

**Pets,
Children,
and
Spirit Maturity**

**Reflections on
the Inner Journey**

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*This book
is dedicated
to Emily,
my first grandchild
to reach adolescence,
and to all adolescents
and parents of adolescents
on planet Earth.*

What is this Book About?

Many adults and many children have become fascinated with the inner consciousness of their dogs and cats and other pets. We know that some sort of awareness is going on inside these animal companions. Yet we know that it is different from the awareness that is going on in ourselves. We know that we are inaccurate when we project our sort of inner awareness upon our animal companions. Yet we also intuit that our animal companions are not simple machines; they are very complex, inwardly alive beings who are similar to ourselves in many, many ways.

We also realize that children in the first year and a half of their lives are very much like animal companions, though more helpless and dependent upon our almost constant care. What sort of consciousness is going on in these infants and small children? Clearly, they respond to our facial expressions and antics. Their faces and sounds communicate to us their feelings and wants. Are they aware of being alive? Are they aware in the same ways our pets are aware? Or are they aware in ways that are quite different from our pets? Do these young children have thoughts like we adults and older children have thoughts? When does thinking, in the human sense, begin?

Clearly, after a child learns to talk, a deeper sort of inwardness has been achieved. We are able to communicate with a talking child as another thinking being who can think as we think and share thinking with us. Also, we are learning that childhood thinking has its stages of development. A child of three does not think like a child of seven. What happens here? What is going on in the inner persons of these changing children?

Then in adolescence a human being is giving up childhood, in some sense or another, and becoming, in some sense or another, an adult. What is an adult? What is maturity, measured not simply in physical size or sexual function or social roles, but in inward qualities of consciousness? Something I am going to name "Spirit" and define very carefully begins to happen when the full implications of adult human living are appropriated. We might say that some children never grow up: they just become bigger. Adulthood can be defined as an inward quality. What is that inward quality? How is a mature adult something quite different from a child?

Such questions as these are challenging not only to adolescents but to all of us for the full course of our lives. A whole human being never ceases to be an animal. We are animals our whole lives long. Our pets can continue to teach us what this means. A whole human being never ceases to be a child. We are children our whole lives long. Our children can continue to teach us what this means. A whole human being never ceases to be an adolescent. We are adolescents our whole lives long. Our adolescents can continue to teach us what this means.

And who can teach us what it means to be an adult? Surely it is other humans who have actually become adults. And, as I will strive to clarify, Spirit maturity also has its stages of inward intensification. Who can teach us Spirit maturity? We will have to be taught by those who know, the true shamans among us. Lucky is the adolescent who finds early Spirit teachers who can evoke this Spirit potential. And lucky is the adult who, at each juncture of living, finds the Spirit teacher that is needed. And lucky, too, is the adult who in profound aloneness takes the final journey and becomes a Spirit teacher for others.

These are the questions and the themes that this brief book has been constructed to introduce. I say "introduce" because these topics are inexhaustible. Furthermore, concerning these profound matters, there are limitations in our ability to express what we have learned to one another. Hearing someone tell about a journey is not the same thing as taking that journey yourself. So certain aspects of my tale in this book may be cryptic to some readers, not because they are reading poorly or because I am writing poorly, but because understanding must wait until living has caught up. I am imagining that this book might be read more than once. And I am imagining that those later readings will say more to the reader than the first, that certain portions of this book will be understood more clearly when many years of genuine adult living are assisting the reader.

Part One:

Pets

Dogs and cats far outnumber the other species we choose for our pets. Birds, reptiles, and fish are too different from ourselves to join our families in a thoroughgoing way. Monkeys and chimps are mammals very much like ourselves, but perhaps they are not different enough from our own children. And they can be even more trouble.

Also, monkeys and chimps are tree animals which eat mostly vegetables, while we humans live on the flat earth and usually include more meat in our diets. So perhaps we identify deeply with cats and dogs because they are, like ourselves, small carnivorous animals running on the ground catching their food and fleeing from bigger meat eaters (or perhaps compromising with them).

And perhaps we also love our dogs and cats because, like humans, they are group animals requiring much affection and attention from one another. Dogs and cats will bond with us, giving and receiving affection and attention from us. They are capable of being members of our family and, indeed, making us members of their family.

So I invite us to observe more closely the consciousness we have experienced in the dogs and cats we have known.

Animal Feelings

First of all, dogs and cats have feelings. They can feel pain and pleasure. They can be lonely, happy, resentful, fearful, angry. Their experience of emotions may be somewhat simpler than our own complicated emotional lives, but this may be why we love them so: they bring out our own simple emotional qualities which we might guard or suppress in our human interactions.

Our uniquely human form of consciousness includes the capacity to suppress our basic mammalian feelings or to twist them into patterns of compulsive action. Our cats and dogs tend to be closer to their feelings than many of us. They do not have the ability to build the sorts of distances from their feelings that we humans can accomplish.

Nevertheless, both we humans and our pets share what we might call "feeling consciousness." This is a very powerful and seemingly magical form of awareness. When we are close to our feelings, we are capable of a relevance in our responding that we sometimes call "magnetism" or "vitality." Occasionally we are able to communicate at this deep feeling level with our pets or even with wild porpoises, whales, apes, or chimpanzees. Though these communications may seem unusual to us super-rational humans, we are simply recovering that primal mammalian feeling-consciousness which we humans share with the other mammals.

Animal Mentality

In addition to what I have called "feeling consciousness," dogs and cats and the other mammals are also mentally intelligent beings. That is, they are mental beings in the sense that they scheme for their needs, they figure things out, and they can learn from their experience. Clearly, they can learn a large number of signals from us, and they can associate appropriate behaviors with those signals. Yet if we wish to observe our pets accurately, we must not project upon them our own uniquely human modes of thinking. For example, dogs and cats do not appreciate music as a symbolic form that is expressing their feelings. Likewise, drawings and paintings do not attract their passionate interest. It may seem that they understand many words we speak to them,

but they do not use language the way we do. For dogs and cats, human words do not “stand for” things. Our words function for them as “signals” indicating the need for appropriate behaviors. Gestures and facial expressions can likewise function as signals. Humans might even use music and paintings to signal their animals, but signals are not the same mental function as symbols. This distinction is very important for understanding our pets, our children, and ourselves.

Humans also signal one another. We possess the signal-mentality seen in our dogs and cats. And this signal intelligence has evolved to an incredible degree of effectiveness in humans, dogs, cats, chimps, horses, elephants, dolphins, mice, etc. The experiments now being made by humans to create “languages” with which chimps and dolphins can communicate with us have demonstrated amazing feats of mental capability in these animals. But these humanly constructed “languages” are not, for these other species, languages in the human sense. What chimps and dolphins do with these so called “languages” can be explained in terms of **signal-using**. The feats performed by these animals do not indicate a **symbol-using** intelligence such as we humans experience.

Symbol-using is a form of intelligence that is unique to the human species, but claiming this uniqueness does not need to indicate a demeaning of our non-human mammalian companions. The basic mammalian mental process, which we share with our pets, is a highly evolved form of intelligence. And some non-human mammals may be more capable of using this intelligence than some humans.

But however wondrous the basic mammalian intelligence is, human intelligence, fully operative, is even more wondrous. The reason we cannot always see this is that we do not take care to distinguish the signal-using mentality we share with our dogs and cats from the symbol-using mentality that is unique to our species. We know that we use language fluently, draw pictures, make music, do dances, beat drums, create sculpture, and build artful buildings. But we do not often reflect carefully on why our pets and wild animal companions do not do these things.

We usually conclude that the other mammals are not quite as smart as we are, but the actual state of affairs is not a matter of degree. Rather, we are observing in humans the existence of an entirely different type of smartness. In certain types of signal-intelligence, our dogs and cats may be much smarter than we are. Distinguishing and processing smells is a case in point. It is not just that the noses of our dogs and cats are better, their brains also are better at thinking through smell signals.

But our pets lack that unique form of intelligence that uses “symbols” to **stand for** things--symbols that can be abstracted from ongoing life and manipulated on paper or on a computer screen or in our minds. Numbers, words, the drawing of a tree--such abstractions, when seen by our dogs and cats, might be experienced by them as signals, but not as symbols. In our pets minds, these abstract entities do not **stand for** things. For example, when you call your cat by name, that name is just a signal, like “Hey There” is a signal for you or me. The cat’s name does not, in the cat’s mind, **stand for** “me,” this particular cat. It just means something like, “Pay attention; another signal is coming at you,” such as, “Supper is ready,” or “Get off the couch.”

And in the mind of a particular dog or cat, some other animal’s name does not **stand for** that other animal. If, in talking to one particular dog you use another dog’s name, that name might function as a signal indicating the behavior of turning toward the other dog, but no list of names, each standing for some other animal, exists in the mind of your dog. And your dog does not “call to mind” some other dog along with its

name. The symbol-using process is so all-pervasive in we humans that it takes careful attention to notice that these other mammals do not actually do this. Only in our comic strips and movie cartoons do animals think as we do.

It is true, however, that the inner worlds of our pets do contain complex arrays of signal images that can be remembered and applied to current behaviors. A dog, for example, can learn from experience what a skunk looks like and smells like and can call to mind appropriate behaviors whenever it meets an animal that fits this particular pattern of remembered images. But these remembered signal-images do not **stand for** the skunk. Such images are simply part of that behavior-oriented signal-functioning of the dog's signal-intelligence. A dog does not lay awake at night thinking about skunks. The dog composes no poems about skunks, draws no pictures of skunks in its mind or on paper, and does not use the abstraction "skunk" as a metaphor for other displeasing experiences in its life.

But poems, pictures, and metaphors are processes that human children learn to do. Why? Because they are capable of symbol-using intelligence. Let me say again what symbol-using means. Take, for example, the number "4." This abstract figure on a piece of paper or in a human mind stands for a common characteristic found in four apples, four dogs, four tomatoes, four trees, four bowls of food, four crayons, etc. No dog or cat would notice that this "fourness" was a common characteristic of these many sets of objects. The verbal signal of saying "four," might be learned by a dog or cat as a signal to nod its head four times. But such cleverness is not the same as having the symbolic concept "four" as a functional tool in the mind.

How do we know that the above statements are true since we cannot enter the minds of our pets? We can observe their behavior. And if we observe their behaviors closely, these observations will support what I have been claiming, namely that the other mammalian species do not use symbols.

Symbol-using, however, so dominates the minds of we humans that we must stop and think hard to be aware of it. To be aware of it, we must stop the usual course of our living and intently observe our symbol-using mind--watch it busily thinking its thoughts, remembering its dreams, envisioning its tomorrows, recalling its yesterdays, thinking about this and that and then this and that. This always active busyness of our symbol-using minds is so continuous that it can even get in the way of effectively living our lives in the actual present time of our experience. Perhaps we need to learn from our pets how to be present to our feelings and to the signals coming in from the world around us.

Since our dogs and cats do not possess the gift of symbol-using, they also do not possess the problems that go along with having this gift. Their "minds" are quite strictly practical and present to the challenges of the moment. They do not reflect on stars or galaxies or Big-Bang beginnings of the cosmos. They do not try to figure out how humans are different from the other mammals. They do not ask, "Who am I?" or "What do I do with my one life?" They do not construct languages, life styles, or religions.

Animals other than humans do not build cultures, reform cultures, tear down cultures, or rebuild cultures. Their group life may have a maze of commonly understood signals, but this maze of signal-images is not a social "culture" in the human sense. Human culture is made of symbols. Human culture is a quite natural and necessary product constructed by the only symbol-using species now living on this

planet. Human culture gives the human species its advantages, as well as many problems the other species do not have to experience.

Animal Personality

Thirdly, our dogs and cats are not only feelingful animals and mentally intelligent in their signal using way, they also have personalities. Their mental signals and bodily feelings are integrated into some sort of organizing center, some sort of "self." This self shapes a unique style of performance that is individual for each animal. We have surely noticed how different our various cats have been from one another. One is quiet; another is vigorous. One is affectionate to the extreme; another is aloof. Perhaps a particular cat has been deeply hurt and is thus fearful in the extreme. Each animal has a unique, centered personality that has developed over the course of its life.

We humans also have centered personalities of this basic mammalian quality. But here again, when we accurately observe our dogs and cats, we find that the sort of personality they develop is different from the sort of personality that we humans develop. Each of us humans is also a centered self who integrates feelings and mental activities into the service of a personality which each of us has developed over the course our lives. But since we have both a signal-using and a symbol-using mentality each of us has been enabled to construct a personality that is much more complex than that of our pets. We reflect upon who we are. We abstract who we are into some sort of image of ourselves. We speak of "having self knowledge." We sometimes think we "know ourselves." More often, we discover that we do not know ourselves as well as we thought we did. We find ourselves mysterious to ourselves, meaning that we are more wondrous than our symbol-using intelligence can fathom.

We also find ourselves becoming new selves, selves we hardly recognize as ourselves. We can even become reflective upon the strange fact that we have been a series of selves, and that each of these "selves" has been impermanent. How astonishing this is: some old self has passed away to be replaced by a new self. We sometimes hope that the self we now are will last forever. At other times, we want to get rid of the self we are and become something different as soon as possible. Clearly such flights of self-reflection and self-construction do not engage the consciousness of dogs and cats. They become personalities that we can observe and relate to, but they do not take thought about the personalities they have become or about what personalities they might wish to become next.

Perhaps we delight in the personalities of our dogs and cats because we know that we too have animal personalities. We too possess that basic level of personality formation that provides the foundation for our more explosive and complex flights of selfhood. We are animals in our basic feelings. We are animals who possess the signal-using mental process we see in our pets. We are animals in some aspects of our centered personality. And we are also *more*.

In Part Two on "Children" I will examine further what this "more" entails.

Part Two:

Children

Between approximately eighteen months and two years of age, the normal human child undergoes a primary transformation. The child learns to talk. This capacity is genetically present in the human infant, but talking does not occur unless the child is raised in a society of human talkers. Children raised by wild animals do not realize this capability.

Talking as a genetic capability dates back a long way in the course of human evolution. It probably arose at the same time that larger brains began evolving in the upright-walking primate species in our evolutionary line. Perhaps this is why larger brains came about--to make talking and other symbol-using activities possible. By "other symbol-using activities" I mean not only reading and writing words but also drawing pictures, beating drums, making music, dancing, singing, decorating bodies, carving sculptures, laying out artful living spaces. Language is a very basic aspect of all this symbol-using, but the same symbol-using brain makes all these artistic activities possible as well.

As symbol-using begins in the life of a child, our uniquely human type of consciousness begins to emerge. Until that time the human child is manifesting only the signal-using type of consciousness--a consciousness that is also present in other primate species, in dogs and cats, and other mammals. Very young human children, from birth until eighteen months or more, are no more and no less than primate mammals very similar in consciousness to the other mammal species. Our infants are not yet "thinking beings"--that is, they are not using symbols as we adult humans are. In order to accurately understand these very young children, we must not be deceived by their expressive faces and their clever winsome ways. This is signal-using going on, not symbol-using. We are not yet dealing with what we normally mean by a "thinking" human being.

In motor capacities, the very young human is virtually helpless in comparison with the very young monkey, chimp, or ape. Infant monkeys can crawl and cling and walk very soon after birth. Infant cats and dogs learn to walk fairly well just days after birth. Human infants need about a year.

One of the prices the human species paid for its larger brains was giving birth to its infants before their motor capacities were fully developed. By general primate standards, human babies are born premature. This enables their proportionally larger brains to make it through the birth canal without killing the mother.

So as young children learn to crawl and walk they are still developing their basic mammalian brains, a development accomplished by most mammals before they leave the womb.

But as children learn to talk, they are entering the uniquely human form of intelligence and begin to take their place in human culture. I am going to suggest that learning symbol-using starts a child on a period of development we might call "middle childhood." In this period children are mastering the basic human breakthrough of symbol-using consciousness.

Then around age six, children have another major turning point and enter into what we might call their "later childhood." In this period, children are learning to recognize that there are other perspectives than their own--that other people are seeing things differently. Mastering this late childhood facility of imaging themselves standing in another person's shoes prepares the young human for the challenge of adolescence.

Adolescence, if fully accomplished, means leaving childhood and becoming an adult. This completes the picture of the human childhood journey.

I want to examine each of these three periods of childhood more closely.

Early Childhood

Even though a symbol-using consciousness is not happening in early childhood, a whole lot of important things are happening. Three major turning points take place in this early period: (1) birth itself, (2) body identification at about 4 months, and (3) emotional identification at about 15 months.

1. Birth

Leaving the womb and entering the general world as a separated being is a traumatic experience. Not only is birth a physical ordeal, it is a departure from a comfortable world with few demands and little risk. It is an entry into a world in which some effort must be made to get attention, food, and general care. Visual information comes in for the first time. Breathing, yelling, and gurgling are also new experiences.

Learning to trust and bond with a limited number of proximate humans is perhaps the key challenge. Without almost constant care, the infant is a goner. At this stage of our lives, we do not know about death; but our instincts guide us to demand the attention I need.

2. Body Identification

It may seem strange to realize that distinguishing my own body from the world around me was something I had to learn. In the womb and in those early years I and the cosmos were one oceanic flow. I felt things, I heard things, I saw things, I moved my limbs, but I did not realize that it was I being encountered or that it was I doing something. I did not know the difference between my toe and my womb, or my toe and the bedpost.

Learning the boundaries of my body was an important development. It grounded my consciousness in this particular body that was experiencing particular things and doing particular things. This step forward in increased consciousness was, however, a loss of my oceanic identification with the world around me. It was a departure from that inarticulate sense that there was nothing at all but me. After the body-identification breakthrough, there was *me* and there was *other-than-me*. These other-than-me realities might be dangerous to me or helpful to me. I had to begin learning to distinguish danger from help. And I began to learn how my effort as a separate being made a difference in the outcomes of my life.

Some childhood experts have mistakenly assumed that the human infant's oceanic union with nature is a great blessing which we older humans have lost. But it is more accurate to say that this oceanic union is a great blessing that we need not totally lose as we move on to that next great blessing of knowing ourselves as a separate being. Our union with all of nature and our separation as a differentiated being are not contradictory but complimentary.

Furthermore, if I did not make the passage into body-identification properly, I

became an inadequately grounded personality. Perhaps deeply traumatic experiences happened to me--traumas so deep that grounding in my separate body did not fully take place. If so, I am probably spending my life in some form of insanity. I am incapable of grounding myself in my body, so I drift away from my present moment of experience into disassociated flows of feeling.

3. Emotional Identification

If I have made it successfully to about 15 months, grounded in my own body and aware of its encounters and responses and of my involvement in them, then I am ready for another crisis in my childhood development. Up until now I was moving along in a maze of feelings that were not well distinguished from one another. Strange as this may seem, I was not clear what feelings were my own and what feelings I was simply picking up from others. I had no sense whatsoever how my needs and responses, my interpretations and hopes, were vitally related to what I was feeling. I did not yet have a self-consciously separate emotional self. And certainly I was not reflective about any of this, for I was not yet reflective at all.

But moving along as a healthy infant, guided by my instincts and the encouragement of the emotional environments in which I was living, I somehow made this leap into a deeper sort of awareness. To the extent that I failed to make this leap properly, I became neurotic. My feelings became untrustworthy guides to what was actually happening in the present time of my life. Old hurts and fears and traumas got stuck supporting patterns of behaviors that were irrelevant to, indeed handicaps for, the realistic living of my life. Perhaps years later I would find helpful therapies that would assist me to straighten some of this out. Perhaps not. My point is that the crisis of emotional identification was an important challenge in my destiny.

Emotional identification is a vastly more complex subject than I am going to describe here, but perhaps I have said enough to hint why caretakers of very young children need to pay attention to these very important developments that are taking place before their eyes.

Though early childhood is an important time, it is not a time of symbol-using--the process we sometimes call "rational consciousness." Each of us are, in this early period of childhood, nothing more and nothing less than complex mammals having experiences only slightly more wondrous than those of our pet dogs and cats.

Middle Childhood

Middle childhood, characterized by symbol-using, is underway by age two. The dawn of symbol-using intelligence takes several years to appropriate, but human children are unbelievably adept at doing so. They learn words and other symbols at a truly astonishing rate.

Yet, in spite of this linguistic skill, human thinking in this middle childhood period is taking place at a surprisingly rudimentary level. For example, if children at age three are shown a ball that is red on one side and green on the other, they can easily say which side you are showing them: red or green. But if you are on the other side of the ball looking at the opposite color, children of this age do not easily figure out that you are seeing the other color. If you ask them what color the ball is, they say, "Green." If you ask them what color you are seeing, they tend to say, "Green," as well.

This is a very elementary illustration of a big shift in consciousness that takes place around age six in most children--namely, the full realization that there are other perspectives on reality than one's own. Other persons become more than mere parts of the child's world. They become "other" persons seeing reality from their own perspectives.

This advance in consciousness launches the human child into what I am calling late childhood. If children in late childhood are shown videos of themselves figuring things out when they were children in middle childhood, they tend to disbelieve they were ever so "dumb." When we move on in our consciousness, we tend to forget what it was like to be less conscious.

Late childhood

Late childhood is a time of expanding awareness about the world, about our society's thinking about things, and about thinking itself. By age 11 to 13 the human being has, if all has gone well, stretched the capacities of the symbol-using intelligence to a level of proficiency that is the peer with adults in general. Children of this age can be mathematical or musical geniuses. They can be good chess players, avid readers, fluent talkers. They can have intense presence to their feelings and good balance between their symbol-using consciousness and the feeling consciousness which they share with the other mammals. Most children of age 13 are as capable intellectually as they will ever be. Though we learn more and more our whole life long, the basic tools for human thinking, making music, drawing pictures, and so on is quite fully in place in the teen-age years of most humans.

Many human adults may never reach their full capacities for thinking clearly, but the potential to do so is present in the normally developed older child. Capable thinking characterizes the potentiality of older children.

Our full human adulthood, which we shall explore in the next section, is something more than capable thinking. Full adulthood is something more than being sexually mature and socially accepted in the customary adult roles. Full adulthood is the advent of a quality of consciousness that is vastly deeper than anything we have discussed so far.

True adulthood means leaving childhood for a new sort of life. We take the gifts of childhood with us. We could not make the adult journey without the preparations of childhood. The amazing gifts of a successful human childhood form the foundation for this next step.

The step into full adulthood will be the subject of Part Three. I am going to call this step "Spirit Maturity."

Part Three:

Spirit Maturity

Becoming an adult means more than reaching full growth and sexual maturity. Becoming an adult means more than a shift in social status. Becoming an adult means accepting the challenge to embrace a dignity, a courage, an awareness, a depth of consciousness that we often call "Spirit."

Children can have passion, vitality, curiosity, openness, discipline, and amazing intelligence, but these good qualities are not yet "Spirit." The good qualities of childhood can be integrated into adult living. But in order for that to happen, we must first become adults. And what does it mean to become an adult? It means entering into that form of consciousness I am going to call "Spirit maturity."

Many grown human beings have never embraced Spirit maturity. Many have used the end of childhood and the beginning of their sociological adulthood as an excuse to revert to interior babyhood or some other childhood state. Perhaps some feel that they have missed something in their childhood and that now, as grown humans, they can seize the opportunity to make up for that lack. Perhaps some are terrified of full adulthood awareness and responsibility and therefore opt to continue childhood dependencies and viewpoints for a while longer.

The tragedy of not growing up and the tragedy of not becoming a Spirit person are one and the same tragedy. The fuller meaning of this statement will be illustrated in the three sections that follow.

Step One:

Leaving the Herd

"Leaving the herd" is a symbol for the adolescent challenge. Many ancient tribal societies intuited the appropriateness of encouraging their adolescent members to take this challenge. Adolescent boys, for example, were sometimes taken from their mothers and sent away from the safety of the tribe into some wild natural place. There some trial had to be accomplished or a vision quest taken. When or if the youth returned to the tribe, he was accepted as an adult member. Adolescent girls, usually in connection with the advent of menstruation, were also provided with some sort of coming-of-age ritual.

The details of these ancient rites of passage differed widely, but the intuition was widespread that a definite leaving of childhood was needed before full adult responsibilities could be taken up. This is still true in modern society, if we define adulthood as a state of inward maturity rather than simply getting bigger and older.

Adolescents who simply stumble into adult roles without taking the appropriate inward journey do not make our best parents or citizens. It behooves we humans entering the twenty-first century to look more deeply into this adolescent challenge. I call it a challenge because not all adolescent humans take this challenge or fully complete it. Some do not complete this challenge until their twenties or thirties. Some never take the challenge. So what is this challenge? How do we describe the inward reality of what is involved in this challenge?

"Leaving the herd" will be my symbol, but this symbol must not be taken literally. I do not mean that adolescents have to literally leave their families, or literally leave their communities, or literally leave human society and go into a wilderness of other-than-human reality all by themselves. And even if youth do perform these sorts of outward rituals, it is the inward journey we are interested in understanding and accomplishing.

Inwardly speaking, "leaving the herd" is precisely what a child must do to become a mature adult. A human child is a drastically dependent being, not only physically but psychologically as well. Being well-bonded with a herd of human beings is critical for a child's safety and psychic development.

But every human society, every specific human herd that a child might belong to, is an artificial reality. Human society is "the world of made" superimposed upon "the world of born." To understand this fully, one must leave "the world of made" and join "the world of born." To understand human society and to take appropriate responsibility for human society, a human being must leave human society. Only when we humans have come back to human society as persons who have fully left it can we talk about being responsible for human society.

This inward leaving includes leaving the family, leaving the community, leaving the cultural group, leaving humanity as a whole. This leaving is done in order to self-consciously engage in the life of the planet, the life of humanity, the life of the cultural group, the life of the family, and the life of one's own body and psyche. This inward leaving is prior to responsible engagement. Without the leaving there is no responsible engagement, there is only conformity to the society that has not been inwardly left. Indeed, there is just a continuance of childhood dependencies. There is just a continuance of clinging membership in one or more of the herds of humanity.

Sometimes youth leave the herd of their families only to join a new herd, a youth gang or a religious cult. A group of youth might support its members in making a full transition to adulthood. But the youth gangs and religious cults most commonly seen

merely provide new ways of being children to those who are facing the challenge of a full exodus from childhood.

Leaving is always a somewhat painful experience. All of us are attached to the familiar, even if that familiar reality is out of date and restraining our further development. Leaving can also be exciting and liberating. Yet a human child does not know in the beginning that he or she has the courage to take on such liberty or such excitement. Adventure may sound good on paper, but it can be terrifying as an actual prospect. And the pain of leaving goes deeper. It means mourning the loss of what is being left. The adolescent who is not sad to leave many aspects of his or her childhood, is not fully experiencing this passage. Pain, sadness, and mourning are not bad experiences: they are simply part of the journey.

The safety and security of childhood is a condition that one might wish to keep forever. Why become an adult when one could have childhood? Why take on added responsibility when one might drift on in carefree dependency? Yes, stepping into adulthood is a pain as well as an adventure.

This step may be a pain for the parents as well as for the child. Parents have become used to being the care-takers, the responsible ones, the ones in charge. For their child to step out into adulthood can be wrenching for them. It requires that they change. It requires them to forge an entirely new relationship with that child. It takes courage to allow a child to leave the nest (or perhaps to throw a child out of the nest).

But this leaving is absolutely essential to the emergence of a full, Spiritually mature adult. Against the protests of both parents and child, this "leaving home" needs to take place.

But this "leaving home" need not mean leaving all discipline and becoming a completely spontaneous rebel. It might mean leaving a very oppressive home discipline. It might also mean leaving a very wholesome home discipline because it is not truly "my own." And even though the adventure of adulthood means leaving all the disciplines of home, it does not mean entering a life that lacks all discipline. As I leave home, I take on new disciplines in which I myself am the disciplinarian. My new disciplines may contain elements of the disciplines I learned from my parents, but I, if I have fully become an adult, have made those disciplines my own. And I have probably added new disciplines. I have changed other disciplines. I have altogether abandoned at least some of what my parents taught me.

It is the specifics of all this that contain the pain and the liberation. If my parents are democrats, I must leave the Democratic party before I can return to being a true Democrat or something else. If my parents are communists, I must leave communism before I can return to being a true communist or something else. If my parents are Christian, I must leave Christianity before I can return to being a true Christian or something else. If my parents are atheists, I must leave atheism before I can return to being a true atheist or something else. If my parents are Germanic Texans, I must leave that culture before I can return to being a true Germanic Texan or something else. If my parents are Alabama African-Americans, I must leave that culture before I can return to being a true Alabama African-American or something else. If my parents are California Hispanics, I must leave that culture before I can return to being a true California Hispanic or something else.

Whatever culture my parents are, I must leave that culture and enter that

mysterious wild location that existed before all human cultures came to be. I must walk out into the chaos of human freedom and only then return to my tribe, my human herd, my cultural group, my place in the order of things. Though I may end up my journey very similar to my parents, I will have tasted freedom. I may be like my parents, not because they desire that, but because I have chosen it. I may be like my parents, not because I was too lazy to choose something different, but because I have chosen to be an enrichment of the very same heritage in which I was reared. And I can be an enrichment only because I bring my own freedom to that heritage.

On the other hand, my journey into adulthood may take me to places very different from my parents. I may learn a new language. I may practice a new religion. I may espouse a different politics. I may leave a heterosexual family life for a homosexual life. I may leave upper class proprieties for a simpler form of living. I may leave being poor for a more comfortable life style.

But the key point is that I will have tasted my own freedom and chosen for myself what characteristics I am going to treasure. This is the key to adulthood--the discovery of freedom. And this discovery means leaving home, leaving the home of my parents, leaving the home of my culture, leaving the home of my childhood religion, leaving the home of humanity as a whole. It means leaving the planet, the sun, the stars, the galaxies in order to rejoin the whole of history as an expression of freedom.

Freedom is an adventure, and it is therefore exciting and wondrous. But freedom is also a pain because it means some sort of death to every aspect of my childhood. Christopher Fry in his play *The Sleep of Prisoners* had his actors pronounce the word freedom as "free doom." This is a valid insight. Freedom is a doom to all those factors that hold us prisoner. Freedom is the doom of childhood. Freedom is the doom of human culture. Freedom is the doom of all lazy drift with the course of history or the propensities of my own psyche.

Freedom includes the realization that all things pass away. Childhood will come to an end, whether we wish it to end or not. Our first experiments with adulthood will also come to an end. Even our last most mature experiment with being an adult will one day come to an end. Our entire life will end. Freedom means giving up hope of avoiding all these dyings. Freedom means facing "**doom**" squarely, and courageously entering into it.

So leaving the herd and becoming an adult means making friends with death. A culture that sweeps death under the rug makes children of all its adults. An adult is someone who knows death, who sees that death walks with us every step of our lives, who makes friends with death as well as friends with life. Leaving the herd is a form of death. Freedom is a form of death. Without death there is no freedom. Without death there is no adulthood.

So this is the core crisis of the adolescent challenge: to make friends with death, to realize that dying to childhood is the way forward, to realize that perpetually dying to each moment and phase of living is the very essence of adult maturity.

Adult freedom is the courage to die and be born again. Adult freedom is the courage to realize that I and I alone can and hence must choose my destiny. Adult freedom is the realization that choosing my destiny entails firmly killing the past and courageously inventing my future, a future which later I will also have to kill. All things pass away. But this is not a message of despair, unless we want to remain children.

Realizing that all things pass away is our opportunity to become an adult.

Clearly, when adulthood is defined in this manner, we are forever facing the adolescent challenge. We face new challenges to leave the herd at each stage of our lives. At age 92, we can still be leaving the herd. So, we who are no longer facing our first departures from childhood can regard our adolescent companions with a certain admiration and learn from them what it means that we too are still adolescents. We, whoever we are, are still facing some new challenge to leave the herd and then to return in responsible engagement with this same herd of humanity as it confronts its current historical destiny.

Step Two:

Adopting a Religious Practice

Having left the herd and become a Spirit-breathing adult, you and I now face a new challenge. How do we sustain our Spirit lives? The answer is contained in finding some fresh understanding of what we mean by “religion.”

If you are going to play the piano, you have to practice. Performance in public concert takes place only after many hours of solitary practice. Furthermore, good practice usually requires the aid of a piano teacher.

Religion is a practice. Religion is a practice for the performance of your entire life. Sometimes religion is a solitary practice. Sometimes religion is a group practice. Sometimes religion is practiced with the aid of a religious teacher.

Viewing religion as a practice is helpful for avoiding a number of misunderstandings about religion. Religion is not the final reality. Life is. Spirit and Spirit maturity are parts of life, not religion. Religion is just practice for the Spirit living of our actual lives.

Religion is a finite thing, a passing thing, part of the cultural inventions of the human species. Religion is not a body of superlative truths cast down from the realm of absolute certainty. Religion is as crass and worldly as politics or economics.

And yet religions have been invented by human beings in order to express their deepest experiences of living, their Spirit relatedness to the Eternal.

Spirit, properly understood, is not an unusual state of consciousness whipped up by human effort. Spirit is something constituted by the Eternal. Spirit is being given to us each moment by the Infinite, just like life itself. And these august words like “the Infinite” are only human inventions. Nevertheless, humanly invented religious words were and are being created to point to the actuality of Spirit in human experience. So what does it mean to actually experience Spirit (that is, being a living relationship with the Infinite) rather than simply talking about it?

When we have chosen to leave the various herds of our humanity and to be our freedom, we have tasted Spirit as an actuality. When we have chosen to make friends with death, we have already entered into Spirit as an actual experience. Spirit is our relationship with that Eternal Ground which constitutes us as finite beings. Spirit is our relationship with that Eternal Ground which constitutes us in the capacity for freedom--the freedom to embrace our death, the freedom to decide our life, the freedom to recreate the world around us. Spirit is not an achievement. Spirit is a gift, a gift of aliveness given to those who are able and willing to accept the fullness of human adulthood.

Good religion is a finite human effort to express what Spirit is, where Spirit comes from, how Spirit is indeed our fullest humanity, how Spirit can be deepened, widened, and matured by the crass practices of some specific “religion.”

I am going to begin by defining three realms of solitary religious practice. Then I am going to discuss group religious practice. Thirdly, I am going to discuss the need for religious teachers. And finally, I will address the subject of religion and children.

In describing this second step toward Spirit maturity, I am assuming that the reader has already experienced leaving the herd and has thus experienced at least the beginning of a Spirit journey. I am not assuming that the reader needs to end up with my religion or with any form of Christianity. I am assuming that you, the reader, are a

free being who can choose to adopt whatever religious practice is most useful for enabling you to maximize your Spirit maturity.

I am also assuming that I myself and you, the reader, are severely tempted to remain Spiritually immature, to avoid all religious practices, to view religious practice as an imposition or an irrelevancy for which a busy modern human does not have time. I want to counter such Spirit laziness. “Being our Spirit being” is our foundational humanness. Finding a religious practice that assists us in “being our Spirit being” is a high priority, something we need to *make time* for. Customary human life is like a river flowing away from Spirit realization. We are in a boat rowing upstream. Religion is the oars. Spirit freedom is the rowing. The boat is our entire life. Rowing the oars of religion with our Spirit freedom enables our boat to move upstream against the general flow of our era.

Solitary Religious Practice

Many of us in recent decades have altered our schedules to make time for physical exercise. Perhaps we have spent several hours a week enabling a maximization of our physical health. A similar discipline is required if we wish to fully manifest the Spirit potentialities of our beings. Each of us could, if we chose, simply get up an hour earlier in order to spend an hour in solitary religious practice.

But only a few citizens of the modern world would know what to do with such an hour. Perhaps those of us who are not now spending an hour a day in solitary exercises are not doing so because we do not feel confident about what would be an effective solitary religious practice. I want to describe some specific options for giving shape to your or my solitary practice.

We might choose to spend that hour in Buddhist mediation. Thousands of our Western contemporaries are now doing so. And to very good effect. We who are Christian-identified in our religious thinking and practice have much to learn from this vigorous Buddhist movement.

I want, however, to describe my own solitary religious practice, a practice that is grounded in Christian traditions. My aim here is simply to illustrate what an effective religious practice might mean. You can borrow wisdom from me or the Buddhists or from many other sources, but in any case you will have to make that practice your own. An effective solitary religious practice is about exercising your Spirit freedom. So, in the end, it will not do for you to adopt a solitary practice that you have not freely chosen. An effective solitary practice is one that you **own** as you own your own breathing and thinking.

Three Realms of Solitary Religious Practice

My current solitary religious practice is based upon understanding these modes of practice: (1) Dialogue, (2) Contemplation, and (3) Prayer.

By “**Dialogue**” I mean reading and responding to or listening and talking back to persons who have realized their Spirit being to some degree. We have or can have an interior council of such persons. To the extent that we are realizing our own Spirit beings, we are able to recognize other persons who manifest Spirit in their actual words, deeds, and styles. Our dialogue with these persons reaches the Spirit level when

their Spirit awakens Spirit within our own lives. Only when we see Spirit with our own Spirit eyes, act out Spirit with our own Spirit freedom, and embody Spirit in our own practical life-styles are we truly dialoguing with the Spirit persons in our lives. Otherwise, we are just registering their words, or admiring their deeds and styles.

These Spirit dialogue partners might include Buddhist teachers; Christian theologians like Paul Tillich; biblical figures like Deborah, Isaiah, Paul, or the writers of the Psalms. Suppose you simply read Psalms for 20 minutes. That might be a wholly satisfying part of your solitary time--provided, of course, that you are able to use the Psalms as a means of catapulting yourself into actually being, in the present, that actual dialogue with the Infinite which the Psalm writer is poeticizing.

By "**Contemplation**" I mean becoming, in our actual present time, aware of the Final Ground that undergirds and destroys all finite things. This Final Ground is the Awesomeness that inspires Awe in all the Awed Ones: it is that Infinite Reality in relationship with which we are our Spirit being. Such contemplation includes becoming aware of our own enigmatic presence in the Living Now and seeing that this Now is being constituted by the Final Ground of our Being. This might be done through watching our breathing, chanting a mantra, smelling incense, viewing a mountain, building a montage of pictures, or any number of other practices. Such practices are succeeding as Spirit contemplation when and if our awareness is able to step back from the busy mind and its play with finite obsessions. Contemplation is an aware focus upon the Final Ground of our Being. One Buddhist teacher has suggested that if we could stop obsessing in our busy minds for 12 seconds we would reach Enlightenment.

I am finding that using Buddhist methods is an effective tool. The key here is simply to sit up straight and pay attention to my breathing and other bodily sensations. I can do this for 10 minutes, 20 minutes, or longer. I can learn to watch my busy mind and feelings and watch myself watching. I can learn to identify with being this mysterious observer of my life, an observer who observes that equally mysterious Wholeness of which I am part.

It is also effective for me to look into the full depths of this ever-present Eternal Now. And as I look into the black abyss of nothingness out of which all things are coming and into which all things are returning, I find it helpful to imagine a small neon sign there at the depths of that darkness. And as I approach the sign I can make out these words, "Welcome home." This relatedness to the Eternal is my home. As I approach nearer to the sign I find these additional words in small print: "Your entire life is received; your entire past is approved; your entire future is open; and all your finite relationships are entirely good." As I return to the surface of my living, I do so as one who identifies with being this profound Spirit relatedness to the Infinite Mystery at the bottom of every specific Now.

By "**Prayer**" I mean the practice of appropriating my Spirit Freedom, setting my intentions in this particular moment for this particular day, indeed for this particular fulcrum in the flow of all future time. Prayer changes things by changing my intentions. Having intentions at all changes things, for what would have happened had I lazily drifted with "the already determined" is different from what does take place because I set my intentions. If every day of my life I had set my intentions in the most powerful and constructive way possible, I would already be somewhere very different from where I am now. And that difference would be a Spiritual difference. I would be more free, more able to set my intentions creatively for this next moment of my destiny.

So if you, my reader, in this moment have a desire to maximize your life as a Spirit being, nothing is more important than setting your intentions this day toward your own very specific Spirit ends. You cannot begin anywhere else than where you are. You cannot take any other step than the next step. Prayer is the exercise of choosing what that next step is to be.

Classical Christian prayer practice identified four arenas in which it is always appropriate to set our intentions: Gratitude, Confession, Petition, and Intercession. The prayer exercise on the following page uses these four categories.

Prayer Exercise

1. List four recent developments or characteristics in your life that you consider beneficial:

Then complete this prayer: Oh Infinite Silence, Determiner of my daily destiny, Awesome Presence, My God, I am grateful for

2. List four ways you are neglecting being your potential as a Spirit being:

Then complete this prayer: Oh Infinite Silence, Determiner of my daily destiny, Awesome Presence, My God, I acknowledge that

3. List four outcomes you sincerely want for your life:

Then complete this prayer: Oh Infinite Silence, Determiner of my daily destiny, Awesome Presence, My God, I ask that I myself might

4. List four outcomes you sincerely want for people other than yourself or for the aspects of human society or the life of this planet:

Then complete this prayer: Oh Infinite Silence, Determiner of my daily destiny, Awesome Presence, My God, I ask that

The above descriptions of dialogue, contemplation, and prayer are but a brief sketch of these profound arenas of solitary practice. But perhaps these descriptions are thorough enough to illustrate this central truth: religion is a practice, a very practical discipline for the sake of being and maturing our Spirit being.

Unless we practice being Spirit for an hour a day, or at least 30 minutes, we are not likely to live Spirit in the ongoing course of our lives. And a disciplined solitary practice is not the only religious discipline we need. We also need a community who will support us in the doing of our solitary practice and who will assist us in the continual task of interpreting how Spirit can best be manifest in the full round of our living.

Religious Community

These are the main purposes of any good religious community: (1) to assist each person with their solitary religious practices, and (2) to assist each person to maximize Spirit in the full round of their living. Such a definition of good religion stands as a critique of most popular religion. Most popular religion either helps people be more fully accommodated with the general herd, or it provides people with the opportunity to join a "religious" herd which is separated from and irrelevant to the times in which they live. So finding a religious community that adequately supports you in being your Spirit being may be a challenge, an even bigger challenge than doing your solitary exercises every day.

Some Christian-identified people have given up on Christian communities they have known and joined a Buddhist sangha or some other group. If you want to pursue your religious practice in the context of Christian symbols, you must find an alternative to simply enduring the bad Christian religion that takes place in most Christian-identified groups. Here are two viable alternatives to passive endurance: (1) reform one of these Christian groups in a thoroughgoing fashion; (2) start over by building a Christian community on some new foundations. Neither one of these tasks is easy.

It is my belief that reforming a currently existing Christian group entails fighting several hundred years of now obsolete practices and communal customs. For most of us, it will be far easier to find or start an alternative Christian community--one that is laying new foundations in genuine continuity with this long heritage. If, however, someone is only beginning his or her efforts toward adopting a viable Christian practice, building an adequate Christian community will be almost impossible to do without excellent help.

This brings me to my next topic: the need for religious leadership. Or to put this topic in a personal way, the need for a religious teacher.

Finding a Religious Teacher

A religious teacher is someone who sees you personally and knows your Spirit issues and your Spirit journey imperatives better than you know them yourself. A religious teacher is not someone with a bunch of teaching to hand over to you. A religious teacher is someone with insight into your life. People sometimes search the world for their teacher. At other times people go wherever they can to avoid finding their teacher. Sometimes a teacher even finds them, but they flee away. The truth about this topic is this: *there is no shortage of religious teachers, there is only a shortage of religious students.*

“When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” The reason why this old adage is true is that a religious teacher is already present. Your next religious teacher need not be someone altogether grandiose. An effective religious teacher is someone who is walking the same path as everyone else--perhaps one small step ahead on the same journey of becoming a fully authentic human being. There are very likely many people in your life who already fill this bill.

So, your Spirit journey leaps forward the moment you decide to be a student, and thus to make yourself available to the Spirit teachers already present in your life. This would mean learning all you can from them and allowing these persons to teach you something entirely different from what you thought you needed.

So how will we know when we are meeting our religious teacher? We will know by the Awe that is happening in our own inner being. We will know by the awareness that we are being understood and challenged to greater depths. We will know by our own dread and fascination being with this teacher.

Wherever such a student and such a teacher meet, there is the start of genuine religious community. Perhaps the arrangement is larger than two or three people. Perhaps a particular religious teacher is effective at making presentations to large groups of open learners. Perhaps a particular religious teacher is effective at constructing group interactions that assist people significantly.

Whatever the external trappings, it is the interaction between Spirit teacher and Spirit student that creates an effective religious community. It is not a set of ancient liturgies, not a great song book, not the mastery of some religious tradition. All these resources are valuable only if there is a teacher who can make them come alive for a particular set of persons in the present--in the present time of their own ongoing Spirit journeys.

An effective religious teacher may, of course, have mastered some particular religious tradition, but that is not what makes him or her an effective religious teacher. It is not the authority of a tradition, but the authority of the teacher's authenticity that makes that teacher effective. If a teacher's authenticity can enable a whole lineage of Spirit teachers to come alive for the learners, this is a powerful gift for Spirit enablement. But we need to be very clear that simply transferring religious teachings from the records of the past to some human minds in the present means nothing unless the Spirit essence of those teachings are also brought to life in the present lives of those learners.

We are light years beyond the herd religious practices of our times when we begin to embrace the above insights about religion, religious teachers, and the adopting of a religious practice that works for us. This brings me my last topic on the practice of religion: *good religion is not for children.*

Religion and Children

In our culture, many parents fret over the religious training of their children. Instead of preparing and allowing their children to make free departures from the herds of human society and the herds of human religion, most parents feel the need to install their children in some belief systems they hope will help them. Such parents may

not even be disciplined religious practitioners themselves, but they want their children to be good people, to have every opportunity for some good morality, some integrity, some character, and perhaps a safe and socially acceptable quality of life.

Fretting over the religious training of our children may sometimes place these children in the presence of a genuine religious teacher, one who ends up being effective in awakening them to being free, adult Spirit persons. But most of the time, since most religion in our times is so oppressive, the religious training we provide our children only encourages them to not make the transition into being free, adult, Spirit persons. Occasionally, oppressive religion does provide children with something clearly bad to rebel against.

But if parents are to think through how best to serve their children with regard to their children's religious practice, parents must keep in mind this basic principle: *good religion is not for children*. Good religion is an adult practice. Adults help their children most by simply practicing good religion themselves. Also, forcing even good religion upon children is counter-productive, for **until a human being has become an adult who has left the herd of society and become a new edition of authentic human freedom, good religion is irrelevant**. And bad religion is worse than irrelevant: it is a burden which the child will have to cast away in order to become a full adult.

When a child has reached adolescence and is facing the adolescent challenge of becoming a Spirit person, then good religion can be meaningfully taught--provided, of course, that there exists a teacher who both understands Spirit and the adolescent challenge.

Before that time, a child's learning of religious tradition is like a child's learning of words he or she does not know how to use. Maybe those words will be used later, but for the time being meaningless words are just a "savings account" being carried along but playing no role in the current enterprise of living. So it is with teaching children good religion.

Let me give an example from my own life. I was read Bible stories from a very early age. I accepted them in the same manner as I accepted the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Certain parts of these Bible stories spoke to my life experience. For example the story of David killing Goliath was one of my favorites. It probably assisted me in standing up to the big people in my childhood. But Spirit was not something I saw in the Bible until I was reading the sermon on the mount at age eighteen. It was not until then that I began to leave the herd of social custom and becoming a somewhat Spirit-aware person.

Now having the Bible, teachers of the Bible, and songs on biblical themes as part of my childhood did put a storehouse of potentially meaningful material in my memory. And some of that material did later come alive for me. Most of that material came alive with Spirit very much later in my life. And the way most of that material was first interpreted by me, I had to throw out.

Did I or does any child really need to be taught religious material? This is not an easy question. We clearly must be lucid about the limitations of the child's journey of consciousness.

A cache of religious baggage that means little to them is not what our preadolescent children need most. Rather their most pressing needs are these: (1) simple care for their

physical and emotional lives--that is, assistance in becoming healthy human mammals who can express their feelings and process them intelligently; (2) assistance in being effective users of their symbol-using intelligence; and (3) assistance in becoming centered beings who have a workable foundation in elementary selfhood. These are the primary goals in caring for children.

Learning that there are limits and moral restraints is also part of the childhood agenda. Such behavioral humility needs to begin in very early childhood just as it would be taught to our pets. Behavioral humility needs to mature throughout childhood development. When a child reaches the time of the adulthood challenge, it should not come as a big surprise to him or her that life imposes limits as well as opportunities, that life calls for responsibilities as well as privileges.

But morality is not religion. Religion has to do with discovering the Spirit foundations for morality and for all else in our living. Good religion has to do with freedom not morality--the freedom to create new and better moralities, the freedom to practice or not practice the moralities we have learned. Adulthood is a step beyond morality. Mature Spirit living is obedience to an imperative that is infinitely more demanding than any morality. Spirit living has to do with assuming responsibility for the entire human culture, including its moralities. Spirit living also includes the wisdom that each and every concrete decision is filled with ambiguities that no morality can completely resolve. The Spirit person lives within moralities and yet beyond morality. Children are not yet ready for that imperative, not until Spirit has indeed dawned in their inner beings, making them no longer children.

Once an adolescent, or a person of any age, leaves the herd and enters the space of Spirit freedom, good religious practice becomes not only relevant but a pressing need. My reflections in this section have been written to serve those who are confronting this pressing need. If you do feel this pressing need, then you are no longer a child, you are on your way toward becoming a fully mature adult.

Step Three:

**Being your Being
along with Jesus, the Buddha,
and the Shaman Samantha**

Jesus and the Buddha are, in current Western culture, the most well known symbols of Spirit fulfillment. I have added to this short list a fictitious character, the Shaman Samantha, because I want to indicate that all of the exemplars of Spirit fulfillment have not been men. The shaman dynamic in human society has always included both men and women. Even in those times when the dignity of women was the most severely maligned, Spirit women still appeared and, though not always officially acknowledged, served as exemplary Spirit teachers of our species.

Every long-standing religious tradition has recognized Spirit exemplars. In each and every culture, persons have appeared who manifested Spirit with unusual power. These persons proved socially important as sources for healing the Spirit of others and for informing the healed with directions for staying healthy and being a healing resource to still other members of that culture. When human history began to be written, it included each culture's memory of these Spirit exemplars. In most cultures, we have had long lineages of such exemplars dating back to the very beginnings of that culture.

Let us call these Spirit teachers "shamans." I prefer the word "shaman" to the many other words we use for these persons: "clergy," "priest," "prophet," "pastor," "guru," "seer," "mentor," "therapist," "workshop leader," "theologian," "inspirational presenter," or whatever. Some of these words have meanings that are too sectarian or narrow to include the vast variety I have in mind. Others of these words have meanings that tend to exclude the Spirit dimension, which is precisely what I want to emphasize. The term "shaman" has several advantages. (1) It has the capacity to remind us that Spirit teachers existed long before civilizations, long before our most common religions came into being. Tribal societies had shamans at least 50,000 years ago, perhaps several hundred thousand years ago. (2) The term "shaman" has the capacity to stretch our minds beyond the familiar understandings and misunderstandings of being a Christian minister or Jewish rabbi or some other religious professional. "Shaman" has the capacity to mean someone who is playing a Spirit role in our lives rather than someone who is pursuing a religious profession. (3) "Shaman" has the capacity to mean a Spirit role that each of us might find ourselves called upon to play.

Becoming a Shaman

The shaman-dynamic is open to all persons, and yet it is fully embraced by relatively few. Even among religious professionals, the shaman-role is quite often avoided. It is avoided with the same motives that leaving the herd is avoided or that adopting a good religious practice is avoided. Becoming a true shaman requires opening ourselves to Spirit intensification. This can be terrifying to both our patterns of self-depreciation and our patterns of misguided pride.

Yet, being a shaman means nothing more and nothing less than this: being your Being. By that simple phrase I mean actually manifesting in your presence, your expressions, and your deeds the being of your relatedness to the Eternal. A rock does not have any difficulty being its being, because a rock does not have the possibility of not being its being. The same can be said about your dog or cat. But strange as it may seem to our logical minds, the human is the one species that has to choose to be the fullness of its being. And equally strange to our sugar-coated perspectives is this tragic truth: *the state of living that is generally true in the life of each and every human is "NOT being one's being."*

We have misunderstood Jesus, the Buddha, and the Shaman Samantha by putting them on a pedestal, considering them gods or at least very special mutations within our species. We tend not to see their humanity and our humanity as being on the same plain. The Buddha, however, only claimed for himself that he was awake. He assumed that this awakening was possible for anyone who had the commitment for realizing it. And we can only truly grasp what it means to consider Jesus the Son of God if we can see ourselves as capable of also being a Son or a Daughter of God along with Jesus. And Samantha, as the representative of all the shamanic persons in each and every society from the dawn of humanity, is likewise not a glamorously grandiose figure, but simply a very ordinary someone who is being her (or his) actual Spirit being in a more or less complete fashion.

The actual situation is not how unusual the shamanic person is, but how fallen away from our true being most of us are. Spirit maturation is not adding something to our ordinary lives, it is taking something away. It is taking away our flight and cowardice, our egoism and false pride, our self absorption and self-loathing, our obsessions and addictions, our rebellion from the basic conditions of being human, and our despairs over ourselves and over life in general.

Those who have come to see deeply into these estranged states of humanity have often concluded that each of us needs to work very hard in order to achieve our true humanity. But such is not the case. We only have to make this very strange sort of effort: to *stop NOT being* our true being. The actual being of our true being is not in any way an achievement. It is simply a gift. Being our being is simply accepting a gift. Infinite Being gives us our being with the same completeness that Infinite Being gives a rock or a cat its being. We are constituted a Spirit being. We are constituted a relationship with Infinite Being, a relationship which has the built-in liberty to relate to itself in being itself or in not being itself. *Our Spirit problem is that we have already chosen to NOT be ourselves.*

In order for us to be ourselves, we have to be rescued from **not** being ourselves, and then we can freely choose to be ourselves rather than flee away again. And let me repeat, when I make a free choice to be myself, this is not an achievement. Such a choice is a surrender, a humiliation, a meekness, an embarrassment, an admission of error, a repentance, a dark night journey into the oblivion of everything I thought was my true aliveness. Such a choice also entails surrender to the upwelling of an intensity of aliveness that may be overwhelming to my shy and self-deprecating slump of customary living.

To become a shaman, I must give up all attempts to jazz up my life or to cool down my life. I must simply let my life be what my life actually is. Am I a male? That is what I must be. Am I a female? That is what I must be. Am I a relatively inexperienced but vigorous youth? That is what I must be. Am I an experienced but waning old man? That is what I must be.

And most important of all, am I a relationship with the Eternal--a relationship capable of choosing to be that relationship? If I can answer that question "Yes," I know precisely what I must do in order to be a shaman for my generation. I must choose to be what I already am, a relationship with the Eternal. Through each and every finite relationship, I am a relationship with the Eternal. Am I eating oatmeal? I am a relationship with the Eternal in and through the eating of oatmeal. Am I dying of pneumonia? I am a relationship with the Eternal in and through dying of pneumonia. Am I teaching a class of sleepy and resistant students? I am a relationship with the