery as much as we can. Where it comes from and how it works.

Annoyingly, learning how the patterns work doesn't stop them from running. Having been outspoken all my life, it's unlikely that I'll be able to entirely undo the impulse to be aggressively blunt. That will very probably continue to be my default reaction whenever I'm under stress. But I don't have to be at the pattern's mercy and act it out every time. I

can learn to anticipate the situations that are likely to trigger me. Avoid them where possible or desirable and support myself in being prepared when they're unavoidable. Say I'm going to visit my sister-in-law who likes to tell everyone how great she is, and point out to others how they're not up to snuff. If I don't want to tell her to "go stuff it!" for the twentieth time in twenty visits then I can work with myself in advance and in the moment to defuse my rising temper. There are lots of methods, written about in self-help books and taught by therapists, that people learn and apply with this kind of challenge.

The most powerful way to undermine patterns is to stop identifying with them. You are not your patterns! That's true for me and for you! We can and should see them as historically produced habits of mind and action that don't come close to capturing the fullness of who we are.

So we have the possibility of elaborating the options available to us through understanding how our patterns work and using strategies to interrupt their hold on us. And introducing alternate possibilities for thought and action.

It's as if I start with a house that is me and through my efforts I can renovate it, open up rooms and whole floors that may have been closed off, extend space beyond the original frame. The house is vastly improved. And I am freer and happier in this remodelled and more open version of me.

For most people, the investigation of "Who am I" stops with the extension and elaboration of options for dealing with life, although there may be ongoing remodelling undertaken over the years. They are content to have constructed more positive and self-supporting identities.

But, still, how stable and reliable is the new identity? Doesn't it shift and vary just like the old one? Isn't it also hard to nail down, especially when you really look inside at what's going on in there? Are there remaining doubts about who you are? Are you still not fulfilled in the way that you hoped for? Is it possible that there is much more to us than we imagined?

### Self Beyond Self

There's a meditative exercise that I've used a lot over the years. I ask myself the question, "Who (or what) am I?" I look. Looking is different than thinking. Thinking isn't helpful because it just takes us into predictable dead-ends. I look to see who I am. Maybe I have an image of my body, dressed in my psychologist outfit. I ask, "Who is it that experiences that self? I look again. Maybe I have an idea or image of some kind of super-self that is looking down at the psychologist image. I ask, "Who experiences that super-self?" I look. Maybe I see a younger Ross, the child who wanted to grow up and be successful. I ask, "Who experiences young Ross". I look. And on it goes, looking and looking.

This process of continual investigation is useful at the level I was previously talking about, namely learning about various patterns and facets of identity. That's as far as it went for me for a time. But it can and did go into new territory. The looking process began to increase my sense of the fragility and impermanence of all the versions of self that got conjured up. I would see the limits of each self, that none is really me in any fundamental way. They are all tenuous. The investigation starts to seem bottomless. And I start to feel bottomless.

For me, at a particular point in this looking exercise everything dramatically shifted. The best I can do to describe this shift is that it's like I've arrived in a vast field, open and unencumbered. There is nothing left to hold onto. And the very notion of me is lost in the openness.

This place, beyond all of our usual notions of self, is really something else. I recommend it wholeheartedly!

What is it I'm talking about? Words are a problem here, because any I use are not going to help very much. It's a mystery that can't be understood rationally. It's an experience beyond description, and without having had the experience there's no way to really know it. But it's an experience available to everyone. Many people have had small flickerings of it at moments in their lives. It is our birthright to know the fullness of who we are.

Some people who find themselves out beyond the usual sense of self describe that experience as a kind of direct knowing of the Divine. Some people talk about universal consciousness. Others refer to the Nature of Mind. I'm not sure the labelling is all that important.

What I know is that there are several core aspects to this experience beyond the usual sense of self. First, that it has no fixed or permanent characteristics. This has often been called "emptiness" in spiritual traditions but the term can unfortunately suggest a kind of dead nothingness. That's not it at all! It's a vibrant living spaciousness, where nothing can be nailed down. Second, there is a clarity or knowingness that allows perceiving. Like that mirror we talked about earlier. An open presence to life. And finally, there is a ceaseless movement, like a fountain burbling. Endless manifesting. Our minds have this same energetic flowing.

Beyond the house of our patterned self is a huge, empty, burbling, mysterious existence waiting to be reclaimed. To know and live there is the fullest expression of freedom.

### Recognizing the Gateway

If we have an intention to observe ourselves and a curiosity about what is happening inside ourselves then the gateway of investigating the self is open to us. But often we lose track of our intentions and stop being proactively curious. So what can help to see the gateway is when we notice that we're engaged in self judgement. Aren't I great! Don't I suck? And everything in between. Becoming aware that we are trying to nail

down who we are and what our value is alerts us to ask what's going on. What patterns are running? What is being served? Beyond this first level of investigation lies the next, for those so inclined. Who is it who is trying to be a solid self? Who is beyond that self? And so on. Given that we are fairly often interested in ourselves, and are busy with self-judgement much of the time, this gateway to freedom is not easy to miss.

### Beware the Underbelly

A common problem that can happen with investigating ourselves is to get caught up in an endless fascination with the particularities of who we seem to be. Take me for example. When I was in university studying psychology I went through a prolonged period where I just couldn't get enough of analyzing me. I recall especially one dinner. My partner of the time and I were with another couple, all of us studying psychology, and we talked for hours in great detail, buzzing with insights about ourselves and our relationships. He was obsessive. She was depressive. They dealt with conflict in their amazing way. We dealt with it in our amazing way. On and on. At the time the conversation seemed great. And in a way it was. Our self-awareness was new and exciting. But over time there was such a lot of discussions and such a lot of preoccupation with ourselves. It was a bit much!

Beyond going through a phase, people can get bogged down in analyzing themselves endlessly. When that happens it's usually because they're engaged in a public relations battle with themselves. Basically, do they measure up? On the deficit side, there's the worry that they might be damaged or unworthy. On the positive side, there's the hope that they might be special, maybe even exceptional. Their investigation stops with the the usual sense of self, and is concerned with assessing and assigning that self's proper value. Interrogation gets coopted by relentless self-interest. It is not about anything beyond the usual sense of self. It's not about freedom!

When people have experiences beyond the usual sense of self it can sometimes lead to a different attachment to specialness. As if by having such an experience, or the merest taste of such experience, it puts them in a rarefied category of human beings, i.e. the advanced category. In short, people can get really full of themselves. When I was training in Zen meditation we had a technical term for the arrogance that could accompany a substantive taste of beyond the self. Stink!

So, that's one possible side effect. Another is a desire to transcend the pettiness of everyday life. Having tasted how everything is fundamentally empty, there can be a temptation to distance oneself from the messiness of emotions, desire, conflict, and so on. This path of transcendence is about escape. It's definitely not about freedom or living vitally.

The way I understand it, there are two main phases of spiritual work. The first is to find a way to deeply experience beyond the usual sense of self. We need to have that experience with sufficient intensity to be convinced that it's something real. And frequent enough to know it's not an aberration. Not just a product of the drug that was ingested

or of the rare astrological event or of the indigestion from the potato & chick pea roti. We have to know it sufficiently to develop confidence.

The second phase is to learn how to live beyond the usual sense of self all the time, in every aspect of life. This is a quite unimaginably challenging undertaking. But that's the work, and every effort brings us more and more into life's vitality.

If you run into someone who tells you that she lives beyond the usual sense of self all the time she is either seriously deluded (by far the most likely) or she is an exceptionally rare and remarkable person.

### Things You Might Do?

Observe yourself. Observe yourself. Observe yourself.

Ask all your friends and all your enemies to tell you 3 things that they notice about how you are in the world.

Invest in therapy. I get that it's costly. But I see a lot of people who are quite willing to take out a loan for a trip to Argentina or a new car but would never consider a loan to know themselves better.

Write out descriptions of all your major patterns. Break them down into as much detail as possible.

When you've identified a pattern, experiment with violating its rules. If you're supposed to be quiet and deferential sing *What Do You Do With a Drunken Sailor?* at the top of your voice next time you visit your parents. If you're supposed to be independent and invulnerable ask everyone you meet on the street for help in tying your shoe. See what happens when you violate the patterns. Especially inside of you.

Ask yourself who you are. Look. Ask who sees that version of you. Look. Ask who is looking. Look. Keep going. Keep looking. See what you find.

Attend an introductory meditation workshop.

## ***Cultivate Compassion***

### The Challenge of Compassion

A few nights ago my step-daughter Benten was sprawled at the bottom of the bed between her mom Kerry and I, telling us again about how much she hates school and bemoaning that we're only in September and how that's such a long way from June and summer break. But then, I can't remember exactly how, because I was on the verge of drifting off to sleep, Kerry got into talking about how easy it can be to be judgemental of people, to not be generous in how we think about and act towards them. And that led to us talking about people that we've formed grudges against for no good reason. And then to the question of whether we could be more generous.

That conversation was about compassion and lack of compassion. In our talk about how we can sometimes be less than compassionate what was really obvious was how our own self-interest was implicated. An example was being envious of someone who had achieved something that we wanted, and then holding onto a low level resentment towards them. This kind of primitive territoriality is what we're up against when we commit to opening our hearts to others. To cultivating compassion.

When I was growing up "the Golden Rule" was often brought up by adults around me as a guide to how to live. Words from Jesus. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The same adults tended to talk about this instruction as if it was a matter of course, as if it was straightforward to implement. And as if good Christians everywhere were busy actualizing that instruction. In fact, I think Jesus was being very radical with this teaching, and that taking him seriously requires a colossal undermining of our usual ways of being. It's a rare person of any religious or political persuasion that seriously commits herself to the path of compassion. And that's because it's really hard work.

### Compassion Deficit in Our Times

Our lives are woven through with brutality, obvious and subtle. Benten tells me about the bullying she witnesses in her on-line existence. Ugly stuff indeed. People living for the excitement of viciously attacking others. Ridiculing. Shaming. Threatening. People making themselves big. Making others small.

Our modern political landscape is increasingly fractured and fractious. All the commentators agree. We are less and less inclined to work together. More inclined to assert our own self-interest, damn the consequences for others.

Despite all the efforts on many fronts over the last few decades, race relations are not much better than when I was driving taxi at nights in Saskatchewan in the 1970's. Back then, I discovered that many white passengers felt safe denigrating Indigenous people in casual talk with a white cabbie. They knew better than to talk about politics or hockey, where differences of opinion might lead to trouble. But they assumed that we would all be on the same page about race. At the time, I was shocked to make this discovery, but

it opened me up to a whole world of hate that I'd not fully seen growing up. I haven't been back to Regina for some years now but last time I was it was clear that Indigenous people had, thankfully, finally gained access to some political power. But even though white people were taking greater care in how they spoke about race the same basic attitudes seeped out of crevices everywhere. Not much compassion to be found!

When Jesus gave his teaching centuries ago the context was likely the same as ours in important ways. People's self-interest by and large running the show. But since his time there have been waves of change coming and going that featured sincere efforts to take the needs of more people into account. The intention of compassion towards others has been actively promoted at times, even while efforts admittedly often fell far short.

In this moment of history there seems to be an especially low public commitment to caring for others. Maybe that's just because our vast informational networks provide us with overwhelming evidence of our hard-heartedness. Or maybe something especially vicious has been unleashed by the economics of globalism and the politics of hate.

### And Yet Compassion Arises

Several years ago a devastating photo went viral, of Aylan Kurdi, a three year old Syrian boy drowned in the Mediterranean Sea when he was trying to escape his homeland for Europe. My heart broke when I saw the photo. Lots of peoples' hearts broke when they saw it. We all felt the loss, the utter pain of it all.

After that image appeared there was a great influx of funds around the world to charities supporting the plight of people fleeing war torn countries. In Canada, there was an upsurge of goodwill towards Syrian refugees, and new government funds were made available to allow sponsorship for immigrants.

This type of compassionate response arises for most of us, at least from time to time. For at least that moment we forget our self-interest and open our hearts and want to help. We remember our common humanity.

And there are lots of people and organizations who are working at compassion for others all the time.

A huge question of our times is whether we will collectively arouse sufficient compassion for our dying planet and for future generations of people or whether short term self-interest will continue to dominate our economic and political decisions. We desperately need to be brave enough to open our hearts to all the suffering that is heading our way.

### Compassion for Ourselves

It's important to bring the same generosity of spirit that we're cultivating with others to ourselves. That's quite different than what I've been referring to as "self-interest", which has to do with valuing ourselves over others.

I recall reading about the Dalai Lama, who grew up in Tibet. When he came to the West as an adult he was astounded to discover such a lot of psychological suffering. He'd expected that a better economic situation might support a greater sense of well-being. But what he found was a lot of people who were intensely self-critical and feeling unworthy.

It's been a lot of decades since the Dalai Lama first made his observations. But my sense is that the overall mental health of our western world has worsened. Our expectations of who we should be have been inflated by a culture focused on celebrities and business tycoons. And social media promotes gross fictionalization of our lives, featuring wonderful dream fantasies for others to be envious of. It's not easy to feel good about ourselves.

Some of the issues that I see in my psychology practice these days include: Young professionals who feel like failures because they can't afford to buy a house, having been brought up to believe that home ownership is a right and a cornerstone of success. Young couples who feel like a failure because they can't keep up with the demands of parenting in an age where kids are expected to be in every kind of program available and parents to be on call constantly. People who feel like a failure because their attempts to follow an entrepreneurial trajectory like Mark Zuckerberg (of Facebook fame) have not taken off. Athletes who haven't been big enough or fast enough to be able to make the professional ranks and secure a 6 million dollar per year salary. Academics who haven't been able to get tenured because there are so few positions available and the criteria are so demanding. And so on.

These are people relatively privileged, yet feeling bad about themselves. There's a whole other growing group of people in this city who are nowhere near the ladder of success, and who usually find it even harder to hold their heads high.

Can we be kind with ourselves even if we have not climbed to the top of whatever it is that we wanted to be? Maybe even if our situation is dire. Why is that so hard to do?

Some people really balk at this idea of compassion for ourselves. As if it's just self-indulgent and narcissistic. It's not.

When I was in training to become a therapist my supervisor talked with me about the danger of burnout and the necessity of balance. He said that as a therapist I really only had one tool and that was me. And that I needed to take care of that tool if I was to be of any use to others. This is advice that is relevant for more than just therapists. It brings to mind the instructions given on flights, to put your own oxygen mask on before helping others. If we want to be able to extend compassion fully to others we cannot afford to be harsh with ourselves or the quality of our work will be seriously undermined.

### How to Cultivate Compassion

To begin, we need to have an intention. But why form the intention to be compassionate anyway? I think survival of the species and the planet are relevant here. Given our

current trajectory I wouldn't place bets with my bookie for our survival for another hundred years. Compassion might make a difference.

The other clear reason to decide to foster compassion is that it feels good. I know that I feel a lot happier if I've gone through the day with my heart as open as possible, meeting people with generosity. And so has the Grinch who once stole Christmas and then turned things around! But people should experiment with this assertion for themselves. How does it feel to be generous?

Perhaps we decide to form an intention to be more compassionate. How do we go about implementation?

Once again, I have to emphasize the power of observation and self-awareness. To diligently work to see all the ways that we are not compassionate. To understand the mechanisms that keep turning us towards self-interest.

And we need to take action. To push against our relentless greed in tangible ways. Extend ourselves beyond what's comfortable and safe. The ways of doing that are many. They include giving of time, money, physical capacity, attention, and sharing of skills. Feel the resistance and keep going.

There's an exercise that's used in Tibetan Buddhism, called Tonglen, that I think really captures the work of cultivating compassion for others. To start, you imagine a person or group of people across from you. You look at them and see how they are in pain and you deliberately experience their suffering. As you breathe in, their pain leaves them in the form of smoke and comes into you. You inhale it for them, willing to take their pain. Forever. On the outbreath you send them everything you value. All your accomplishments, your joy, your love, your peace of mind. You give it all away to them. Forever. The intention of Tonglen includes cutting into our self-interest, opening our hearts, and feeling our connection with other beings. It's powerful.

As for cultivating compassion for ourselves, again we need to take action. A major focus for such action is making sure we nurture and rejuvenate ourselves.

### When Compassion Becomes Natural

Up until now I've been stressing that arousing compassion for others and ourselves requires hard work, going against strong tendencies to be in competition, wanting to be more successful and more special than others. But what happens when we open ourselves right up so that we lose that hard line of distinction between us and others. When our experience goes beyond the usual sense of self and everything and everyone feels connected. When every corner of reality is revealed as having the same qualities of emptiness, clarity and movement? When it becomes unavoidable that we are all unique expressions of that same burbling fountain of mysterious existence?

When we experience the truth of who we are, compassion arises spontaneously. No work is required. It becomes the natural order of our lives, because in the most primal

way we know we aren't separate from anyone. So why wouldn't we want the very best for all of us!

### Recognizing the Gateway

The gateway of compassion beckons us every time that we catch a glimpse of ourselves angling to get more than everyone else. Have you seen any of that lately? All the subtle and blatant ways that we manoeuvre to be sure we get the biggest piece of pie, the acknowledgement for being right, the praise for being the most compassionate in the group. This gateway also becomes potentially visible every time we bring harshness to ourselves or others. When we put productivity or values ahead of generosity. Keep a watch out. It's not hard to see our heartlessness. And then be willing to take up the antidote of compassion. It can take us all the way to freedom.

### Beware the Underbelly

The most common difficulty that people have with compassion is an imbalance between compassion for others and compassion for ourselves. If the weighting is too much towards compassion towards others we easily become harried martyrs, proud of our long-suffering but annoying to be around because of our smelly moral superiority. If the weighting is too much towards compassion towards ourselves things can quickly degenerate into indulgent self-coddling and a retreat from the world. Compassion is for us all, no exceptions.

Another issue is that compassion cannot be reduced to a formulaic template for implementation. Many people have strongly held positions that go something like this: If you feel compassion you must hold X perspective on this issue and support Y plan to alleviate the problem. This takes us back to something I was talking about earlier, that there is no absolute right way to live. And that we each have to find our own way with our choices. This means that compassion can inform our decisions but that there is no solid assurance that any particular action will be the most compassionate in any particular circumstance. We have to choose despite this uncertainty, and then take the consequences of our choices.

Let's take immigration, surely a hot topic of our time. Some people avoid feeling any compassion for people desperate to find a better life for themselves and their families. But I think most people have at least some empathy for their plight. Can we allow a generosity of spirit for all those who would come to North America or Europe, and still have a generosity of spirit for everyone in these same regions who are struggling to keep their heads above water? If we do, we will make decisions that try to take everyone into account. For some, that may mean an open immigration policy and aggressive social programs to foster harmony in a radically changed society. For others, it may mean a gradual influx of people up to a certain point, trying to keep a societal equilibrium over time. I don't know the right answer. The point is that people acting out of a compassionate intent can come to different conclusions and that doesn't mean that they are not compassionate.

Another example. Some people who have a really strong feeling for animals become vegetarians, wanting to show compassion to animals and not cause them unnecessary suffering. Then there are Inuit hunters, who kill animals as a necessity for survival and as a longstanding part of their culture. Attitudes toward caribou and bears and seals are deeply respectful. The animals' sacrifice is understood as part of a sacred cycle of birth and death.

I was a vegetarian for 20 years. Then I stopped, and started eating fish and chicken. I didn't want to make that change but decided to because of circumstances. I was living with my then partner Kathryn who was in a prolonged and serious health crisis. She'd been told that she needed to start eating meat to support her failing health and she decided to take that advice. I was then making separate meals for each of us. But I was exhausted because I had a complicated job and was taking extra contracts on top of that to pay for her health treatments. And I had major responsibilities at the meditation centre I was involved with. I decided, on balance, to simplify my life by adjusting my diet. At least part of that decision was rooted in my desire to support Kathryn in addressing her suffering.

I tell this story not because I want to defend my actions. I could have taken different actions, but I chose this one and I'm willing to stand behind myself. I tell the story because of how it evokes judgement. Some who read the story will feel sympathetic. Others will feel unsympathetic. And some will feel utter contempt and won't read another word beyond this one. They have decided that they know what the shape of compassion is once and for all and that anyone who violates that shall be cast out. There's a lot of that way of thinking going around. I've done my share of that way of thinking.

As far as I know there is no great tablet in the sky where God has written out all the correct answers about how to live. Open immigration policy or not? Abortion or no abortion? Right to die or no right to die? Eating meat or not eating meat? Poker on Sundays or not poker on Sundays? Until I have evidence of such a tablet I'm going to keep assuming that I need to take ownership of my life and make the best decisions I can, with as much compassion as possible for all.

One more issue I want to raise about the path of compassion. Which is that it is not necessarily the same as being nice. Compassion means responding to the actual need that is arising. And sometimes that isn't nice.

I'm especially sensitive to the "nice" derivative of compassion because of my upbringing within fundamentalist religion. In which a kind of moral program was prescribed. Niceness is a close relative of politeness and is just another feature of this program, accompanying other features like not drinking or smoking, not dancing, not playing poker on Sunday, not swearing, not having sex before marriage, tithing to the church, looking down on heathens and homosexuals, and so on. Such a tiresome program!

But compassion is neither nice nor not nice. It's what meets the need. Let me give you a rather extreme example of how "not nice" can be deeply compassionate. Many years ago now I started working with two meditation teachers, Ruth and Jon. I was, and continue to be, deeply impressed by them and I'd jumped into serious engagement with both feet.

At first, most of my work was with Ruth, but then Jon came to town and a group of us went to spend a weekend to receive his teaching. During that weekend at one point he responded to something I said by looking me directly in the eye and saying, "Do you know that you're a manipulative prick?"

Devastation!

But I was pierced in a way that years of therapy and meditation practice had failed to accomplish. My longstanding story of being a basically nice guy to whom some bad things had happened along the way was blown out of the water. And I started a new round of investigation that went much more directly into the heart of my darkness. From here, I can honestly say that Jon's insult was one of the most compassionate acts ever to come my way. From here, I also know what it cost him to make such an intervention. And I'm grateful for his willingness to cause me pain in the cause of my freedom.

So, compassion is not straightforward. As we're learning how to be more compassionate it's probably not wise to start with insults as a main approach. It can go very wrong in unskilled hands. Kindness is a much better beginning, and mostly it gets us where we need to go. Although not always as speedily or effectively as a skilled teacher like Jon can take us.

### Things You Might Do

Give money to people in need beyond what is comfortable. Don't claim it on your income tax.

Volunteer for the Cancer Society or Amnesty International or the local Humane Society.

Make a list of the people you judge harshly. Write out the things you say to yourself about them. Spend 10 minutes a day going through the list one by one and evoking feelings of kindness towards each person.

Make a vow to stop gossiping about people in your class or at your workplace. If you break your vow go and apologize to the person you gossiped about.

Think about everybody you appreciate and make a point of telling them about it.

Phone your lonely old aunt.

Take a day for yourself every month and do nothing other than what makes you feel relaxed and nourished.

Ask someone to be with you when you talk about the pain in your life.

Take a snooze in the middle of the afternoon.

When your body hurts, take care of it.

## ***Prepare to Die***

### The Avoidance of Death and Loss

I feel slightly sorry to be including this as a topic. There's some very old pattern running in which I wish I could somehow spare us all from how things are.

But I'm afraid it's unavoidable. No matter what we do to ignore or reject death it still comes for us. And we all know it in our bones.

For me, death intruded early when my dad died suddenly when I was 10. Life turned upside down.

It was because of that early experience, and its ongoing impact on my life, that I decided to do my doctoral research on the effects of a parent's death on teens. After graduating, I took a job in a cancer program at a teaching hospital and started seeing patients and their families. I vividly recall one of my early meetings, with a woman in her 70s, newly diagnosed with an advanced breast cancer. She was extremely distressed at her diagnosis, which was entirely understandable. But I was surprised by her seeming incredulity that this could happen to her. And by how incensed she was that one of her doctors had referred to the possibility that she might not survive. It was as if she had never allowed for the reality of impermanence in her life.

Over time, I learned that most of the people I would see in my work would have little interest or capacity to speak about death and dying. In one way I fully understood that focusing on coping and living well with and beyond illness was of paramount importance. But often the pursuit of the positive and avoidance of death was confounding to me. People with terminal disease refusing to make a will or organize their finances because it would be giving in to negative thinking. People who saw it as a personal failure of will if they had even moments of despair or anxiety about dying.

This is the world we live in. Where aging and death have been edited out as much as possible, and the glorification of long life at all costs has come to rule. Old people like me are encouraged to carry on working hard and running marathons as if we weren't breaking down. Really old people, like my mom, are tucked away in nursing homes where they won't intrude too much into our fulsome living. "Celebrations of life" are all the rage, where survivors are encouraged to only remember the happy times with the deceased person, and avoid crying, as if death were simply a welcome opportunity for nostalgia.

It's pretty crazy, comparable to a scenario where everyone were to decide that daytime is the only reality and that night time should be ignored and avoided and denied. Pretend it doesn't exist. If you can't pretend in the moment, avoid feeling anything about it.

I am no doubt overstating this collective reluctance for death. Despite the prevailing approach of avoidance, there are lots of places in our society where people are paying attention. Development of high quality palliative care programs. Advocacy for the rights of dying people to influence the timing and way of their death. Green approaches to dealing with corpses. Bereavement support programs that encourage the work of mourning. And so on.

### Death as Advisor

While I was working at the hospital I met regularly over several years with a man in his thirties. Paul had a brain tumour that he'd been told would kill him. In talking with me about this grim forecast he said he wanted to make sure that he lived whatever time he had left really fully, and especially to stay connected with his teenage daughter and his partner. His strategy to keep himself on track was to remind himself regularly that he would be dead soon, and that this very moment needed to be savored. It served him well. Every time he got into worrying about how long he might live or whether people would be ok when he was gone, he'd bring himself back to the intention to be alive right now and connect with the people in his life because it would be over soon. He had a dilemma when after a couple of years his scans no longer showed any evidence of a tumor and his doctor suggested that perhaps he might start to think about himself as cured. Rather than change tack he decided to stay with an ongoing focus on how short his life would be. He was afraid that if he were to be seduced by hope, he would start planning for the future and get distracted from now. As it turned out, he did die within the year. When we said goodbye he talked about how glad he was to have had the time he had.

This use of death as a reference point to spur us to aliveness need not wait until we're in big trouble. I used to have a quote from Pablo Picasso on my website (not sure where it went?) that reflects this possibility. "Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone". If we are cavalier about our lives, feeling that there is lots of time for everything, we are deluded. I've lived a pretty long life, but some days it feels like it will be gone before I really got going. Some days I wear my mala beads around my wrist, each "bead" shaped like a little wooden skull. As I finger each one individually I say to myself, "last moment", infusing myself with an urgency to wake up to every precious moment that remains.

### How to Prepare for Death

This notion of preparing for death might be interpreted as having to get ready for a new experience or a journey. But the thing is, we don't exactly know what awaits us on the other side of death, although many claim to have insider knowledge. We really can't be sure. So preparing for what will come is a bit of a shot in the dark. I could be still trying to follow the morality program I learned growing up in the hope that I might be judged worthy by those particular criteria when I come to the purported pearly gates for judgement. But I'm not doing that.

Preparing for death includes consideration for the people who will be left behind. On a practical level, what's called for is for each of us to imagine what would happen if we die today. What messes will our loved ones inherit? Self-interest and fear of death and general busyness may stop many adults from taking care of these issues. And that's really unfortunate.

Preparing for death includes taking care of business that might be unfinished. Is there a longstanding feud with a family member that you want to resolve before you die? Do you owe friends money? Are there people who helped you greatly whom you've never told how grateful you are?

What else can we do to prepare for dying and death? Well, what we do know about the process of dying is that we progressively lose everything. And it can help to be ready and able to let go.

In a way, we are always dealing with loss. Like when we finish elementary school and then start high school. There are feelings about something being over. A sense of loss, and a needing to let go in order to move on to the next thing. This experience of loss gets accelerated the older we get, until now in my sixties it's a galloping reality. Loss of bodily strength and function. Of memory like it once was. Of physical attractiveness. Of friends who are starting to die off. Of respect from colleagues who see us as over the hill. Of energy for getting things done. And so on.

To be willing to let go is to stop the insistence that things be the way we want. It's to relax into what is happening, whether we want it or not.

Here's a little example. This morning I made a mistake. I managed to delete an entire chapter of this writing. I wasn't happy! I tried to see if I could recover the document but I couldn't (turned out later it would have been possible if I'd investigated further!). So I retyped the whole thing.

In the more distant past this kind of event might have taken me down a path of self-recrimination that could have ruined my whole day. Like, "How stupid can you be?" Like, "Isn't that just like you? Don't you ever learn?" Complete with bitter resentment about having wasted so much of my limited time available for writing.

But I know more about letting go than I used to. I saw the judgements rising in my mind and felt the anger at myself. And then I consciously let it go. Which meant to take the hit of my new chapter-less reality and start again from there. After a while the judgements started to appear again. I took the hit and let them go again. Each time the judgements tried to start up, I'd release myself from the insistence that I do things properly and that I be efficient and that life needs to conform to my needs.

This example is rather trite, but it directly applies to aging and death. Can I let go of my insistence that I shouldn't have to get up so often at night to pee? Can I let go of my desire for strength and independence in order to get the help I need to shovel snow?

In my spiritual work I've done quite a number of exercises aimed at practicing the possibilities for letting go, some of them specific to dying. In one exercise, I would say goodbye to all of the senses, one at a time. So, for example, I'd say goodbye to sound. To the robin's song early in the morning. To Jimi Hendrix turned up full blast. To the clear joyous ring of the bell struck at the end of a round of meditation. To Kerry's raucous laugh exploding like fireworks in the sky. And Benten's chattering to friends on her phone. All of these sounds will be gone for me when I die. So in practicing now, perhaps I'll be ready to let go when it's my time.

In another exercise, I visualized being on my deathbed and people coming in to visit me one at a time. Seeing what I have to say, feeling what I feel as we part this last time. It's a hard exercise. It's not that I'm try to practise so that I can avoid emotional pain when I'm dying, but rather so that I can really be there while I'm feeling the pain. Not to shut down to try to avoid the pain and not to be overwhelmed by the pain because I have no experience in being able to allow it. To be able to be there in the loss as I'm dying. And let go.

A friend of mine developed his own practice of identifying everything he couldn't keep. Can't keep this computer. Can't keep these fingers. Can't keep the thought I'm having. Or the feeling of sadness rising up. Can't keep my lover. Can't keep my love. And on and on. His practice was bringing into his awareness all of the ways he wanted to make life permanent and safe. And then letting go.

### Recognizing the Gateway

The gateway to freedom through impermanence is evident in all those moments when we find ourselves trying to hold on to an experience. When we are aware of the poignancy of things changing, and our impulse to somehow stop that from happening. On the last day of a summer holiday that was just so perfect, resisting the shift to school or work. When posing for the photo on the day of graduation. When the first red leaf drops from the bush in front of the house. While we want to nail things down so they can never change or never be lost, we can instead turn into the truth and open to the mystery of our dreamlike lives. Hardly here at all, yet so brightly beautiful.

### Beware the Underbelly

Probably the main problem that can develop with this gateway is to go out of balance in the opposite direction to avoiding death. To become too focused on dying and loss, and thus neglect life. There are a couple of ways that such imbalance can express itself. One is to slip towards a kind of apathy and hopelessness. As in, "What's the point? Why make an effort? We're destined to die anyway." It's this kind of interpretation that has led people to believe that talk of death and impermanence is "pessimistic". It's not pessimistic. It's just honest. And it need not lead to hopelessness.

Yes, we will die. And yes, there are no guarantees about the right way to live on our way to death. So yes, there is no safe path here. But we can actively choose in the midst of uncertainty and we can experience great happiness in our freedom.

Earlier, I talked about the experience of being beyond the usual sense of self, where we feel interconnected with everyone and everything. From there the spectre of death looks quite different. Certainly not pessimistic. And not tragic in the ways we often assume. From there, we can question where we could possibly go that separates us fundamentally from each other.

The other expression of imbalance is when people really get into the drama of dying and death. It can be addictive, like a drug. I ran into some of this when I was attending palliative care and death and dying conferences. People who were charismatically throwing themselves into the intensity of the charged reality of dying. Like great birds getting as close to the sun as possible. But more to get high than to be there for people in need.

### Things You Might Do

Make a will and update it regularly. Ditto for Powers of Attorney forms and a detailed document about your finances.

If there are people who you have unfinished business with, track them down and say what you need to say or do what you need to do.

Go and sit in a lounge in a Long Term Care home. Be with the people in the room. Open your heart.

If you want to be buried at sea or have your ashes scattered in Bethlehem make your own arrangements.

Let the wild flowers in your vase slowly die. Every day, lean into the changes you see. Feel everything you feel.

Practice a breath meditation. Every time you let go of a thought and return your awareness to the breath you are training to be able to let go when you're dying.

## ***Walking the Path***

In the preceding sections I've tried to point at the places and ways that we can find entry to possibilities for greater freedom. I've been encouraging experimentation and play so that we can have experiences to guide decisions about what we want. I've also tried to provide descriptions of what it might be like to taste freedom through each of the gateways.

When we taste freedom, it can change things for us. For some of us, it just gets really important to keep going further. We want to know more about the process of walking this path to freedom. New concerns and questions arise. I will address some of these unavoidable questions below.

How Committed Am I? I am reminded of my first meeting with my teacher Ruth, when she gave me a formal warning about our future work together. That I needed to know that it would cost me everything. At the time, I was perplexed about what that meant and I was initially relieved when she later explained that it didn't necessarily mean I had to leave my job, my relationship, my entire life situation. But, more radically, it meant that everything that I believed was important would come into question, and be subject to the criteria of whether it served my freedom or not.

Back then, I was not in a position to make such a huge commitment once and for all. None of us are. We have to keep choosing as we go along. Inevitably, we run into places where we don't want to go, find ourselves holding on and not wanting to let go. So we get to choose. Again and again. Nobody is forcing us to go free. We can start out on our path, have an intention, but we must remain active agents. The real question is whether we are ready to make a serious start.

Will I Choose a Particular Path? Are there benefits from joining a group, or enrolling in a formal program of spiritual work? Most often yes. Except for the most exceptional people, an unstructured, eclectic approach tends to get bogged down over time, too easily derailed by personal preferences and patterns. Bumping up against a training structure tends to force us to extend beyond that which comes easily, and takes freedom beyond our comfort zone.

Spiritual paths are many. I'd like to say that they all lead to the same place, but that isn't necessarily true. The main way of assessing has to do with the actual experience you have when you read a book, go to an introductory workshop, or start training. Does it feed you? Can you taste the freedom? Is there room to move and bring your own energy to the program? What are the other practitioners like? Do they seem like they are waking up?

It's good to check around. Learn about the variations. Kind of like dating. It helps to have some experiences to really know what works for you.

Different spiritual paths have different emphases, although most have at least some expression of all the gateways I described earlier. Some follow compassion most strongly. Some are shaped by ongoing inquiry into the mind. Some have many ways to experience ecstatic opening.

Follow your interest. But also be aware that interest can be dominated by historical patterns. For example, people who are introverted and emotionally distant can be drawn most easily to paths where they can pursue freedom while avoiding other people and the intensity of emotional experience. While this may work for a while, if they really want to be free they will eventually have to turn towards all that they are avoiding.

Will I Look for a Teacher? Pursuit of a particular path doesn't always imply a teacher, but very often it does. Is a teacher necessary? There is no definitive answer, but my own experience has been that it has been really useful to have help from people who know more than me.

What should you look for in a teacher? Most important is that they should exude awakens. You can directly experience that. They should have lots of experience and a history of training with their own teacher(s). They should have a significant degree of mastery of the methods that they teach. They should be concerned only about your freedom, and any working relationship should be based on that concern. Not on profit, power, status, recognition, or gratification of personal needs. They should respect boundaries, not expect intimacies that exceed the project of spiritual training.

There is a saying that when you are looking for a teacher have both eyes open. Which means gather as much information as possible and choose. Once you start working with a teacher close one eye and keep the other open. What that means is to keep looking at how things are going, but put enough faith in the teacher to seriously engage with the work. Teachers are all imperfect. Take what you can without endlessly looking for and judging their flaws.

To work with a teacher is a commitment for you both. The teacher commits to giving you what she has. You commit to making use of it.

How Will I Know When to Stay and When to Go? There is no reliable template for how to become present, how to go free. So how will we make these ongoing decisions about how to proceed in walking the path?

It's a mystery. It really is. But it includes trusting ourselves. And it includes being suspicious of ourselves.

Throughout my life I've felt a pull towards spiritual experience. It's like there's been a searchlight that's been consciously and unconsciously shining, looking for connection with something I've always known but lost track of. Looking for home.

Like when I was 8 and my grandparents returned from a trip to Japan. Grandpa brought back a little book about the life of the Buddha. I was instantly fascinated and eager to

read it. He eventually hid it from me in fear that I might be influenced and drawn towards a heathen religion. I tore up their house looking for it. Why was I so fascinated?

I trust this intuition towards freedom.

And yet, there are these patterns that run in me and in all of us, linked to historical attempts to adjust to the world. And these patterns seek satisfaction. They repeat endlessly, insisting that they shape every choice. They can subvert and distract from the pull to live freely and joyfully. And they can coopt decisions that are aimed at freedom, twisting them to serve the patterns' agendas.

It's complicated. If I am involved in a spiritual path and it's getting difficult and I'm not sure it's what I want anymore, how will I know what to do?

Meditation teachers often warn students that they are constantly tricking themselves, following the dictates of the ego. And yes, there are all these blind spots and seductions and losing track of what's important. Like when I knew that it was time to leave my life as a researcher but nevertheless accepted the huge donation offered to our research group, knowing that it would keep me engaged for at least another few years. I couldn't walk away from the prestige, or risk disappointing my colleagues.

Teachers lament that most students leave their spiritual path as soon as it starts to get tough, i.e. as soon as the really important stuff starts to arise. And they're right, it happens a lot. The recommendation often gets made to put your trust primarily in the teacher so that you can better ride out the turbulence of your own desire machinery. That's understandable.

The point here is that we need to carefully examine our motivations if we want to support our intentions to be free. Too easily we could end up jumping from path to path, teacher to teacher, looking for an easy place to hang out.

But it's tricky. We also have to learn to listen to our deepest intuitions, trust ourselves, and act decisively from our own experience. We are, after all, training to take ownership of our lives. How can anyone, teachers or not, ultimately know what's best for us?

Somehow, we must come to live our own lives and make our choices. Without a foolproof template, and without anyone telling us what to do.

What Place Will Community Have in Spiritual Work? There's no doubt that it's helpful to have connections with others who are serious about getting free. We all need support. We also need reassurance from time to time that we aren't entirely crazy, or that if we are, then at least we aren't alone in our craziness. But there are varying degrees of connection possible, ranging from loose relationships with periodic contact to brick and mortar communities where practitioners live and work together.

There are no right answers here. But there are choices to be made.

My Path as a Case Study. What I'm going to do now is lay out the mysterious workings of my spiritual path. Not because it's typical. There is no typical. And not because it's special. All paths are special and mysterious. I write about me as a case study because it reveals how the questions I've just raised can take shape within lived experience. I also admit that I want to seize this moment to honor the people who have most helped me along my path.

### Early Days

I was 18 or 19 and riding a train in Germany, standing up because once again there were no seats. I wanted to trade for a new book, but was reluctant to give up my Joseph Conrad novel. A guy in the same compartment said he would trade but admitted to me that his book was boring. I was on the verge of saying forget it but, in desperation, changed my mind and decided to forge ahead with the exchange.

The new book was *Steppenwolf*, by Herman Hesse. Reading it blew my mind apart! Since I'd walked away from the religion of my youth a year or so previously I'd been both exhilarated by my freedom and borderline depressed by the loss of any sense of spiritual life. Hesse restored it, and I was thrown into a whole new world of discovery that was utterly unlike the Baptist church, and yet was alive with possibilities beyond the usual sense of reality and self.

For a few years after reading *Steppenwolf* I went from one type of spiritual (or just plain weird) experience to another, with very little discrimination about what was truly helpful. I don't regret this period where I was taking a scattergun approach. I was gathering experiential information and it helped me to gradually get clear about how to proceed.

Towards the end of this period I remember being at a talk at a strange convention of people from a lot of New Age and spiritual paths. A Sufi teacher lambasted the audience for being a bunch of feckless samplers, all of whom he accused of having no real intention of getting free. This spoke to me at the time. And I started to get more focused in my search.

### Dunc and Transpersonal Psychology

While I was experimenting with this and that in my post-*Steppenwolf* period I was also at university studying psychology. The format of the introductory course involved having a series of lecturers, all professors from the Psychology department. It was not a hugely interesting class. But one day this guy Dunc showed up. Late 50s, bright blue eyes, unruly white hair. When he started to talk it jolted me into attention. His topic was consciousness. It's evolution. The possibilities for people and society. He radiated enthusiasm and vibrant aliveness.

I wanted desperately to study with Dunc. But for a variety of reasons it took me a couple of years to track him down. While I was waiting to connect, I learned some things about him. Dunc had been a leader in studying the therapeutic use of LSD with alcoholics. He'd written a book about common experiences shared by people using psychedelics

and people involved with spiritual traditions. I learned that he was widely condemned among his peers for his unorthodox ways.

I finally met Dunc. And I studied with him, followed him around, partied with him, watched football upstairs with him while the party went on below, talked with him endlessly, lived with him and his partner June for a short while. And generally had a very good time for a number of years.

Dunc had a lot of things he was interested in, most under the umbrella of what had come to be called "Transpersonal Psychology". Chief among his interests was psychic energy. He was developing a theoretical framework, and was keen to develop practical applications. I listened, and experimented with what he proposed. All intriguing at the time.

But it turned out that what I gained most from Dunc was the model of his enormous generosity.

A moment stands out. Dunc and I were wandering through the Administration Building on campus, probably in search of some bloody form that needed signing. An uptight looking older dude was coming down the hall towards us. Dunc did what he did, which was to light up and greet the man warmly. In return, he got a grudging "hi" and no eye contact. I was thinking "What an asshole" or some such compassionate thought. But after the dude was gone, Dunc turned to me and said, "Wow. That's the first time he's acknowledged me in at least 5 years." That was his teaching in action. Just keep showing up no matter what happens. Live generously. Bring light to the world.

I continue to this day to have great respect for Dunc. But I also had to go my own way. One of his core beliefs was that the path to happiness lies in evoking positive emotions or energy. He wanted to create field effects where people evoking love or joy or bliss would transform the experience of others entering the field. Effectively, we could all be riding a wave of bliss. Why wouldn't we?

In terms of the gateways to freedom that I've described, we could say that Dunc was emphasizing opening up, but the opening was confined to positive states only. In meditation training, among the warnings that are often given is to not be attached to particular states. To feel blissful is understood to be of no special importance. What we are aimed at is being awake to whatever arises. My own experience with trying to live in a purely positive emotional state was that it did violence to me. That it outlawed other feelings from me. And that, anyway, it was really quite impossible. Sometimes I'm sad. Sometimes I'm angry. I couldn't agree with Dunc that this was unfortunate or unnecessary. I want the full smorgasbord of life.

Last time I saw Dunc he was in bed in his cabin in the woods, with dementia and having suffered a stroke. He smiled at me with the light of the sun, although I don't think he knew my name. There was a little group of women caring for him, headed by June.

They all told me what a joy he was to care for. How it was really a gift to them to spend time with him.

Thank you Dunc.

### Zenson and Zen Training

After I completed my Masters in Psychology I worked a couple of years teaching for the university. I was meeting with a small group of people to do informal meditation in the park on Sunday afternoons. But it was pretty “loosy goosy”. My spiritual interests were narrowing down. I read a couple of evocative books about Zen, and had a friend who told me stories about his time spent at a Zen temple. So I flew off to San Francisco to spend a couple of weeks at a temple there. The experience scared me. The trappings of mystical practice set me back for a time. But I was also moved, and knew I wanted more. My most vivid memory was how clear the practitioners’ eyes were.

Then Kathryn and I decided to move across the country. My official reason to want the move was to do my Ph.D. My unofficial reason was to find a Zen temple to train at. Which I did.

The first couple of years attending the Zen Centre several times a week were really hard. I was having a long-delayed grief reaction to my father’s death. My relationship was in trouble. School was gruelling. The main outcome from my sitting practice was a lot of pain in my legs. And the people in charge at the Centre didn’t seem all that together. I persevered.

Then, one day, a man showed up. Wearing dark blue robes, shaved head, athletic looking, piercing blue eyes, prone to jokes. Zenson was a priest and a teacher who had been recently sanctioned by the person who’d originally set up the Zen Centre, Roshi Philip Kapleau. He was coming to take charge.

Suddenly everything was different. Having someone who clearly knew what he was doing brought order and direction to the spiritual practice at the Centre. There was a delightful crispness in the air. Flowers appeared on altars. The meditation room got renovated, exquisitely redesigned. The weekly schedule of sitting and chanting intensified. Whereas previously long retreats were only available through travelling out of town, now we had our own retreats led by our own teacher.

Zenson was a force. Active, engaged, encouraging. He sought me out, just like he sought everyone else out. Gave me instructions. Got me to be a Board member. And over time, brought me into the wild river of koan practice. I worked hard for years on an initial koan, which was a question that took me into the heart of the mystery of my life. Retreat after retreat after retreat. Late nights sitting. Private meetings being tested by Zenson.

It was a very intense period for me. Very electric. And hard to balance with graduate studies, and then starting a career.

Then things changed. I broke through my “breakthrough” koan. The koan work had been intense, very much an expression of the “investigation of self” that I’ve described as a gateway. The emphasis was on looking beyond the usual sense of self through an ever deepening questioning process. It was exhilarating work but also torturous.

Now there was a long line of subsequent koans to work on, with the dual purpose of deepening an initial awakening experience and providing instruction about how to live in the world with presence. There was a greater emphasis on compassion, about how to be of service.

Zenson made me a leader. I assisted with running evening sittings and introductory workshops. Was in charge of meeting with new people coming to the Centre. Gave talks of encouragement. Led short retreats myself. Spearheaded the fundraising campaign.

We also became friends. We shared baseball season tickets. Had dinners together, with respective partners. I babysat his infant son.

Somewhere along the way, I started to feel weary. Zenson wanted me to become his full time Assistant, encouraged me to be more and more involved at the Centre. I started to pull back. I was struggling with my practice. While I liked working on the koans, I was finding them insufficiently relevant to the specifics of my life to really move things forward. I didn’t feel that my ability to be present was greatly improving. But mostly I felt weary. That I’d somehow acquired a second full time job on top of my daytime work.

Then things changed again. A crisis emerged, with Zenson at the centre of it. It turned out that he’d been behaving in destructive ways, breaking expected boundaries with students. He had not been well prepared for dealing with the intimacies that arise in teacher/student relationships. There had been little attention paid to the importance of boundaries in his apprenticeship to become a teacher. And he messed up.

There was a prolonged period of trying to know what to do and I was part of the small inner circle that had to decide. After months of difficult process, Zenson was asked to leave the Centre. I wasn’t there when he drove away.

I stayed at the Centre after Zenson left. Got recharged when a new teacher came to take over. But I never really recovered from the heartbreak I felt about Zenson, nor from my weariness. I also came to understand my weariness as related in part to limitations in the approach being taken to spiritual practice at the Centre. And I could see some of those same limitations repeating themselves with the new teacher. I eventually took my concerns to her. She had no idea what I was talking about. It was time to leave.

This leaving was not easy for many reasons, including my own self-doubt about whether I was just fleeing a difficult situation because I was afraid. Was I acting out of an old pattern? I had to trust my intuition. I was done. In retrospect, I’m glad for my decision.

My main concern about the approach being taken to increased awareness in Zen practice as I knew it was that there was little to no attention given to the importance of personal patterns. The investigation of self was only about what was beyond the usual sense of self. Nobody seemed too concerned about how the machinery that runs us works. The prevailing bias was that if we just can deeply experience the fundamental nature of our own minds, difficult habit patterns will drop away. That wasn't my experience. And looking around, it seemed to me that it wasn't true for other so-called senior students. Nor had it been for Zenson.

In the last couple of decades, there's been a landslide of meditation teachers embroiled in controversies about ethical violations. Concerned students ask how this is possible. Some decide that the teachers must not have had any legitimate awakening experience, that they were frauds. But I don't believe that, certainly not about Zenson. What seems clear to me is that there has been a serious ignoring of how patterns work in the formal training of many teachers, and that the result of this lack of awareness is that the patterns are free to run amok behind the scenes.

My own experience is relevant. A strong pattern for me from early on has been to be relentlessly responsible, taking care of other people, and downplaying my own needs. That played out for me at the Zen Centre in that I willingly took up all kinds of responsibilities, acting out the old unconscious hopes that I would be deemed worthy through such dedication. My pattern was seized upon by the teachers at the Centre, seen as embodying the very type of commitment that made for a serious practitioner, and clearly evidence of my blooming compassion. As I got more and more fatigued, and could see that there was something seriously out of balance in my approach I tried to speak about my work ethic as a problem. I was met with incomprehension and stigmatization. Which was indicative of the absence of any framework from which to consider how "good" behaviours aren't good if they're arising out of habit, unconsciously. Which they always are unless attention is being actively brought to the situation.

The other problem that I came to see with Zen was how it's original context of monasticism continued to shape practice. There were all those retreats. For about a decade I didn't have a vacation that wasn't used for intensive meditation. There was the centrality of the intentional community of Zen Centre members, separated from the larger community. Most of my friends were fellow practitioners. That was great in many ways and today my continuing closest friendships are ones that developed in that context. But there was little time or energy left over for other social connecting. Then there was the upkeep and administration of the temple and its grounds. More than once, I arrived home after an evening of sweeping floors at the Centre, or meeting to talk about raising funds. I'd look around at my unswept floors and disorganized financial records and wonder if this was really how it was supposed to be. Eventually, I longed for an approach to spiritual work that was much more integrated into my everyday life and

didn't require me to live a parallel existence. These days, I am thankful for my friendships with fellow practitioners, but want nothing to do with formal communities.

Despite the rockiness of my last years at the Zen Centre, and despite my critiques of the approach, my main feeling about Zen and Zenson is gratitude. It was all very useful.

About once a month for the past 15 years I have breakfast with my dear friends Taigen and Randy, who I met and practiced with at the Zen Centre. They are both teachers now, Randy in the Vipassana tradition and Taigen at the same Centre where we all met. I greatly look forward to these get togethers.

I feel very warmly about Taigen and his work at the Zen Centre. He's part of a wave of teachers much more alert to boundaries, more open to and supportive of psychotherapy and a focus on personal patterns, more concerned with integrating practice into everyday life. Of course, Taigen and I don't agree on everything, and there are important differences in our approaches. But every time I see him I think how fortunate his students are to be able to work with such a remarkable, open-hearted man.

#### Ruth and Jon, my Dzogchen Teachers

After I left the Zen Centre, I dove into my work. I'd become director of a research unit studying psychosocial issues faced by people with cancer. There were lots of projects, but looking back the ones that stand out for me involved using research findings to inform drama productions. I partnered with a theatre program, and enlisted cancer patients and theatre volunteers as actors. I got to act and work on scripts and write about our big adventures. It was exciting, intense, and moving. It also, eventually, became way too much to manage.

During this time, I wasn't involved in any formal way with a meditation group. What was useful was grabbing the chance to attend retreats in a number of different traditions. I got to sample other serious approaches, looking afresh at what might work for me. But as time went on I found it increasingly difficult to move my intention for freedom forward. I missed working with a teacher.

I was seeking a therapist. I'd been in therapy a few times before, and thought it was time to try it again. First session, something new. Almost from the start, the therapist had my ears pinned to the wall. She seemed to see right into me. Wasn't having any of my bullshit. Not aggressive, just really clearly letting me know that I wouldn't get away with my usual smoke and mirrors in this room. I was appalled. I was delighted. I wanted more. I'd met Ruth.

I was in therapy with Ruth for a few months when I learned that she was a meditation teacher. It didn't surprise me. She had a presence beyond my previous experience. The room where we met practically vibrated with energy. She was the most straightforward person I'd ever met. I asked if I could work with her as a student.

It was some months later when I met Jon, her teaching partner and later her life partner.

It's important to say right now that my more than 20 years of work with Ruth and Jon didn't start because I liked their model or approved of their way of teaching. I jumped in because of how deeply affected I was by how they were in the world. In Zen, there was an old master who famously challenged his students to practice as if their hair was on fire. Ruth and Jon walk into a room as if their hair is on fire. Not in a panic but with a vibrant intensity that rolls off of them in waves. It turned out that their way of working was perfect for me. But I would have tried just about anything they had an offer.

Ruth and Jon worked intensively with a relatively small group of students. Their approach was rooted in the ancient Tibetan mystic tradition of Dzogchen, but they'd reworked material to make it more accessible to Westerners. They also borrowed from a variety of other mystical traditions, and had no problem with their students exploring those possibilities.

Weekly individual meetings were paired with small group meetings. Focus shifted back and forth from work on identifying, interrupting and undoing personal patterns to work on coming more and more deeply into presence. There was a curriculum for the first couple of years, featuring lots of methods. The intention being to have all kinds of tools to aid in the work of awakening. The content for the curriculum included all of the approaches that I've described as gateways in this writing. Their bias was that the different approaches complement and enrich each other.

The focus was on daily practice, with mandatory morning and evening sitting and various exercises scattered throughout the day. For the first few years I worked with Ruth and Jon they didn't offer retreats, because in their experience too many people just used them to get high and then came home and spilled all the energy they'd built up into reactive patterns. Later on, they introduced retreats to supplement the intensive daily practice. Retreats often featured forays out onto the streets to practice engagement with everyday life in a state of heightened awareness.

When Ruth moved to California to be with Jon I made trips to visit. Twice I went and stayed for a month in a room near to their house, and went every day for teaching. It was amazing.

Ruth and Jon helped me shine a relentless light on my life, on what I was doing. Change became unavoidable. I left my marriage. I moved into a small apartment and began to downsize my work life. One day, after a plenary presentation to a big conference, followed by a national radio interview, I suddenly realized that my career ambition had vanished. A driving force throughout my life just up and disappeared and never came back. I returned to where I'd started in psychology, as a therapist.

Whereas I'd become friends with previous teachers, I did not become friends with Ruth and Jon. They were my teachers and just my teachers and that was good and it was clear. The focus was on my freedom and nothing else. When we went for dinner together it was about being fully present at dinner. It was never about loosening up and

relaxing into comfortable habit patterns of sociability. We could be social, but not at the expense of presence.

The arrow of teaching was always pointed directly at me, at my heart. Once, early on I asked Jon about the lineage that informed his teaching, meaning who did he study with? In Zen, lineage had been a big topic of conversation, seen as the primary way of legitimizing teachers. If they'd had good training with enlightened teachers then they were the real thing. Jon's answer to my question?

"Fuck lineage!"

Right.

That was a show stopper. But it was also a teaching. "Be here now! Is this working for you? Trust yourself."

Another time I tried to get Jon talking about his experiences working in a Gurdjieff group years earlier. He started to talk and then caught himself, and laughingly accused me of trying to distract us from the importance of my work.

Years later Jon and Ruth both agreed to let me tape interviews about the paths they had travelled to becoming teachers. It was fascinating. And I was struck by how they had not indulged in the telling of those rich stories over the years, except from time to time when a particular story related directly to my efforts to get free. They had been demonstrating a core aspect of their teaching, "Do what is necessary and let the rest go."

I said above that the real heart of my attraction to working with Ruth and Jon was how they embodied presence. The relevant term here is transmission. They transmitted what is possible, and sitting in the same room with them immediately increased that possibility for me.

For example, many years ago I was meeting with Ruth and we were talking about effort. I was going on about my tendency to be responsible, to always make effort. How tired I was of effort. I wanted to relax. She invited me to relax. She said that we could relax together and that we could go all the way to full awakening through relaxation. I looked into her eyes and felt her let go and let go and let go. And I was letting go and letting go and letting go. I couldn't find any bottom to the letting go, to the relaxation. It just kept going until there was nothing left but this exquisite peace.

I was struggling to come up with a memory of a specific moment where Jon transmitted what's possible to me. I was talking with Kerry about this conundrum on our long walk this morning and she was saying how her experience of Jon's impact is that it has had an ongoing, almost relentless quality. That in so many subtle and not subtle ways he has constantly let her know that she is fully capable, that she goes way beyond the limited ways in which she sometimes thinks of herself. This really struck a chord for me. Over the years Jon has unfailingly transmitted the Nature of Mind, the truth about who

he is and who we all are, including me. His unwavering recognition of who I am has infused me with confidence, and hugely supported my ongoing efforts to get free, to actualize presence, to come home.

About 15 years ago Ruth and Jon suggested I start teaching. So I did. I ran introductory groups. Out of those came a small group of serious students that I met with regularly for a number of years, much as Ruth and Jon had done with me.

Every day I feel grateful for the efforts of my teachers.

Gratitude is an endless open sky.

## ***Finale***

Throughout this writing I've made the case that personal and spiritual change is difficult. That freedom is hard work. I think it's important to know this. And decide about whether the effort is worthwhile. We all have to decide, and keep deciding.

But I want to now take another look at this notion of "hard work".

There is a story about a deeply awakened meditation master, Layman Pang, in ancient China. At a time when almost all spiritual practice was done in monasteries, he lived as a lay person, was married and also a parent. Moreover, both his wife and adult daughter were said to also be awakened. In this particular story Layman Pang is sitting in his meditation hut when he suddenly shouts, "It's hard, hard, hard!" His wife shouts in response, "It's easy, easy, easy!" And then his daughter chimes in, "It's neither hard nor easy!"

What can we make of the story? When we are really engaged in an activity or way of life then the judgements we have about them become less relevant, perhaps not relevant at all. Is it hard to open up to a difficult feeling like anger? When we are engaged in doing it we are just doing it. Yes, we could say it's hard. But that calls for a separation from the process so that we can judge. We could also say it's easy, because sometimes even greatly effortful tasks suddenly seem effortless. But again, a separation is called for. "Neither hard nor easy" seems closest to the mark, because right in that moment of opening to anger there is no judgement. There is just the anger!

So after all this, maybe it isn't accurate to say that the work to be free is hard, at least when you're doing it. Freedom is something that is just there for you if you choose. Hard and easy. Neither hard nor easy.

Why would you choose to do the work?

What else would you rather do?