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[Fear and the Work of the Soul](#)

by Taylor Grey

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Dedication

If you think you're crazy...for you

If you deeply fear...for you

If you're dying or have died...for you

Note from the Publisher

[Fear and the Work of the Soul](#) is Treeheart Ministries' first eBook publication. When we read it, we knew we had to make Taylor Grey's circuitous, often funny, sometimes radical, and always thought-provoking journey of transformation available to others. Our reviewers' responses have been diverse, but all have agreed on one thing: "This book had a very profound effect on me. Publish it!"

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Dr. Diane Kistner

Director, Treeheart Ministries

Note from the Author

This book reads a little like my brain works—in a multilayered, all-too-human way—and some of my more left-brain-dominant readers may find this disconcerting. Tone may shift; ideas may be suggested, dropped, and picked up again; and insights may appear between the lines that even I continue to discover on re-reading. This is how transformation has been for me, and the labyrinthine process is one I've deliberately tried to capture. In short: Life does not present itself as a straight string or a question with only one answer, nor does transformation or this book.

One reviewer flattered me by saying he loved the way I jump around in time; also, that the book is very "Zen." Another reviewer commented on my frequent use of the word "crazy," suggesting I check everywhere to be sure "crazy" is what I meant.

Crazy is what I meant. But "crazy" means different things to different people. I want to clarify, then, that when I've heard the word in any context or used it in this book, it has consistently evoked a feeling of dread with which I've had to wrestle. So when you see the word "crazy," know that I do not mean it in the lighthearted sense of "wacky" or "kooky." Know also that, now, after much hard work, the word is far less black-and-white for me.

Taylor Grey

April 2001

Preface

December 1998. I am lying on a table as an Oriental Medical Doctor inserts and twirls acupuncture needles into various points of my body. I'm not really sure how this acupuncture thing is supposed to work; I only have some briefly encountered notions about meridians, chakras, and chi. I am here because my sister has brought me, hoping that the treatment will help ease the depression that has been thickening for more than a year. Certainly the antidepressants have not helped. Certainly positive thinking and trying to look on the bright side have not helped. Even my tried-and-true palliative—working myself half to death—has failed to break my fall. Increasingly, I sense, I am slipping. All around me, my life is getting more and more confusing and unstable-feeling. Despite my training and work as a psychotherapist, I totter at the edge of the fear that I can no longer depend on myself to figure things out. Worse, I can feel my mind and body inexorably shutting down, and it seems I have no say in the matter.

So I'm here, on this table, figuring “What the heck. I'm game to try anything.” But, in my heart, I know that this ponderous deepening darkness has little to do with neurochemical imbalance, disrupted energy fields, or blocked chakras. No, at some barely conscious level I sense that this heavy, brooding presence that feels like a gigantic crow is settling itself down on me (as if I were an egg!) is something no drug or alternative treatment could ever mask or alter. This dark bird, whose true nature I will not come to recognize or appreciate until much later, is **Grief**. I cannot know, as this book begins, how patiently and lovingly she will warm me, hatch me, feed and guide my fledgling emergent self, and ultimately help me begin to see why my soul chose this intense and crazy life.

Chapter 1

The “Acupuncture Angel” Cometh

At the age of 46, lying on a table studded with acupuncture needles, I was about to get the shock of my life. An angel presented himself to me, and I did not—in any way, shape, or form—believe in angels. In fact, the few times in my life that I was exposed to the idea of angelic presence, I had utterly rejected the notion as religious lunacy. Shortly after my father had killed himself at the age of 46, when I was 15, a supposedly psychic friend of my mother's remarked as I walked in the door, “Oh, child! Child! You are *surrounded* by angels! I have never seen *anyone* with so many angels around them!” “This guy is nuts,” I thought, and ran to my room.

About six years later, while practicing the then-trendy transcendental meditation technique, nobody else at home, I sensed a presence I at first thought was a burglar. Frightened, I tried to be very quiet so as not to be detected and harmed. “Just take what you want and leave in peace,” I thought silently, but I heard no indications that this was happening. Soon it dawned on me—and this made me feel electrified with fear—that this presence was not human. It seemed to come into and fill my whole room, and I shuddered, knowing it had me in its sights. Every cell was on alert, and all my hair stood on end. I remembered then what the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi had taught us: that if ever we felt like we were under psychic attack, we were simply to say, “In the name of God, leave me.”

Never mind that I didn't especially like the word “God.” Having been raised a Southern Baptist subdued by ideas that today we call fundamentalist, “God” to me described a punitive, judgmental, authoritarian, unloving, and definitely untrustworthy deity that at an early age I had come to refuse to

believe in. But I was afraid now and grasping for anything that might protect me from this disembodied entity that I suspected intended me harm. So, with quavering voice, I whispered aloud to this presence in my room, “In the name of God, leave me!”

My last word was hardly out of my mouth when I felt large, warm, strong, yet gentle hands engulfing my head and face. Then I heard a voice in answer to mine. It was a most unusual voice, the voice of a woman and a child and a man so seamlessly blended together it sounded like one. The voice replied simply, “In the name of God, I have come to you.” My entire consciousness then seemed to release into the room, mingling into, embraced by, this presence. The next thing I was aware of was waking up several hours later. “Did I dream this?” I wondered, feeling a bit like I’d been blasted with something cosmic. No, it was much too vivid to be a dream. Did I think I had received some divine blessing? Decidedly not! I was very freaked out. “Surely only crazy people have experiences like this,” I agonized, and the one thing I knew with certainty was that I did not want to be crazy. So what did I do with this? I ran like hell away from all things religious and “spiritual.”

This is why what I’ve come to call my “acupuncture angel experience” was so shocking to me. About half an hour into the session, I saw him suddenly, floating above me, clothed in flowing green and white and gold, so beautiful I at first thought the angel was female. For a few minutes, I was so stunned by such indescribable joy that I forgot that I did not believe in angels. I even said to the doctor, rather beside myself, “It’s an angel, isn’t it?” Glowing, he just smiled and said, “Yes, it is.”

The angel began to talk to me. He told me my life was about to get very hard, but it was very important that I try to hang on. He said he was always there for me; that all I had to do was call his name and he would come. He told me his name—at which point I understood that he was a beautiful he and not a she—and asked that I not share it with anyone else. He continued to hover over me for a few minutes as I laughed and cried with the waves of joy I was feeling, and then he faded upward with the words, “Remember, just call me whenever you need.”

I reacted to this blessing, at first, with euphoria. It lasted several days. But then my fears took me firmly by the throat and proceeded to throttle me. “I must be crazy!” I thought, my anxiety building to almost unbearable levels. I had seen an angel so solid and real that I could still hear his voice echoing in the recesses of my consciousness. But hearing voices means you’re crazy, right? Unless you’re enlightened—and I knew for certain I was not—visions are something only crazy people see! And, anyway, how could my life get any harder than it already had been? I’d lived a lifetime filled with trauma after senseless trauma, and I had struggled valiantly to stay sane and productive in the face of it. I was determined to find value and meaning in my experiences, and I’d dedicated myself professionally to helping others do the same. I had sufficiently healed my own wounds with some very good psychotherapy; I had seen the light at the end of the trauma tunnel, and it was good. I had worked very hard to get where I was, and I believed now would be my “time in the sun,” my engagement with my highest good in life.

So surely this angel, or whatever it was, had to be wrong. I argued with myself over this, trying to go on with life and work as usual, but the part of me that finally won the argument was my own fear: This angel thing was a sure sign I was losing my mind, and I was rapidly losing confidence that I could prevent it from happening.

The End of Life as I Knew It

Less than a month after my angel experience, and just as the angel predicted, my life did get very, very hard. It marked the end of life as I knew it. My whole world shattered to pieces, and soon there was no footing left for me. In one fell swoop, I lost my work, my dreams, my courage, my fight, my income,

my credit, and what I had known as my self. I was hospitalized three times in as many months. My former therapist, Ralph, who had steadfastly believed in me and supported my efforts to train and work as a therapist, was telling me I needed to apply for disability.

The pain of all this was too great. The only way I could cope at all was to shut down completely. For months, I slept as much as 22 hours a day, surfacing only long enough, when urged, to take a bite of food or relieve myself. My sisters, who were trying to care for me, were frightened and overwhelmed. Off and on, filtering down into my thick slumbers, I could hear whisperings about nursing homes in the background. Were those whisperings real or was I dreaming them? I didn't know, and I was beyond being able to care. Oddly enough, I was no longer afraid. When you've lost everything, what's left to be afraid of?

My thoughts had slowed to a labored crawl, so there was much I could not process or comprehend. It was as if I had suddenly popped into neutral, but I was not spinning the wheels of my consciousness in any waking-state sense of that term. I felt in this world but not of it—very disengaged and completely motionless but often in danger of floating away. As my angel had instructed me, I focused solely on mustering what was left of my strength and energy to stay in my body and hang on to life. This, and nothing else, seemed important to me, even if I did not yet know why.

Chapter 2

The Very First Thing

June 1999. I was in a kind of suspended animation, rather like being buried in quicksand. I was not sinking any deeper—I was already in about as deep as I could go—but I wasn't surfacing either. To surface, you have to make a concerted effort. You have to move, and you have to have some sense of what direction you need to move in. I didn't. In my cognitively slowed state—my IQ had dropped a full 26 points—it took me a while to figure out what to do.

When I did start to move, the movements were at first so slight that I hardly recognized that I was moving. But finally, one day, my head broke above the surface and I was able to look around. I had that feeling Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* must have had when she realized she wasn't in Kansas anymore. Some powerful force outside of me had blown in and whirled me away to another place and time. Strangely, I wasn't in Georgia anymore. I was in Florida.

This was a *déjà vu* experience, because where I found myself was in the house of my son and ex-husband, lying on a couch in front of the television set—which I still refer to as the “Darth Vader TV”—that had served as the last-straw catalyst to our divorce five years earlier. The “only solution” had been recommended by my family, and consented to by me (apparently while in a state of complete brain fog). The solution was that I would move in with my ex and son and this would at least prevent me from being homeless or killing myself.

Now, my ex and I had accomplished an extraordinary thing. We had agreed, post-divorce, to be responsible co-parents, no matter what it took, and in the process of doing this we had to bury most of our hatchets. We also managed to renew the friendship that our subsequent marriage had almost destroyed. So now I felt safe and relatively nurtured, but it was also very weird. I kept feeling like I had somehow time-traveled back to an earlier time and that something very important had been erased. My awareness kept fluctuating between past and present in a way that utterly confused me. Not only did I not feel like I had physical or emotional footing, but for brief panicked moments I wasn't even sure

where I was in time. Maybe I was still this man's wife. Maybe what came later was all a bad dream.

But things were different now than they were back then. Unlike the little whirlwind I had been when I was married, somehow I had become like a person who has lost the ability to walk or speak and must learn how to do these things all over again. I had to reassess reality and attempt to negotiate life in a radically altered environment in which I was not a solid, dependable fixture. Everything, it seemed, slipped and slid. So what was I supposed to do? Why was I even here on this planet? What did I have to work with and on? And how could I start to heal? As far as I knew, I could only count on three things now: (1) I was severely depressed; (2) I was completely dependent on other people; and (3) I was totally crazy. So I asked myself, as a therapist would ask a client whose functioning has been totally compromised, in an effort to help initiate any movement, no matter how small or in what direction: "What is the very first thing that occurs to you now?"

Movie Therapy

Trying to Escape Reality

What occurred to me was to start watching movies, because what I longed for more than anything was to escape the pain, fatigue, and devastation of where I was. In other words, I wanted to escape reality, and movies had always been pretty good for that. First I watched *The Sixth Sense*. I watched it three times in a row. But instead of escaping reality, as I'd hoped, I was taken ever more deeply into the reality of my situation. The main characters in the movie are Malcolm, a child psychologist who failed a client who had come back as an adult to shoot him, and the troubled and sensitive Cole, a child who gives Malcolm an opportunity to make up for his failure. The impact this movie had on me requires some explanation of my professional demise.

What had set my downhill slide in motion, destroyed my dream of helping people, and extinguished my spirit—I didn't yet understand that quite the opposite was true—was my first year out of graduate school when I worked with traumatized people under the clinical supervision of a therapist whose ideas about what we were working with were very, very different from my own. Where I saw courageous human beings who were reacting normally to abnormal traumatic stress, people who deserved respect and an honoring of their capacity to survive and heal, he saw "sick puppies" who were too broken and slack ever to get better. Where I accepted my clients' realities and worked with them from their unique histories and perspectives, pulling for strengths and their innate drive to heal, he saw delusional crazy people who needed to be confronted with their delusions. When I focused on client self-determination and honored their own healing agendas rather than trying to impose on them my own, they got better. But then my clinical supervisor refused to consider the demonstrable evidence I had of their improvement, insisting instead that I was deluding myself and I was crazy. "I've been doing this for thirteen years," he once boasted, "and my clients never get better!" I became increasingly horrified and confused, and depression soon had me in its grip.

I fought my supervisor's directives for months, arguing as cogently as I could that what he wanted me to do with my clients was going to hurt them. But he was stronger than I was and had power over me, so finally (to my shame) he wore me down. I did what he told me to do, and my clients indeed got worse, as I knew they would. They got so much worse, and became so unstable—and understandably so angry with me because I had flip-flopped on them and proved so undeserving of their trust—that I found I could not stabilize them again.

Everything exploded, and I simply did not have the skill or experience to handle it. In fact, I don't think even the most seasoned clinician could have handled what happened. Someone's head had to roll, so

soon I was fired for “poor clinical judgment,” that same poor clinical judgment that I had argued so hard against. Of course, my supervisor failed to mention to his higher-ups that he had badgered me into doing exactly what had opened this Pandora’s box to begin with.

Then it hit me: He had deliberately framed me—and the only reasonable explanation I could come up with at the time was that he was a bitter, vicious person who didn’t care about anyone else and got some sick pleasure out of hurting people. In trauma terms, we might call him a perpetrator. That’s exactly how I came to think of him. And yet I blamed myself solely, and mercilessly, for the harm that had been done to my clients. I had failed to stand in my own integrity, and the only one responsible for that was me.

When I realized people like this clinical supervisor could actually be out practicing in the field, and rising to positions that allowed them to crush new therapists with impunity—the clients be damned—it broke me. I became so deeply depressed that I could not work at all, although for a very short while I tried. I also did something that therapists are taught not to do: I generalized my experience to the entire mental health field. I became convinced, in a very paranoid way, that disempowering clients and keeping them sick—and to hell with any therapist who did not follow this agenda—was what mental “health” [sic] was really all about. After all that training, and all my hopes that I could play a small part in making the world a better place, I realized I could not ever bring myself to work in the field again. This realization represented no less than the death of a lifelong dream that had sustained me.

I had been so traumatized by my experience that all the gains I’d made in my own therapy for childhood trauma came undone, and I did what professionals call “decompensate.” I completely lost it. But the very idea of getting back into therapy to settle down what was by now a very active, reactivated case of posttraumatic stress disorder threw me into such severe panic attacks, I knew it would kill me to risk seeking the help I so desperately needed.

I was also suicidal most of the time, but the fear that I might fail at killing myself and wind up in a hospital at the mercy of psychiatrists—who, as you’ll see, I have good reason to mistrust—paralyzed me in a fetal position in my room. What effectively kept me away from potentially lethal substances or devices that I knew were in the house was what I truly feared would be a fate worse than death: involuntary hospitalization.

For more than a year, my fear of psychiatry served to keep me alive. Locked wards and drug straight-jackets do the same, of course, with far less work on the patient’s part. I’m sure I would have had an easier time of it had I allowed myself to be “put in” and drugged out of my gourd. But doing it my way afforded a context in which no one could interfere with and attempt to suppress the grief that I didn’t yet understand was essential to my healing. Nor could they shun, belittle, pathologize, or try to therapize me out of the transformational process I deeply sensed had been elegantly engineered for me.

So this brings us back to the pivotal scene in *The Sixth Sense*. Malcolm is visiting Cole in the hospital, and Cole decides it is safe to tell him what’s really got him upset. Up to this point, I have been identifying with Malcolm, with his desire to help this boy, and also with his very human need to somehow set right the failing of his other client with similar difficulties. But when Cole tells him, “I see dead people,” the expression on Malcolm’s face changes dramatically. You can see him pulling back, becoming the insensitive therapist distancing himself from this tortured boy who trusts him and needs his help so desperately.

Watching the movie, projecting my own experiences onto Cole and Malcolm, and knowing what I thought I knew about the mental health system, I could almost read Malcolm’s mind: “Oh, God! This kid’s a real *sick puppy*! I’ve got to get away from him, refer him to someone else, get him on drugs or hospitalized or something. He’s so broken and sick, he’s hopeless. I cannot help him.” In the blink of an eye, Malcolm had turned into my clinical supervisor.

Later in the movie, Cole puts his finger right on my problem: “You believe me, don’t you?” he says to Malcolm—after Malcolm has just confirmed that my mind-reading was correct—“How can you help me if you don’t believe me?” And that was the essence of what I had brought to my work, my belief in my clients. It’s what had made me effective as a therapist, and it underscored what I had let slip away that caused so much grief and devastation: my belief in my own instincts and intuitive wisdom.

But this movie had even greater implications, and they were not lost on me. When Cole tells Malcolm he sees dead people, he adds, “they don’t know they’re dead.” In the production notes for the movie, the crew said they were very surprised that audiences “fell for it.” People didn’t “get” what the crew thought would be obvious: that Malcolm was dead but didn’t know he was dead. “How could this be?” they wondered. I knew the answer: Because people typically distance themselves from truths they perceive to be crazy and also because *they don’t know they’re dead!* And that’s when I realized that *I* was dead, had been dead for a year and didn’t know it. Just as my father had died at age 46, so had I. Yet, like Malcolm, here I was, still tied to the earth, hanging by the thread of my need to somehow make up for my failings before I moved on.

Trying to Escape Despair

After *The Sixth Sense*, I became intensely suicidal again, but I was so phobic about entrusting myself to a mental health system I had come to perceive as hurtful, even evil, that I knew I was going to have to use whatever was left of my skill to save myself. My acupuncture angel had told me it was important for me to hang on, so I was hanging on by my fingernails, even if doing so seemed pointless. I kept asking myself, “Why am I still ‘alive’? What am I supposed to be doing here? Why was I even born at all?” I was in a real downward spiral but, in retrospect, these were very critical questions for me to ask.

Knowing I had to break out of this, I started looking for something to make me laugh. I found the one movie that had always served to pull me out of depression, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Why this movie always works for me this way, I have no idea. Maybe it’s the enduring memory of seeing it when it first came out with my two good friends and writing-group buddies. One of them had gone on to become a dean at a large private university and the other had written plays, making it all the way to off-Broadway. I can still see them in their *Rocky Horror* getups, especially the future dean in her little tap-dancing Columbia outfit, so intoxicated that she kept driving her VW Beetle onto the shoulder of the Interstate on our way to the theater. I can’t remember if I wore a getup or not, but I do remember the squirt guns and rice and toilet paper scattered all over the theater. In short, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* is more than a movie; it is an interactive dramatic experience that spawned an international fan club and earned the movie enduring cult status. It is one of the most ludicrous, funny/sad, reality-bending, perpetually fresh movies I have ever seen.

Were my memories of my friends what made this movie so mood-elevating for me? Or was it the nature of the movie itself that served to alleviate my depression? For those who have never seen this movie, a brief synopsis is in order. It is a zany rock musical about an alien transvestite, the flaming and melodramatic Dr. Frank’n’Furter (a role that immortalized the actor Tim Curry for *Rocky* fans), who makes himself a gorgeous man-mate, a kind of sexy blonde Frankenstein monster. Janet and Brad (played by Susan Sarandon and Barry Bostwick, in roles they seem embarrassed to talk about these days) are two “normal” straight-laced kids who make their way to Frank’s castle after their car breaks down on a rainy night, hoping to use the phone. Among all the crazy antics and “unacceptable behavior” that follow the couple’s innocent decision, there is wisdom and hilarity and, yes, a little escape from reality—all of which depressed people desperately need.

Another effect of the movie, one I couldn’t bear to think about at this time, was its way of putting me in touch with the giddy promise of youth, the creativity and questioning of reality that so many “children

of the sixties” (including myself) became so caught up in. My friends, back then, had always told me that I would be the one to go on to bigger and better things. Would it be too painful now to face the fact that they were wrong? I was in too much pain to even think to ask myself this question, although the time for asking it would come soon enough.

I put the movie in the VCR and settled back down on the couch, under cover, to watch it. In an early scene in the movie, Brad and Janet are walking through a thunderstorm, headed so naively for Frank’s castle. Because this is a musical, they are singing. As the strains of their pretty little duet floated over to me, my heart felt a strange, sudden flicker of hope:

In the velvet darkness
of the blackest night
burning bright
there’s a guiding star
no matter what
or who you are

“Oh, yes,” I thought, “I needed to hear this”—because I definitely was feeling more like a what than a who just then. Suddenly, I had a heightened sense that this movie was speaking *directly* to me, knowing full well that people get themselves diagnosed as schizophrenic for this kind of thing. I was mesmerized as Brad and Janet knocked at the castle door and were let in by Riff-Raff, the straggle-haired, hunchbacked butler. Riff-Raff informs them, when asked if they are having a (raucous) party, that they’ve arrived on a very special night: “It’s one of the master’s affairs.” Janet says, “Oh, lucky him.”

At this point in the movie, the maid Magenta—in her sexy maid getup—slides down the banister, answering Janet’s comment with some hysterically cackled “lucky” remarks of her own. But I didn’t hear what she actually said or what I remembered her saying; and I realized suddenly, with some alarm, that I was hallucinating. Now, “hallucinating” isn’t really the accurate term for it, because that means you see or hear or sense things that are not at all there—kind of what I thought I had experienced with my acupuncture angel. This experience was more illusory, as when you catch a blown leaf out of the corner of your eye and mistake it for a mouse or a bird or a spider. So when Janet said, “Oh, lucky him,” and Magenta slid down the banister, this is what I heard:

You’re crazy, he’s crazy, I’m crazy, we’re all crazy!

Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah!

Immediately, all my hair stood on end, and I felt like I had felt so many years earlier, when that divine presence spoke to me when I was meditating, alone and vulnerable, in that empty house. For a few mad moments, I thought Spirit must be speaking to me in the only language I was willing and able to hear: the language of this one crazy little movie. But before I could clamp down on the experience, dismissing it as insanity, I was hit with a very profound insight: My soul had chosen this crazy life. It had chosen all this craziness. Things had been so unbelievably and persistently crazy for me, no matter what I did, it was as if my life-template had been stamped before birth with a pattern, a primer, of craziness. And if I had indeed chosen these experiences, why did I always reject them so vehemently? There had to be a reason behind all of this and, I thought rather angrily, “It had better be a damned good one!”

I started to wonder, crumpled up under my quilt, “What would happen if, instead of distancing myself from the craziness and running away in fear, I just leaned into it and went with it?” That was when I felt the first stirrings of a subtle but powerful transformational process that seemed to be going on at a cellular level. I couldn’t identify or apprehend it mentally, but I felt it just the same. This, I thought, must be what a therapist whose work I admired meant when he spoke of subconscious internal self-reorganization in clients that are initiated by the simplest, most seemingly unrelated, events or communications.

Next, I felt a kind of defiant energy building up in me, enough energy to actually get up off the couch and move around vigorously for the first time in many months. I stomped my feet and shook my fists, loudly exclaiming to whatever was in the house (again, nobody was home), “I’m going to be just as crazy as a Bessie-bug! I’m going to let myself be out of my rabbit-ass mind, and I’m going to *enjoy* it! I’m crazy. I’m crazy! So what? We’re *all* crazy! The whole damned world is *crazy*! So friggin’ what?”

When I did this, I felt an opening deep within me, like an internal dam had broken. I did not understand it then, but what I had just done was face and embrace my deepest fear. (Could it be, I’d later wonder, that our deepest fears are *exactly* the same as our most important soul-chosen lessons?) Now I was in a position to begin to understand, in a gentle and compassionate way, the meaning and function of craziness in my life.

Trying to Understand Craziness

As hard as it was, I knew this movie therapy thing was yielding some important insights, so next I watched the excellent *American Beauty*, a movie about how crazy “normal” people really are and the myriad, all-too-human ways we all struggle to stay alive—or not alive—in spite of the craziness. Very apropos.

One scene from the movie struck me as especially meaningful and beautiful, in part because it acknowledged and confirmed for me a very deep inner layer of myself that I had been trying so hard and so unsuccessfully for so many years to conceal: a child-like innocence and sensitivity that bordered on the psychic. I call this scene “the bag scene,” because it resonates somehow with a fearful image I used to carry around with me of winding up as a bag lady.

The most sane person in the movie, the sensitive, branded-as-crazy Ricky, is showing his girlfriend Jane a video he has shot of a small, almost translucent white plastic bag—a discarded piece of trash—being blown around on a winter’s day, dancing like a child on a wind thick with the promise of snow. Ricky, whose father is a violent, very repressed and crazed “normal” former Marine, shares with Jane in this intimate moment, his eyes welling up with tears:

This bag was dancing with me...

That’s the day I realized that there was this entire life

behind things...and this incredibly benevolent force

that wanted me to know that there was no reason

to be afraid...ever...it helps me remember...

I need to remember...

Sometimes there’s so much beauty in the world,

I feel like I can’t take it...and my heart

is just going to cave in.

I saw in this scene what had happened to me and how I was floating now like a bit of beautiful trash on the wind of pain. I saw how and why my heart had broken and why I had broken down. For the first time, I began to call on my acupuncture angel to be with me—and there he was, this incredibly benevolent force, just as he had promised so many months ago. I found a much-needed comfort in this, the sense of this entire life behind things, of the beauty that exists in all things, no matter how unfair or tragic or ugly. This is when I started to move inexorably toward healing, when I started to trust in something again—the spirit of the universe—and set my feet down on the path toward my highest good.

Chapter 3

Surrendering to Spirit

I then did what so many spiritual teachers advise student-seekers to do, something I had always dismissed as idiotic, “too New Age,” and cliché: I turned it all over to “God.” I surrendered myself to the spirit of the universe. And because I had felt so powerfully that Spirit was trying to speak to me through something as simple and mundane as a couple of movies, I wondered how else Spirit might have been trying to communicate with me in the past when I wasn’t listening.

I began a review of some of my experiences, starting with my last encounter with therapy. It happened in the spring of 1999, after I had collapsed but before my deep sleep. Shortly before my acupuncture experience, and before I lost everything, I had signed up for a personal transformation intensive, a group therapy experience involving two facilitators and sixteen participants. We would attend one preparatory group session a month for five months, and once each month we would spend a weekend at a live-in mountain retreat doing intensive transformational work. We had to commit to attending all ten sessions, and the fee was non-refundable. So, as sick as I knew I was, I forced myself to go.

My First Shamanic Journey

It soon became clear to me that this intensive was not going to be your traditional talk-therapy stuff. We did trancework and breathwork; screamed and yelled and threw pillows; hated what we did not yet see as despised and rejected parts of ourselves in each other; were encouraged to look into the mirrors of others’ faces and start to see therein our own reflections; and, in the process of all of this, we bonded and understood. We were able to experience first-hand what is meant by unconditional love and support, no matter how despicable we felt our revealed underbellies were. By the time it was over, we had recognized each other as beautiful souls on our respective long, slow journeys toward the light.

I thought some of the things we did were pretty far out. The strangest and most removed from any conception I had of “things therapeutic” was when we did shamanic journeys. “This is over the top,” I thought. “This is just too weird and too fringe for me!” The facilitators did little to prepare us beyond saying they would ceremonially “smudge” us—smudging is being run through the smoke of a burning bundle of sage, supposedly to “cleanse” you—and lead us to lie down quietly on pillows and little mats in the darkened group room. They said just to close our eyes and give ourselves up to the process, not trying to make anything happen, but to stay on the lookout to see if any bird, insect, or animal came to us. “If one comes, just follow it wherever it takes you,” they said. “It will be your spirit guide.”

Silent and barefooted, we were lead one by one into the darkened room to the sound of too-loud, powerful drumming and the thick heavy scent of sage and incense. One by one, we were smudged and then eased down onto our respective pillows. I closed my eyes, still thinking, “This is crazy.” But in minutes, I was seized by the rhythm and intensity of the drums, and then I was catapulted in spite of myself into a journey that was so intense and super-real, I thought I had actually left the room and gone off somewhere. Well, actually, as I would learn later, I *had* gone off somewhere, because shamanic journeys are all about visiting other worlds parallel to this one that shamans insist are as real, if not more so, than what we’ve come to accept as reality. After my first journey, I became convinced that those shamans were onto something.

I rummaged around for the write-up I had done after this journey and examined it for messages from Spirit. This is the journey as I wrote it down immediately afterward:

I am inside the edge of a deciduous forest, the smells of rotting logs, moist loam, and mushrooms filling my nostrils. I see a narrow path that I begin to follow into the woods. To my left, a deer crashes through some brush. Is this the animal I am to follow? No, it lacks depth; it is but a construction of my imagination. I look to the right, where I see a brown bear lumbering away from me. Is this my animal? No, he’s not fully real somehow; again, my imagination is trying to create the experience. I walk further along the path and see a small brown snake quietly coiled on a bed of rotting leaves, so still, as if waiting. “But a snake couldn’t be my animal!” I mutter aloud to myself and keep walking.

In a deepening purple twilight, I walk until I come to an inner clearing in the woods. There, to the sound of incessant drumming, I see a number of scantily clad Indian braves dancing wildly, as if in trance. A figure wearing some kind of headdress, his face black with shadow but painted with stark streaks of white, leaps out from the circle of braves and approaches me. With legs spread widely, toes pointing outward, arms outspread, and deeply bent knees, he begins to hop and dance about, shouting. Are his unintelligible words intended for me? Oh, I think, I must be here for a healing. This is a medicine man, and I am so sick.

As I watch, entranced, at first I don’t see that a small brown snake about four feet long is crawling up his left leg. It coils up and up to wrap around his chest, its head coming to rest over the medicine man’s heart. Oh, I think, a snake again... and the snake then loosens and crawls down the other leg. Again I say, “But a snake couldn’t be my animal!” The medicine man, looking suddenly very ferocious, picks up the snake from the ground by its head and tail, snaps the snake very straight, and glares at me. The snake, I am shocked to discover, has turned into a spear that the medicine man now angrily hurls at me. It whizzes sharply past my ear and rips through the foliage behind me. Afraid now that the medicine man intends me harm, I turn and quickly run back into the woods.

In a small clearing past a stand of trees, a hawk soars over my head. Ah, maybe this magnificent bird is my animal! But then I see a small brown snake coiled beside the path, very still, as though waiting for me. Is this the same snake I saw before? It looks the same, and maybe it isn’t poisonous. “Okay, okay,” I mutter, resigned. “I guess you are my animal.” The snake uncoils and begins to slither slowly on down the path ahead of me. As instructed by the facilitators—but that seems like so long ago and so far away—I follow. We take a small right-hand fork through brush and head down towards the bank of a brook that babbles around and over the heads of stones.

The snake moves very rapidly, but I manage to keep up. I follow the snake along the bank, up and down little hills and over rocks. I notice a feeling of fear beginning to build up in my stomach, quietly at first, then increasing as surely as a slow, well-built fire catches hold. The snake crawls up an oak tree with branches that sprawl across the brook—now wider and deeper with faster-running currents—and I scurry up behind it.

The bark of the tree is very rough but reassuring somehow; it reminds me of my willow tree from

childhood, ordered to be cut down by my mother because, I thought, she'd decided I was too old to be climbing it. My senses seem heightened: the textures, the smells, the soft spring breeze stirring a rustling melody in the leaves. I feel the breath of the evening on my skin, the small hairs of my arms (that I never really noticed before) running the feeling deeply into my cells. I am tingling all over, but still I feel fearful. What is waiting for me on the other side of the brook?

The snake is on a thick, long branch that has grown across the brook to the other side. I almost catch up to the snake when—Darn!—it suddenly drops off of the branch and into the water. “Well, here goes,” I say and fall in behind it.

As we float along in the current, the snake just ahead of me, the brook widens, gradually becoming a river. The snake is getting ahead of me, so I reach for it and touch its body, slick in the now swiftly flowing water. Incredibly, the snake metamorphoses into a giant anaconda. I climb on its back as it curves its magnificently wild, somehow feminine body through the currents. As the evening deepens, I feel the snake's strong body beneath me, knowing that it knows where we are going. The river runs on, then slows into a pool that extends itself into the mouth of a cave. Time itself slows, too, as I feel myself floating.

The cave entrance reminds me a little of a tunnel of love at a fair: one could float in a small boat right through it and come out changed. I release my hold on the snake and paddle softly in the cool water, noticing how the ripples reflect the overhead stars and moon as liquid light. I look for the snake, expecting it to take me into the cave, but I see that it is now swimming around in a clockwise circle at the center of the pool. A spiral of water tinged with moonlight forms where the snake is spiraling; it reminds me of the faint light spirals I sometimes see when in deep meditation or trance. Before my eyes, the snake shrinks back to its prior small brown shape and suddenly disappears through the center of the spiral. Knowing I have to follow, I dive through, too.

We drop through to another pool, this one underground. Are we inside the cave after all? The air is cool and a little cave-damp, and somewhere in the darkness water is dripping. I sense stalagmites and stalactites extending themselves very slowly, and I hear a few bats flutter away in the darkness. I cannot see the snake, but somehow I can. It slides out of the water and I follow, blind but strangely not blind, to the edge of a precipice. I draw a sharp breath as I almost slip off the edge. Then I see laid out before me the grandest sight I have ever seen, grander than the Grand Canyon and even more huge: ancient stalagmites and stalactites all growing and grown together, stained in multicolors by the different ores and minerals dissolved by eons of water working its deep inner magic. Could this, I wonder, be heaven?

Before I can fully take in the meaning and the enormity of it all, that little brown snake hurls itself off the edge and falls out of sight! Really frightened now, I jump, not knowing how far we'll fall. What else, I tell myself, can I possibly do?

We fall and fall and fall and fall until I no longer feel like I'm falling.

We land in a shallow pool as though we floated down into it on the softest of feathers. It is much cooler here, and I know we are deep in the earth. I reach for the little snake with my right hand and feel somehow secure as it lets me hold on. Undaunted and not dragged down by my weight, it guides me out of the pool to a drier edge. I sense there are amphibians here—white-bodied salamanders, blind but not blind—and other cave creatures never seen by human eyes. I know that, like me, they can somehow see in this utterly lightless darkness. I reach for some thick vines to my left, not questioning why or how they came to be here, and pull myself out of the water.

My snake slithers up on a rock where I see a nest with a large white egg at its center. The egg stands upright, about a foot tall. I climb up into the nest where I see that two other small brown snakes are

lying beside the egg. My snake curls up beside the egg, too, becoming very still, apparently sleeping. I wonder if I am to see another animal and what kind of animal it might be. A condor? A dinosaur? What? I tune into the fear in my stomach, intense, and something tells me to curl up around the egg. I find I am small enough—how did that happen?—to wrap my body around it. When I do, I feel a warmth emanating from it, or is it my own warmth, or both? “Be still,” a voice says silently in my head. My snake is speaking to me.

I am resting, still, in the warmth of the egg when, suddenly—schloop!—I am sucked inside of it! And there I see a huge galaxy surrounded by a whole universe of stars, and I am in that enormity, held up and floating, in spirit, a part of it all! The space is so immense, so timeless, the lights so bright, yet soft, and the darkness, too. The galaxy is turning slowly in a clockwise motion and, at its center, I see a tiny dark hole. What now? I remember the anaconda’s spiral, and somehow I know that I must go through that center. In the blink of an eye, I find myself moving down through what must be a wormhole, a very black tunnel through space. It is very tight, and I push through it even as its edges are squeezing, massaging my body.

Déjà vu. This feeling is so familiar! Suddenly I know that the wormhole, the tunnel, is made up of all the birth canals I have passed through in my many, many lives; the tunnel is long and curving, tight and invigorating. I see ahead of me a kind of circular curtain, translucent and ragged and with a dark hole in its center. Can I fit through that, I wonder? Then, suddenly, I am through it—aaahhhh!—and inside the body of a very huge snake. I am looking out through its black shining eyes, surveying the heavens, my eyes reciprocating the light of a billion stars. “You have shed your skin,” says the voice inside of me.

And just as suddenly, I find myself stretched out on what looks like the very same path where I accepted the little brown snake as my guide. I am soaking a filtered sunlight into my skin, and I’m alive. A soft breeze is blowing through the trees. Beneath me, I sense that worms and insects are doing their own kind of tunneling, and I feel a special affinity with these creatures. I know that I am the little brown snake, about four feet long in human terms. I am storing the energy of the sun, lying very still, perfect in this moment.

Then I look out of my snake eyes and see—or is it that I am sensing—a tiny little brown rabbit in the brush. It is a baby, separated from its mother, too vulnerable to survive in these woods for long. Frozen, it is trying to be invisible, but its heat and its shivering guide me surely to it. I flick my tongue in the air to smell it, lock in on its heat, and silently move. With one sharp snap, I seize the terrified rabbit in my jaws. I pause for a moment, giving snake-thanks for that which I trust will always sustain me. Then my jaws unhinge and my muscles take over. Present in the moment, I swallow the fear.

Afterward, when we were sharing our journeys, I was very tempted to hold back when it became clear that not too many people had had an experience as intense as mine. I was thinking, too, “I must be psychotic!” My therapist self did a quick assessment to see if I was “oriented times three,” and I was: I knew where I was, I knew what day and time it was, and I knew (as well as anyone else did) my purpose for being there.

I was rather exhilarated after this journey, and as I shared all the details with the group, I couldn’t mask my awe and enthusiasm. “Well!” exclaimed one of the facilitators, clearly alluding to orgasmic experience, “was it good for *you*?” I knew I wanted to do more of this shamanic journeying stuff. Later, shamanic work became an important spiritual practice that would guide me on my path.

Acts of God

Reading back over my journey, I saw some messages Spirit had given me that, in my initial bedazzlement with the more spectacular elements, I hadn’t seen. These messages seemed to have great

relevance to the soul-level work I now needed to do.

What was immediately apparent to me was how the spirit that had come to guide me, that little snake that in my judgmental thick-headedness I had repeatedly rejected, was finally hurled at me as a spear that struck me with great paranoia and fear of harm. This fear had opened me up to the experience I was habitually resisting. The meaning of this was clear to me now based on how my life had unfolded thus far: If I would not embrace Spirit in its benevolent forms, then Spirit would transform itself into a weapon to get my attention. And get my attention it did.

That I found myself in the dark bowels of the cave, “blind but strangely not blind,” was an affirmation that, even in my deepest darkness, I could draw on senses and instincts I had always had but did not know I had. This “second sight” could serve me well in negotiating my way through a very great fall. The fall itself was so prolonged that my common sense of space and time had been altered, just as had been the case in my “real” life. The beauty and value and promise of this was that I finally stopped perceiving it as a fall.

When I first experienced this journey, I interpreted “You have shed your skin” at the level of ego: as an accolade and approval for an accomplishment. But now I could see it for what it was: a reassurance that I had died and been reborn many times and, so, would survive again my next death and rebirth. Once shed of the old confining “skin” my soul had again outgrown, I could for a time bask in the nourishing warmth of the universe—and, in that perfect eternal moment, gratefully consume the fear that was given to me for food.

I was so glad I had documented this journey so I could begin to integrate its meaning and build on it. One thing was clear now: The messages had come when I had slipped out of reality as I knew it—exactly the kind of situation I was afraid of—so now I began to think back to other life experiences when reality seemed to come unglued and shift away from what I thought was normal. I started scanning my memory for “crazy times,” and then I remembered the trees.

As my sisters have always jokingly said, I have karma with trees. I have come very close to being killed three times in this life when trees, for no good reason that I could fathom, suddenly fell on me.

The first time was in the early seventies, pre-dating by a year or so my meditation experience and hearing the divine voice that made me run. I was living in the most wonderful little cottage nestled among old trees, a very quiet and private place that I could afford on my own. It was a playhouse, actually, that the family up in “the big house” had built for their boys when they were little. The boys were long grown and gone, so now they rented the cottage out to college students who weren’t too terribly demanding or physically large. It was hard to find renters small enough—the ceilings ranged from five to six feet tall—so the rent was very cheap. Because I was under five feet tall, it was perfect for me, and I felt very big inside.

My time in that cottage was one of the most creative and productive periods of my life. I was writing and publishing poetry, taking courses toward my first bachelor’s degree (then majoring in psychology with the intention of doing graduate work in clinical psychology), expanding my mind, and working part-time as a secretary in the university’s security office. My favorite time of the day was twilight, when I’d come home, take off all my clothes—a freedom I’d never experienced before—and settle in to doing my creative work. Often, I’d fall asleep naked on the couch, books and scribblings scattered about, then get up the next morning to luxuriate over a few cups of coffee before getting dressed and going out into my day. There was something about that cottage. I sensed an amiable, welcoming presence there, and sometimes I could see beautiful clear blobs of color floating in the corners of the rooms. I thought of them as nature spirits, with which I had been well acquainted as a child, and I did not feel at all threatened in this space. It was my resting place and dearly beloved home.

Tree Number One

I awakened about five one morning—quite early for me—to the sound of my Burmese cat Sombra making a strange, low, and very unfeline noise. She was hunched down in the middle of the floor, her eyes very wide and wild, her body appearing much larger in size because all her fur was standing on end. “What is it, kitten?” I asked her, but then I heard what was underneath her voice. It was a very strange, pervasive electrical whine combined with a sense of pressure that put every cell of my body on alert. As I lay there, holding my breath, just listening, the sound seemed to swell and fall, almost like something monstrous was there with us, breathing. The last thing I noticed before the tree was that my dear little Sombra seemed to be breathing in time to it, resonating somehow with this eerie, room-filling presence.

Suddenly, two huge oak limbs burst through the ceiling, one of them shooting like a missile through the wall above my head, missing me by about six inches; the other missed my shoulder by less as it sawed across the edge of the couch, jamming straight through the floor beside me, opening up a large hole. My cat gave an unearthly shriek and bolted through the hole. There I was, naked and pinned in the arms of these gigantic limbs, and for an incredible few moments, the entire universe stood very quiet and still. Then the ceiling caved in on top of me.

When I managed to wriggle out after what seemed an eternity—although by the clock it had only been a few minutes—I called my mother, rousting her out of a sound sleep. I was screaming hysterically, rain pelting me through the half-nonexistent ceiling: “Mother!” I wailed, “God hates me! God hates me! God hates me!” Now, my mother was always one to tone down or outright dismiss my experiences as imaginary. As a child, when I tried to tell her about some terrible things that were happening when she was not looking—which was a lot—she’d say “Oh, you just dreamed that” or “You certainly have an active imagination.” Today, in her typical cheerful denying way, she did it again. “So a little limb fell on the roof. That’s that! Get up. Get dressed. Go to work. It’s no big deal.”

We hung up. I walked, silent and naked and numb, into my child-sized kitchen. As though it was just a part of my usual routine, I raked the tree debris off the stovetop and put on water for coffee. In a numb, altered state of consciousness, I took down a cup and spoon and my “backup” jar of instant, the rain running down my face like tears that I just could not cry. By now, the guys who rented the upstairs floor of the big house—one, a dental student; the other, a medical student—had burst through what was left of my front door. It was more than a few limbs, you see. It was a whole damned giant oak tree that had uprooted and obliterated my cottage! Had a *tornado* just blown through? Well, *something* certainly had!

“Let’s call the newspapers!” the guys were raving, clearly delighted with the whole thing. In their excitement, I don’t even think they noticed that I was naked and in shock. I just muttered to the ether, “That’s that! No big deal! I’m going to get dressed and go to work!” And I did. I worked the whole day without realizing I was wearing stripes with plaid—*not* the fashion in those days—and two badly mismatched knee socks. Later, when my mother came over, and when she got belatedly hysterical, I said the same thing to her: “That’s that! No big deal!” It’s what I said to myself for a week—that’s how long it took the owners to get back from an out-of-state trip and learn of the damage—as I sat half-reading my wet textbooks in the middle of a bed soggy with rain and tracked-in mud.

The landlords’ insurance company, saying it was “an act of God,” refused to cover the damage. They would not be rebuilding my cottage, but life went on. A childhood friend came over one day, took one look at me huddled in the middle of my wet bed and wadded up papers, a fine mist of rain like a mystical aura around me, and said forcefully, “Come on. You’re moving in with me. Hasn’t it dawned on you yet that you can’t live here?” It’s funny to think of this now, but it seemed so dire yet peaceful at the time. The world had, and yet it had not, come to an end. Now I wonder if it really was an act of

God. It certainly was a radical shifting of reality as I knew it. Could this have been Spirit trying to move me somewhere? Well, it worked. My life took a road less traveled from that point on.

Tree Number Two

Although Tree Number Two didn't technically fall on me, it certainly felt like it did. I was married, with a five-year-old son, and we were living in a pretty little blue ranch house in the suburbs. I was building a home-based desktop publishing business, and we had just built in the garage so we could separate the business from our home life. I had taken a break from work to drive the half-hour round trip to pick up my husband from work, my son loaded into his car seat in the back. On our return, as we rounded a curve and headed toward the cul-de-sac where we lived, everyone in the car became suddenly silent. I could feel all through my body that something immense had happened, and I sensed that same electrical feeling in the air. Sure enough, as we approached our house, we saw bits of tree scattered all about. An old forest pine from our backyard had snapped off and laid itself very neatly right through the middle of my brand new office. It was a lot larger than it looked when standing, and it extended all the way across the street into our neighbor's yard. "This is a sign," I whispered. "A very bad sign."

Tree Number Three

Our insurance company paid for a new roof and repaired my office. Fortunately for us, they didn't pull that "act of God" number. Once the repairs were done, I went back to work and tried to forget the incident. But the roof hadn't been on very long when I had my chilling encounter with Tree Number Three.

It was early one Saturday morning, and we adults were trying to sleep in. My son would have none of it, though, and he was at me to get up and fix him some cereal. Taking his little hand in mine, and trying not to be too bitchy about losing my sleep, I headed off groggily down the hall toward the kitchen. We hadn't yet made it to the kitchen when we heard the crash. I rushed into the bedroom, where my husband was sitting up in our bed, white-faced. A tree limb had fallen on the roof at just the right angle to shoot, spear-like, through our bedroom ceiling.

"I was just sitting here," my husband exclaimed, "and the ceiling seemed to open out like a flower. Then this limb shot through and plunged itself into the floor!"

I saw where the limb had hit the floor, punching a hole through our brand-new carpet, but at first I didn't see where the limb had landed. My husband didn't either. When I did see it, my knees went right out from under me, and I felt such a strong premonitory wave of dread that I almost blacked out. The limb had hit the floor and then boomeranged, bolting across our bed so fast my husband didn't even see it, and *stabbed itself into my pillow!* I figured it had missed me by less than a minute.

By this time, I was beginning to believe that there was something about me that made me a magnet for trees. What were the chances that *three* trees could come so close to killing one person in one lifetime? Even though I knew it was bizarre, I couldn't shake the feeling that trees were out to get me. I didn't want to die impaled by a tree! And I wondered, too, if there wasn't some kind of poltergeist phenomenon going on. Was something about my energy system ripping trees from their moorings and bringing them down on my head?

"These trees are coming down," I insisted. "I don't care what it takes. I can't eat or sleep or think straight as long as there is a single tree left standing." There were only about fifty trees in our yard—and really big ones, too—but the neighbors on the side nearest my office also had several I feared could fall over onto our house and kill me. We fought over this, and I'm sure my once-good neighbor, who I

alienated, must have come to the conclusion that I was a crazed lunatic. I began to have frequent nightmares about small, very slowly moving tornados that buzzed ominously at the edge of wherever I was.

The insurance company was happy to pay for another new roof, but they wouldn't pay to prevent more trees from falling on our house. I found someone who would cut them all down in return for the saleable trunks, but then I had to drag off all the debris—a mind-boggling amount of debris—into the woods because I could not get a permit to burn it. It took months and months for me to do this, working with a little hack saw and a body that only sheer force of will made strong enough to do the physical labor. While engaged in this task, I was stricken with Lyme disease. I thought it was just a really bad case of the flu. The disease—which caused increasing weakness, pain, depression, and fatigue—would go undiagnosed for almost three years and prompt an “It's all in your mind” referral to a psychologist. By then, I was having the arthritic, cardiac, and neurological symptoms of tertiary Lyme disease, and I was *very* angry with my doctor for dismissing my illness as psychosomatic.

It seems to me now, looking back, that Spirit in the form of a tree had moved me again—this time into therapy. Ironically, it was in therapy that my physical illnesses were finally diagnosed. But, more importantly, it was in therapy that I'd start dealing with childhood traumas and learning the skills I would need to hang on when I finally became disabled nine years later.

Chapter 4

Making Sense of the Past

Have you ever tried to put together one of those large, tiny-pieced puzzles of something like jelly beans or abstract art or a solid color, like white? To say it's difficult is an understatement. Therapy can be a lot like that, especially if it's therapy for repetitive trauma. It can take a long time to figure out how all the pieces fit together and how each one affects the sense you make of the whole, and it requires a level of scrutiny and personal fortitude many of us don't have and don't care to develop. In essence, it is self-work, soul-work, and *hard* work.

The metaphor for therapy I like best is this: You've got this great big ball of knotted up string, and you've got to start somewhere if you hope to untangle it. Some people never get it all untangled, and some don't even bother to try, but untangling even some of that string can be life-changing. It takes courage and desire and persistence; it takes time and a gentle touch; and it also takes learning some tricks to prevent yourself from winding up with a worse mess than you started with. The ball of string that you're untangling is really your whole life, and it's the work of a lifetime to see it through to the end. I'm still working on my ball of string—that's one of the reasons I'm writing this book—and I no longer expect to have a long, straight string of answers in this lifetime.

In therapy, I learned that it's very important to figure out the best place to start and also the most efficient strategies for untangling the different knots. Once you get started, often with a therapist's help, you begin to learn how to untangle the knots on your own. When you get the hang of it, and can do it by yourself, that's when you stop seeing your therapist. And that's when you can really get down to the meaning and implications of your past experiences for the rest of your life. Slowly, but steadily, your life starts making a kind of higher sense. This is when soul-work begins to pick up momentum.

Untangling the First Few Knots

For the purposes of this book, it is not important to describe each and every knot I had to loosen. You've got your own knots, I expect—most of us, if we're human, do—and I doubt it would serve much purpose to share mine with you. But a few of my knots have relevance to one of the themes of this book: why my soul—and maybe the souls of a few of my readers—might have chosen this crazy life. The first, biggest knot was the issue of my complete rejection of my own craziness and why I was so angry and resistant about being referred to a psychologist, a “head doctor.”

“It’s Not Psychological!”

The first time I met him, I raged at Ralph, telling him that my problem was *not* psychological; that I had a physical illness that my doctor hadn't found and there was no way he was ever going to be able to help me. Knowing he could do nothing without my cooperation, he quietly agreed. A year later, my Lyme disease still not diagnosed, I was back in his office again, very much sicker and ready to admit that my symptoms might be psychological after all. Shaking all over, I confessed to him my deep, dark secret, the one I had kept hidden for almost twenty years: that I really was crazy.

I had been diagnosed in my early twenties—some time after Tree Number One had flattened my cottage, although those post-Tree years are such a blur I don't remember exactly when—with chronic undifferentiated schizophrenia. All I remember about that time is that I was taking a full load of college courses, working two jobs, and holding down two intense all-nighters a month as a volunteer rape crisis counselor at a large public hospital. In other words, I was very stressed out. My college counselor had advised me to get the symptoms I was reporting to him checked out because he thought they were probably physical, not psychological. Mostly, I was hallucinating strange tastes or burning smells but, occasionally, I'd see mandala-like forms bloom up out of thin air or hear/feel weird scratching noises inside my brain, like someone was scratching a needle across a record. When I had acted on my counselor's advice, I wound up in the locked psychiatric ward of the same large public hospital where I was a volunteer.

As I told Ralph this story so many years later, I couldn't believe what happened next. He burst out laughing. Having just revealed my most-despicable inner self, I was completely dumbfounded. Still chuckling, he apologized for laughing, then told me, “You are *not* schizophrenic! You are nowhere *near* being schizophrenic! I mean, you're not even from the same *planet* as schizophrenic!” “But I was hallucinating!” I protested, citing the same evidence the psychiatrist had used to support his diagnosis. “I was seeing and hearing and smelling things that were not there! The psychiatrist told me I'd have to take all this really heavy-duty medication for the rest of my life!”

But I hadn't taken the medication like I was instructed. The neuroleptics—first one, then another, then another and another and another, all of which I reacted to “atypically”—had made me so much worse, and so intensified my hallucinations, that I knew if I kept taking those drugs I'd have to drop out of college. My grades were starting to slip from A's to C's, time seemed very distorted and non-linear, and this once-bright and inquisitive student couldn't understand anything she was reading. At my job, my boss was giving me these “I'm going to have to fire you” looks. One drug they gave me, Haldol—enough to drop an elephant, I would learn later—so changed my perceptions that I could actually see (but not hear) the telephone ringing. So one day I flushed the medications and never went back to see that psychiatrist.

“Ralph,” I said, “Do you realize that I've spent my whole adult life trying to hide my craziness from the world? I've been terrified that somebody would find out I was schizophrenic and force me to take those drugs!”

“Somebody didn’t do their homework,” Ralph said, shaking his head, noting that it’s so sad when this happens, but that it does happen and people wind up suffering for years because of it. Ralph also patiently explained to me that people who are truly crazy don’t know they’re crazy. “If you think you’re crazy, you’re not,” he said. I wondered aloud, “Could this really be true?” “How,” he asked, “could you have accomplished all you have accomplished if it were not true?” (The psychiatrist he sent me to for an antidepressant had agreed: “If you’re schizophrenic, you’re the most highly functioning schizophrenic I’ve ever seen!”)

Then Ralph asked me the question that would radically change my life. “Did they do an EEG?” he asked. “What?” I answered, not knowing what he was driving at. “Did they do an EEG?” he asked again.

Electrical Brainstorms

Well, no, they hadn’t done an EEG, and to make a long story short, I was sent for a neurological evaluation and the seizure disorder I’d had my whole life was finally diagnosed. I was forty. The neurologist exclaimed to me in astonishment: “What I want to know is how you’ve been walking around all these years!” Not only had I been walking around, I’d been able to finish a degree, raise a family, run several successful businesses, write and publish, develop software, and work in some pretty high-level jobs while I had all this strange electrical activity going on in my brain.

When my neurologist told me I had a seizure disorder—epilepsy—I was floored but overjoyed. I was floored because I thought being epileptic meant you fall down and have convulsions, and I’d never done that. What I did do, usually when I was sleep-deprived or under too much stress—an increasingly common occurrence—was have something called partial seizures that manifested as unusual sensory experiences. I’d suddenly smell burning rubber or see the beautiful floating colors I’d always called “nature spirits” in a corner of my room. Sometimes those beautiful mandala-like forms would bloom out of thin air, seeming to beckon me into their spiraling centers. Sometimes I’d lose track of time, and then I’d sleep excessively for days.

The neurologist told me my EEG showed “excessive bilateral frontal and temporal lobe theta slowing consistent with cognitive dysfunction.” “In other words,” he said, “you have a funky brain.” But at the time, I was cognitively functioning just fine. True, I was having more episodes of altered consciousness, which I now figure had a lot to do with the neurological ravages of Lyme disease, but I was then employed as a technical editor and was also wearing the computer programmer hat for my department. In short, I was doing work that a cognitively dysfunctional person could not have done.

After my diagnosis, I got busy learning everything I could about seizure disorders. I wanted to understand how to fit together the pieces of the puzzle that was me and make them fit into what my doctors were telling me, so I voraciously devoured scholarly and lay publications on epilepsy. One thing I learned is that many of the neuroleptics they give to schizophrenic patients lower the seizure threshold. No wonder I had gotten so much worse when taking them! Apparently, my “treatment noncompliance,” about which I’d felt so guilty, had been the right choice. Had I not listened to my inner wisdom about what was not good for me, I would not have been able to live a productive life and probably would have wound up institutionalized. Before I’d become noncompliant, I came really close. I also learned that anyone, whether they have a seizure disorder or not, can have a seizure if their stress levels are high enough—kind of like overloading and tripping a circuit breaker.

I encountered something fascinating in my reading: that some of my more mystical experiences might have been caused by seizure activity. Still running away from the very idea of angels and other divine presences, this was a great relief to me. The kind of seizure disorder I had, which they used to call temporal lobe epilepsy until they discovered that more than just the temporal lobes are involved, is also

often associated with creativity and altered states of “right brain” consciousness. Some people work very hard to achieve these states using various mind-altering drugs or intensive spiritual practices. These pursuits never really much interested me. In fact, I remember once, when a friend pressured me into trying LSD—and, during our trip, he was excitedly raving about seeing God—that I’d said to him, “I don’t know what the big deal is. Things just look like they did when I was a child.”

Reviving the Dream

The main thing was, I was overjoyed at the discovery that I wasn’t schizophrenic. I’d abandoned my dream and plans of becoming a clinical psychologist when I was misdiagnosed in my early twenties, figuring it would be irresponsible of me to try to work with clients if I was crazy. I had changed my major to English, and I was good at it, but it wasn’t my true love. I had continued over the years to read everything I could get my hands on about psychiatry and psychology, both scholarly and popular, and I had already learned a great deal. But I had never encountered any hint in my readings that my hallucinatory experiences might be caused by anything other than mental illness. I also learned that it’s not uncommon for therapists who pigeonhole illness into physical or mental categories—even psychiatrists, medical doctors who ought to know better—to fail to rule out physical causes for psychiatric symptoms. I was very lucky Ralph was not one of these therapists.

With my new diagnosis, a deep excitement began to build in me, for now there was no reason not to pursue my lifelong dream of becoming a therapist. Another blessing of being diagnosed with a very real *physical* condition was that it gave me the courage to go back to my doctor to find out why my joints ached, my heart pounded wildly and often skipped beats, and I was so depressed and tired and befuddled all the time. By then, the CDC had notified doctors in Georgia that Lyme disease was turning up in the South, so when my doctor looked for it, he found it. Three months on tetracycline, and I was a whole new person.

Not Out of the Woods Yet

Now on anticonvulsant medication and feeling much better after the antibiotics, I was hopeful and exhilarated but still not out of the woods yet. Trusting him now, I told Ralph about something else I’d been hiding for years. Almost a decade earlier, when my son was two, I started having horrifying experiences. I’d later learn they were flashbacks to a lust murder I had witnessed while lost in the woods when I was about my son’s age, but at the time I feared it was evidence that my schizophrenia was worsening. There I’d be, washing dishes or scrubbing the bathtub or working on my computer, and suddenly it was like I had been dropped into the middle of a horror movie. Everything familiar would disappear. When I’d finally come back to a blessedly bland present, it took every ounce of my strength not to scream; and sometimes I did scream a long, long time—but only when I could get my husband and son out of the house long enough for me to let it out without alarming them. I knew if anyone heard me, I’d be found out and carted off to the loony bin.

I told my mother about these experiences, not going into much detail because what I saw was so gruesome, and she said I’d probably just seen it in a movie and it had bothered me more than I thought. “No, Mother,” I said. “There’s never been a movie made that is anything like this. At least I hope not!” Trying to be helpful, she then suggested I was probably just remembering a past life, or maybe I was picking up on something one of my neighbors was thinking. (The latter was an *extremely* frightening thought!) She shared with me that she’d always been psychic; that sometimes she got images of bad things happening, and then she’d hear about it on the news a few days later. She told me she had finally accepted that there was no way she could prevent what she was seeing, that she’d had to learn not to let it bother her—and I would have to learn, too.

I was also having nightmares that brought me out of bed screaming bloody murder. My husband would get very distressed about this. I kept working hard on myself, trying to self-soothe: “You’re probably just remembering a past life. This isn’t happening now. Go back to sleep.” It was too threatening to think I might be picking up on something in someone else’s mind—or (shudder) what someone might actually be doing—so I didn’t even let myself entertain that notion. But I found I could not let my son out of my sight. I became an insufferably hovering, overprotective mother.

Looking back on it now, it’s clear that witnessing this murder inoculated me to a certain degree against later traumas. All the traumatic experiences I would have later in childhood and during my teen years—the physical, emotional, and sexual abuses—not to mention the adult things like being assaulted by trees, paled in comparison. But, as I learned, they were all fused together and encoded very deeply in my body, so therapy with Ralph for what was a classic case of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) took more than four years. By the time we finished, and later when I was happily working my way through graduate school with Ralph’s blessing, I had untangled many, many miles of knots.

What I Learned in Therapy

It seems important to me to share with you some of what I learned in my therapy work, so let me dig out my therapist hat from the back of my closet and shake off some of the dirt. I’ll be right back.

Okay. Other than some vital symptom management skills, which serve me to this day, one of the most important things I learned is how children are affected developmentally by early traumatic experiences. I am now convinced that one of the major reasons so many children grow up traumatized is that adults do not understand that children are not, and are incapable of being, little versions of adults. Children are incapable of thinking like adults or understanding adult situations and responsibilities, much less shouldering them. Their brains are still growing and laying down intricate neuronal networks. It isn’t until they reach puberty that they begin to develop the capacity for higher-level logic that adults rely on to function. Yet so many children are not allowed to have childhoods, and so many of them wind up overwhelmed and traumatized as a result.

A Template for Crazy

Many adults who have raised these children were never allowed to be children themselves, and therefore they do not know what it means to raise children normally. They get angry with their children when they fail at being little adults—just as their own parents got angry with them—and too often they lash out at them in hurtful ways. Often these parents are unaware that they are reversing roles to try to get from their children the nurturing love and care that their own parents failed to give them. This was the case in my own family. It’s crazy-making, and it tends to be handed down from generation to generation. This keeps a lot of therapists in business.

I also began to understand how people can grow up with the persistent fear or conviction that they are crazy—especially if the world mirrors their craziness back to them in the form of projection or inappropriate, stigmatizing psychiatric labeling. When a child is exposed to a *very real* situation that is painful or terrifying—like child abuse or people behaving in confusing or violent ways—they have very few options for coping and soothing themselves. Adults can get in the car and leave the situation; they can drink themselves into a stupor; they can rage indignantly and blame whoever or whatever it is that has thrown a monkey wrench into their comfortable little reality; they can blow a bunch of money on some form of escape; or, if all else fails, they can retreat into their bedrooms and lock the door. Adults have lots of ways—some healthy, some not so healthy; some mature, some not so mature—to take themselves out of confusing or painful situations.

But children do not have these options. What children can do to overcome their terror—and this is what most of them do, because they are capable of little else developmentally—is blame themselves for what has happened. This is actually a healthy defense against chaos. The unconscious logic of the child goes something like this: “It’s too scary for me to admit that I am completely powerless here and can do nothing to escape this painful situation, so I’ll seize the only power I do have: I’ll pretend I’m powerful by convincing myself that, magically, I caused this to happen. Then I’ll have control over what, in fact, I am helpless to control.” In essence, they internalize the chaos and proceed to use it as a tool, much like the wizard who stirs up great crashing storms from a mountaintop.

This magical thinking, which initially serves to soothe and alleviate a child’s terror, may eventually translate into an internalized conviction that “I’m bad” or “I’m crazy”—especially if significant adults reinforce the child’s logic by agreeing it’s the child’s fault (“If you hadn’t done thus-and-so, I wouldn’t have done thus-and-so; you made me do it”) or, worse, if they completely deny the child’s reality as my mother did (“You just made that up; that didn’t happen; you dreamed it; you have an active imagination”). The child’s entire world view as it develops is affected, especially if trauma is persistent over time, and even as the brain becomes capable of higher-level logic, this early magical belief system remains encoded in the body and can suddenly reactivate as a knee-jerk response anytime anything overwhelmingly terrifying or illogical happens.

Changing the Brain

Researchers are now discovering that the brains of people traumatized as children show neuroanatomical changes that help explain why they tend to be more emotional and hypersensitive, more prone to depression or “out of control” behaviors, and less able to cope with stressful experiences. It’s interesting to me that anticonvulsants are often used in an effort to dampen the hyperexcitability of these people’s brains. I’ve certainly wondered if my seizure disorder did not originate in early childhood trauma.

I have learned the hard way that once the traumatic response—manifesting in PTSD as extremes of hyperarousal and reactive, avoidant “numbing out”—is encoded into your brain and body, you can’t just think it or will it away. It has literally been laid down in your neuronal pathways and immune and endocrine system responses, and these kick in far more quickly than your conscious thought processes do. All it takes is a triggering event, of which you may not even be aware, to set off a powerful cascade of neurobiological events that are as unstoppable as a freight train. In times of stress, the body naturally turns to this response because it has been one of your most powerful mechanisms for survival. Maybe you can tone it down with drugs or techniques like meditation or hypnotherapy, and maybe you can pretend it no longer exists by avoiding anything that might trigger it. I do not believe, however, that you can ever entirely eliminate it because it is part of how you have developed and grown, a part of who you are. What you can do is be aware of when this response is activated. You can then remind yourself that you are an adult now who can choose from a variety of survival strategies; feeling bad or crazy and curling up into a fetal position is only one of them.

Learning to Live With It

Trauma therapists often explain that chronic PTSD is like diabetes; there is no cure for it. It’s something you have to learn to live with. Insight into the disorder, stress reduction, and careful symptom management are the tools they teach clients to help them live with a disorder—the pathological connotations of this word are unfortunate—that is not “all in the mind” but rather is woven throughout the mind and body, embedded in every cell, a part of their history and who they are and how they relate to and interpret events in the world.

These therapists also know that sometimes, as with diabetes, and despite a client's best efforts, something beyond their control can reactivate the disorder and send them reeling. If the person does not understand this (or forgets it), having a relapse like I did can make them feel like a sick and crazy failure. Also, if the current stress is great enough, they will often temporarily regress to what are considered more primitive stabilization strategies.

Depression is one of the more commonly used survival strategies of traumatically stressed people. It effectively serves to remove the person, physically and psychologically, from the stressful situation until equilibrium can be restored and other supposedly higher-level strategies can be accessed. At the spiritual level, I've often heard it said that depression is what happens when Spirit is trying to move you, but you are resisting; when you stop resisting Spirit, the darkness of depression begins to lift.

Whatever explanations for depression are currently in vogue—physical, psychological, social, spiritual, or any combination of the above—I now view depression, at least as it has applied to me, as a transitional state Spirit engineers to allow for stabilization and equilibration while deeply wrenching internal self-reorganization and transformation are occurring at a subconscious soul level—often, but not necessarily always, in response to an external traumatic event.

As someone who has suffered from recurrent bouts of treatment-resistant depression for most of my life, I have thought long and hard about cycles and rhythms of depression. In Chapter 6, I will further explore my thoughts on depression in general and specifically how depression has served my own growth. Hopefully, this will provide some food for thought on why I now view depression as an integral and important stage in soul-enriching transformational processes. But the stage that follows depression—in my case, embracing the craziness that I had so feared would kill me and recognizing that craziness as an essential part of my process—is where the fuel for transformation comes from.

Fueling Transformation

Reflecting back now on the onset of my debilitating depression, I realized that my collapse was not a failure. It had been absolutely necessary to my survival and, yes, I think I was also resisting what Spirit had been trying to tell me for a long time. I realized, too, that after surfacing from the depths of depression, embracing my craziness was the logical next step for me to take because, as with the powerless child, it is far less frightening to be crazy yourself than it is to have to endure the terror of knowing you are helpless in the middle of a senseless and overwhelmingly painful situation.

In a psychological sense, I now see that saying to myself, and really meaning it, “So what if I'm crazy?” has been a healthy step for me to take in rebuilding a sense of safety and self-acceptance. I know from my experience working with traumatized people, many of them child abuse survivors, that even when it doesn't seem very healthy to other people, a sense of safety (however derived) is absolutely crucial. So is self-acceptance. Without these, you cannot move and you cannot grow. In a spiritual sense, embracing my craziness instead of trying to distance myself from it was what Spirit had been demanding for years that I do. It kept setting up the conditions for me to do it, beating me over the head with one two-by-four after another, until I finally gave in and said “Okay, all right already! I'm crazy! So what?”

An immediate benefit of embracing my craziness—which ultimately led to my glimpsing the soul-level implications of craziness for my life—was that more psychic energy became available to my consciousness than had been the case when I was running so hard to escape what I most feared or when I was suspended in the quicksand of vegetative depression. This energy, I knew, was required for movement; therefore, it was a higher-level, more preferable approach to healing myself and setting about to discover my highest good than was the dark, death-like sleep of my depression. Had I not

surrendered and started listening to what Spirit was trying to tell me, I know I could not have risen to this higher level. I also know that, no matter how crazy I might appear to other people, I am now a lot more sane than I was before.

Again, this whole dynamic of craziness is one of the most, if not the most, important things I took away with me from therapy. Ralph planted seeds, but I was the one who had to water them, gradually growing my own insights as they apply to my chosen life journey and unique soul-self. On this journey, reminding myself of what I've learned as a client and professionally has allowed me to work with myself in productive and deeply transformative ways, but recognizing myself as a *growing soul* who chose what it was getting into from the beginning has provided the vitality and courage to persist.

Later, I'll look at some of the implications of "craziness" for evolving human consciousness. Let me just say for now that I don't think I ever could have understood what was called for on my soul's journey if I had not had the crazy experiences I have had. In so many ways, they kick-started death/rebirth processes, the fully conscious experience of which was essential to releasing myself from the icy grip of fear so I could move with and through the *energy* of fear into the transformational space. In the process of doing this, I discovered how to float peacefully with the mysterious, magical currents of the universe—but not before I did a vital piece of soul-level work, something that as I began to write this book I was not yet capable of: forgiving myself.

Chapter 5

The Meaning of Self-Forgiveness

Many New Age writers today emphasize the importance of forgiving those who have hurt you. Some trauma therapists also demand this of their clients as part of their healing work. Ralph did no such thing. "Why should we have to forgive murderers, rapists, and child abusers?" he asked me. "The important thing is, you have to forgive yourself."

I emerged from my therapy with Ralph feeling like I *had* forgiven myself: for being a child who had no control over traumatic experiences and was not deserving of blame for what adults did or did not do, and also for being a child who developed what I came to understand were some pretty amazing and creative survival strategies. The terror of those early traumas had receded into the distance, and I felt no animosity toward those who had committed such senseless, brutal acts.

A year after breaking down, however, I knew that my self-forgiveness had not held. I was beating myself up very badly for my failures, and I knew this was intricately bound up in and fused with the trauma I experienced at the hands of that "perpetrator," my clinical supervisor. Clearly, whatever I had untangled in therapy with Ralph had gotten kinked up again—big-time. I realized that, without forgiving and having compassion for those who had hurt me, I would never be able to fully forgive myself, for too much of what I disliked and wished to disown in myself was still bound up in them. So, just as we had been taught to do at that personal transformation intensive, I tried to look in the mirrors they offered so I could better see and understand and forgive myself.

Forgiveness in Karmic Relationships

I'd thrown around the idea of karma, but I never really bought into the concept that people are brought together in this life and have experiences together for reasons that aren't always obvious and don't

make much sense when viewed only from a this-life context. But now, as I began to review some of the relationships in my life that seemed so lingeringly significant, I could only describe them as karmic.

We have all been hurt, and we all know people we can or cannot forgive. When viewed from a karmic perspective, some of these hurts—like being passed over for a promotion or being robbed of our possessions—don't seem that important or powerful; others, however, seem to have enormous implications for self- and soul-level work. We can be profoundly affected by significant relationships we have with and within our environments—so much so that I am now convinced that our souls do choose them to force us to transform ourselves—and, ultimately, our world as we know it. These, then, are what I consider karmic relationships.

Continuing to work on healing myself, I identified three karmic relationships in which I had to work on forgiveness: my ex-husband, my mother, and my clinical supervisor. I realized that, in the case of the first two, I had only been able to forgive myself when I came to an understanding of the dynamics of these relationships and the particular way I had been starkly polarizing them into black and white—good-me/bad-them, or vice versa. I had never articulated these dynamics before, and I certainly never voiced the words “I forgive *you*,” but feeling this forgiveness of the other person in my heart, I realized, had been essential to self-forgiveness and my ability to move to a higher level of compassion for all parties involved.

Karmic Lesson: My Ex-Husband

First I examined my relationship with my ex-husband. We were married for thirteen years, and during that time I had handled everything: the housework, the shopping, the child-rearing, the yard work, the finances, the doctor appointments, the parent-teacher conferences, the meals, the invariable crises—anything that had to be planned and most of the troubleshooting. I also put in an average of 70 hours a week—and often 90—working jobs and/or running various small businesses. Not only was I a little dynamo—a superwoman times ten—I was an *angry* little dynamo. Why wouldn't my husband get up off his duff and help me? On the surface, I was a martyr and a passive-aggressive nag. Underneath, I was hurt that my husband didn't love me enough to see that I was killing myself, and he didn't seem to care enough about our marriage to step in and help me keep it together. At an even deeper and barely conscious level, when anything went wrong, that magical wizard-child in me believed it was all my fault. And, of course, I was running like a madwoman away from my craziness.

It took six years and the post-collapse move to Florida before I understood how our relationship over the years had served to advance not only my own growth, but my ex-husband's growth as well. At the time of our marriage, we were both lacking some very important skills: I did not yet know how to receive; he, on the other hand, did not know how to give. And how could he, if I would not let him have that experience, if I behaved in essence just like his mother did, enabling him to be little more than a receptive (and resentful) vessel for my doings?

In a frenzy of compulsive orchestration, I did everything before my then-husband could even register what needed to be done. I resented his being a “taker,” but I never really gave him a chance to step in and give anything to me. To do so required that I give up the martyrdom I learned so well at my mother's knee; that I become a fallible, flesh-and-blood human being with the courage to “fail” to be perfect. In order to rise to this level, I had to be willing to move into the grey transitional space between the polarities of giver/taker that I had constructed. This was something that, for a very long time, I was too unwilling and too afraid to do. When we came to be thrown together again, with the tables turned and my ex in a position to be the “good giver” when I was capable only of “taking,” I realized that we still had karma together that we had failed to work out before. How lucky we were to have another chance in this lifetime to learn these important lessons.

My ex-husband's learning how to give was only half of it. I had to develop the ability to receive without having a template from childhood to follow, so this was not something that came easy for me. It was only when I could forgive myself for being locked so long into the old strained give/take pattern, understanding and accepting my responsibility for how my own beliefs and behaviors fed and sustained the negative polarity of our relationship, that I was able to appreciate how much we had helped each other's souls to grow.

An acquaintance once said to me, on learning that my ex-husband was taking care of me now, and in the language of conflict and manipulation so prevalent in Western society, "Well, it's payback time!" That I found this statement so shocking was evidence to me that my own consciousness was slowly evolving out of that self- and other-limiting victim/perpetrator thinking into a more blended understanding of what it really means to love. The soul lesson did not lie at either extreme but, rather, in the space between the two where polarities blend into a common, human whole.

Karmic Lesson: My Mother

I could not forgive my mother until I had severed all ties with her. Although this was very painful for both of us, I knew when it happened that it was one of the greatest acts of love of which I was capable at the time. Not only did it require self-love to break out of destructive patterns of craziness and angry denial that we had been bound up in for more than forty years, it required that my soul love her soul enough to release her to work on her own karmic issues—work that I instinctively knew my presence was somehow enabling her to avoid.

When I was growing up in the fifties and sixties, my mother was in a crazy situation. Embedded in this craziness for years, she began to reflect her environment. At a time when divorce and single motherhood were taboo, my mother was on her own with six children. She was married to first one, then another, violent alcoholic, men who were less dependable or available to her than children. With the exception of managing to construct perfect Christmases and birthdays—beautiful but bizarre little islands of normalcy in an otherwise abnormal hell—she often failed to live up to the submissive "happy homemaker" image that society then expected of women. As was typical of most wives at the time, she also had few work skills and a great deal of bitterness about women's lot in life. That bitterness flowed out of her in myriad, unexamined ways and invariably hit the objects closest to her: her children.

My mother was bright and curious, and she'd always wanted to go to college, but these damned men and all these damned children were weighing her down like so much dead weight—a fact she reminded us of a little too frequently. Paradoxically, in a way that was really ahead of her time, she sought enlightenment and comfort through self-education and forays into theosophical and mystical topics. She was reading New Age writings well before the New Age dawned and experimenting with "fringe" endeavors such as past-life regressions and meeting higher selves and guides. She was responsible for dragging me in against my will to learn transcendental meditation in the late sixties, when I was only seventeen years old, screaming at me in the car the whole time, "Goddamn it, stop sniveling! You'll thank me for this one day!" Looking back, it was one of the nicest things she ever did for me.

When my mother began to drown in her life, she did something else that was ahead of her time, something that could have been healthy had she been fortunate enough to walk into the right office: she got into psychotherapy. This was long before therapy became an accepted thing for people to do when they want to figure out their lives or work on issues specific to personal growth. There was much less diagnostic specificity at the time my mother sought therapy, and schizophrenia was at the top of the list of favored catch-all diagnoses. Many psychotherapists and researchers during this time were blaming all the world's ills on bad mothers—the term "schizophrenogenic mother" was often used—so this just served to fuel my mother's resentment and solidify her major ego defenses: projection and denial, with

the greater emphasis on projection.

When we say somebody is “in denial,” it usually means they refuse to see what’s right in front of them. Projection is a little more sophisticated and is, in fact, considered to be a higher-level defense mechanism—why, I don’t know. The person is still in denial, but in a self-denying way that shirks any personal responsibility for whatever is being rejected. People who use projection as their primary defense refuse to recognize or examine disliked and disowned aspects of themselves; instead, they see them in everyone else—whether these aspects are actually “out there” or not—so they are, at the same time, denying reality and obsessing over it by drawing sharp distinctions between themselves and others. This is usually obvious to everyone but the person doing the projecting. At the spiritual level, projection is also intricately bound up in the act of “not me” blaming of “devils” that keeps consciousness static and works against the soul’s efforts to trigger self-transformation.

I think about Ralph’s comment now: “If you think you’re crazy, you’re not.” My mother did not think she was crazy. If anything was wrong, it was always with someone or something else; if anyone was crazy, it was *me*. Over the years, my mother became increasingly dysfunctional and also sharply polarized into an “I’m not the one who is crazy” stance. In projecting her craziness onto others—again, a polarizing, black-and-white view that obstructed the soul lesson lying between the extremes—she was denying not only her own reality but ours. When reality is denied, truly bad things can happen, especially to children. I don’t think a single one of us in my family was protected or spared from life-altering trauma.

One of the most colorful and enduring images I have of my mother—another is that of her breaking all of her dishes in the middle of the night—is her rolling the living room sofa down the hall all by herself when I was still a little girl. Lest the chaos we lived with get too frozen in place, my mother—a physically small woman, like me, but with a huge and sometimes frightful presence—was constantly stirring it up a little more, physically and metaphorically speaking. My siblings and I still refer to this as “fruit basket turnover.” We never knew when we came home where anything would be. We might be in different beds, different rooms; the den might be in the kitchen, the living room in a bedroom—God only knew! Depending on her mood at the time—always unpredictable—we might arrive home from school or a date to find the entire contents of our room, including unmentionables, lying ruined in the front yard for the world to see. We were, of course, shamed for this as if we had created the disarray. I learned that, no matter what chaotic event occurred, I had directly caused it.

Looking back, I guess I would say my mother was actively working with what she had to work with in a way that helped make the world make some kind of sense to her. There was certainly a wizard-like, whirlwind kind of energy and determination to her endeavors; you could see a proud, oddly gleeful, frenzied despair in her eyes. I give her credit for actively trying to do something instead of lying in a fetal position weeping, as many people in her situation would have done—myself included, no doubt. Her methods of working with chaos, however, did not exactly contribute to the feeling that we lived in a stable home.

What I could not forgive until I got some distance between us was my mother’s complete denial of my reality, despite my awareness that this denial was essential to her much-needed sense of safety and stability. That she continued until the very end to insinuate that my experiences were imaginary, nonexistent, or crazy kept me polarized into and swinging between the edges of sanity/craziness, unable to get to the lessons in middle. This kind of denial was what continued to fuel my inability to forgive what I perceived as the unforgivable behaviors of people in positions of power: power to deny others’ deepest instincts toward growth and goodness; power to manipulate and control; power to deprive life of order and meaning; power to reject and hurt and shame.

At the time of our estrangement, my mother was attempting to do her “fruit-basket turnover” number in

my yard and house while I was killing myself in my first quarter of graduate school, trying to settle the chaos of my own life in my typically compulsive and (I thought) non-destructive, workaholic way. I was in my forties, divorced, and trying to reclaim what was left of my life. Basically, something snapped in me one day and every cell of my being said, “I’m not going to participate in this insanity anymore.” I escorted her out of my house while a locksmith was changing the locks, and (in quite a few more words) I told her goodbye. That’s the last time I ever saw my mother.

As I mentioned before, my mother was psychic. She picked up on a lot of things that were going on, many of them terrifying. (She had an uncanny way of knowing, too, what we, especially as teenagers, had been up to.) This is why it was so hard for me to get to a place where I accepted her “not knowing” as anything other than a deliberate attempt on her part to neglect, ignore, or embarrass me out of the reality of my experiences. But knowing how my flashbacks and hearing divine voices had affected me, I can forgive my mother for running away from what frightened her, what she just couldn’t bear to face. I know whatever havoc she wreaked on the world around her was her way of getting it out and away from her.

As I worked back through these issues again, I was able to come to a deeper level of forgiveness of my mother and myself. I know in my heart and soul that she did the very best she could with the circumstances she was given to deal with in this life; the strategies she adopted were exactly what she needed at the time to feel safe and survive. By forgiving her, couldn’t I also forgive myself for doing the very best I could do when my own life became too overwhelming to bear? But, beyond this, couldn’t I see that what her soul was doing was rubbing my nose in it until I could see that I had to *change* something?

I know now that, at soul level, my mother and I have given each other exactly those lessons we came into this life asking to receive. Together, we played out the template of craziness until the soul-level meanings began to bubble up into consciousness. In coming to this level of understanding—I might even say gratitude—I was able to move on to the most pressing level of work I needed to do now: forgiving the “unforgivable” conduct that brought about my professional demise.

Karmic Lesson: My Clinical Supervisor

In thinking about the lessons learned in my relationships with my mother and ex-husband, trying to view their actions from that kinder and gentler space that lay between us, I had a sudden epiphany. I saw as if in a vision the pirate-like face of my clinical supervisor. Behind his gruff exterior, wiry red beard, rigidly set jaw, and icy blue eyes, I saw something I’d never seen before. Instead of looking malevolent, his face seemed stricken with fear. His eyes, far from hostile or evil, were the eyes of a frightened child.

Suddenly, I understood. This man had been terrified of me! Here I was, this upstart new therapist, who walked in and starting proving him wrong almost at every turn. My clients really were getting better—in stark contrast to his own clients, who were not. Although I doubt he allowed himself to get fully conscious of his fear, instead falling back on a kind of professionally sanctioned denial, I can see now that his actions from the beginning derived from sheer terror. What if someone found out that, despite that Ph.D. he had worked so hard for and was so proud of, he really didn’t have much talent for what he was doing? What if someone who didn’t buy into his theory that the clients were hopelessly sick were to question why his clients never got better but mine did? What if it became obvious to those in a position to get rid of him that he just couldn’t glean from his books the instincts he needed to help his clients get well? And what if—horror of horrors—he had to admit to himself that he had come to truly despise his chosen work?

I saw in an instant that my clinical supervisor had done the very best he could do from his level of

consciousness: He had construed everyone and everything around him to be so pathological that no improvement was possible and anyone suggesting otherwise had to be nuts; in this way, he could avoid facing the pain of his own dashed hopes that must have drawn him into the field to begin with—that he would be able to help people—and he would not have to admit to himself his part in this. When I came along and overtly challenged his safe and paradoxically comforting world view, he did what he had to do to keep himself safe: He trashed me, yes, but not for the reason I'd long suspected. He acted not of out of malice but of fear.

When I could get to the quaking fear behind my clinical supervisor's "malicious intent," and when I allowed myself to resonate in an empathic way with that fear, I discovered I could forgive him easily for what he did. But even more importantly, I found at last that I could truly forgive myself for my part in the whole messy affair—for how well I understood the depths and dimensions of fear.

In this moment of understanding, I stepped out of myself in an effort to see how my clinical supervisor might have perceived me. Had he seen what I saw myself to be, an inspired new therapist who cared about the health and growth of her clients (but sadly failed)? Or had he only seen himself as he was when he was first starting out: still hopeful but naive, unsure of himself (as I was), and tottering at the brink of a spirit-crushing disillusionment? I can't say what his ego saw or struggled with, except as I glimpse the disowned aspects of myself in his actions. I've certainly had my own dysfunctional ways of dealing with what I could not face, especially if it bore any relationship to craziness. But I do appreciate now that our souls made a contract for learning in this life. Now I can imagine my clinical supervisor as an old, experienced soul who agreed to give me the gift of a profound, if difficult, lesson: that our deepest fears, if denied or projected, can undermine even the noblest of our intentions and aspirations.

I ask myself now: What has most constrained me in my life if not *disowned* fear? What has pulled me off-center and out of my own integrity if not this fear? What has allowed me to harm when I intended no harm, to fail to love when I only wanted to love? It hasn't been fear itself that did this; it has been my rejection of what I most feared: my own craziness. In seeking to avoid what I feared, I have stripped myself of the awareness that, at soul-level, life is not crazy, that things really do make a higher sense, and that I am okay just the way I am—and so is the rest of the universe.

Chapter 6

In the Name of God

Consider the simple blessing that most children, at least in the Christianized world, are taught to say at mealtimes:

God is great, God is good.

Let us thank Him for our food.

Ah-men.

The implications of this blessing are that God is good, not bad; great and fantastic, not small and petty; a provider of sustenance, what we need to live, and not a source of loss or lack or diminishment. How can children who learn this blessing grow up thinking about God in anything other than dualistic,

polarizing terms? There is God and there's the Devil, right? There is good and there is not-good (evil). There is "supposed to be" and "not supposed to be." In other words, there is judgment, not unconditional love; there is projection and denial and the disowning of parts of God's creation—in self or in others—judged to be ungodly (sinful). But when we look up the definitions of words that the Church—in my case, the fundamentalist Southern Baptist Church—routinely uses to describe God, the message is very different. What does "omnipresent" mean? That God pervades all things—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and there's nowhere that God is not. What does "omnipotent" mean? It means all-powerful. What does "omniscient" mean? It means all-wise and all-knowing.

Stack these messages about God against the "God is great, God is good" message, and what you have is a very confusing mixed message. Mixed messages, psychologists tell us, are crazy-making. I tried to resolve my confusion by asking my Sunday School teachers to clarify, but it was like they didn't understand what the words they were using meant. I remember wondering how God could be all-powerful if He didn't have power over everything, including the Devil. I wanted to know why an all-knowing God didn't know how to get rid of the Devil. I dared once to suggest to a Sunday School teacher that maybe God didn't want to get rid of the Devil; maybe He wanted the Devil around for some reason, but nobody had been able to figure out why. (If you're thinking my Sunday School teachers thought I was a bad and crazy child, you're right.) If God is in all things, I asked, why are things the way they are and why do things happen the way they happen if God does not want it that way?

By the time I had my encounter with the divine presence in my meditation, I had been so shamed into buying into the prevailing and dualistic good/not-good view of reality that I had forgotten I ever asked these very good questions. Instead, I had internalized the dichotomizing message of that simple mealtime blessing: *God is great, God is good*. I assumed the presence that came to me had to be not-good; it was something to be feared and cast out, rejected; worse, it had to be out to get me and do me harm; it was evil. It was the literal equivalent of the Devil offering me the fruit of knowledge that, once consumed, would cause all hell to break loose. "In the name of God, leave me," I'd fearfully whispered. "In the name of God, I have come to you," it answered.

Think about this! First I assumed that anything that would make me so afraid had to be not-good and not-God. Then, when God spoke to me in that gentle, powerful, multidimensional way, I was too afraid I was flawed and crazy to listen to what God was trying to tell me. I didn't get the message that, as a child, my soul had instinctively known: That God is in all things, and things are the way they are and happen the way they happen because God wants it that way.

I believe now that fear is a tool Spirit uses, a compass that points the way to the soul's next learning. To the extent that I have rejected this tool, my soul's growth has been constrained. I know I could never have been on my knees before Spirit without first having felt the full, unrelenting brunt of crazy fear. I have always said that everything happens for a reason, but it took me thirty adult years before I believed it. I finally asked the critical question: When did God (or Spirit, as I prefer to think of the divine presence, because the word "God" carries too much baggage for me) come to me—and in what guise? Spirit came to me when I was alone and afraid. Spirit came to me in the guise of my deepest fears. Spirit came to me packaged inside what I feared was not-normal/not-good/not-God. Come to think of it, this is how Spirit has *always* come to me, over and over and over, until I finally surrendered and began to explore the soul-level lessons embedded within my fears.

Illuminating Fear and Loss

What *is* fear, anyway? Strip away its emotional charge, and fear is essentially the anticipation of change—change we rightly equate with some kind of loss. But change is not only a given, it is essential. The

soul cannot grow without it. Intuitively, all of us know this, so why do we so fear change? Change involves transformation: death and rebirth into a larger self. Women are not the only ones “cursed” with the pain of childbirth, for anyone who is reborn experiences pain. Adam and Eve being cast out of the placid, comfortable Garden of Eden is a perfect metaphor for this.

I now believe fear and a “fall” of some kind is an essential part of the transformational process. This is the “dark night of the soul” so many spiritual writings refer to, and rarely do our egos go gently or willingly into that good night. Fear inexorably pulls us into the spiral that leads to death and rebirth. To the degree we try to avoid change, and to the degree we succeed in repressing conscious awareness of our core fears, that is the degree to which we succeed in slowing down or sabotaging our own transformation—for a while, anyway, because Spirit will not stand for this forever. In other words, the harder we try to stay asleep, the more effort Spirit will expend to shake us awake.

Everything must grow and change and unfold. This is what the whole universe is up to every second of every single day. And if we truly believe Spirit is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, how could Spirit have intended it to be otherwise? I now believe that Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise purely and simply because it was supposed to happen that way so their souls could grow. It’s what God really wanted and what He planned, and He set up the conditions for it to happen. I don’t see how else the creation—and our existence as evolving citizens of the universe—could possibly make any sense.

Fear and Dualistic Thinking

Just as we fearfully and judgmentally polarize the creation into good and not-good, so do we polarize “self” and “other” into artificial dichotomies such as victim/perpetrator, healthy/sick, giver/taker, powerful/helpless, sane/crazy, etc. Fundamentally, these all represent the original good/not-good dichotomy that is born of our failure to grasp the infinite nature of God or Spirit. We fear and suppress any aspect of ourselves or others that we think might be the least bit not-good, and this includes anything we perceive as different or “not normal.” In doing so, we lose sight of our larger consciousness—which is pretty much what I mean when I use the word “soul”—and, with it, our ability to experience the majesty of the divine.

Like Malcolm distancing himself from Cole in *The Sixth Sense* or my mother and I distancing ourselves from each other's craziness or my clinical supervisor distancing himself from the crazy hopelessness he had projected onto clients to avoid having to face it in himself—we reject and project onto others what at root we perceive as not-good/not-God. But this is based on fallacious ideas of God’s limited nature, and it’s how soul-limiting and destructive dichotomies that keep us divorced from a higher spiritual consciousness are created and sustained. This prevents us from accepting and loving ourselves and the entire amazing creation, warts and all.

As I said before, I believe our most profound soul-level lessons—the lessons we came into this life to learn—are intricately bound up with and packaged inside our fears. When these fears are recognized, owned, and their trails followed where they lead us—within—ever-more-complex soul-level work and transformation is initiated. As a former therapist, I am well aware that fear can shake our egos to the core like no other human emotion ever could. Fear alters our behaviors, takes us out of the realm of reason, and knocks us to our knees like nothing else can.

We can read about and analyze fear for years and never allow ourselves to feel it and own it. If we don’t feel it and own it and get to its heart, we may convince ourselves (for a while) that it’s not really there, gathering momentum in the background, pulling to us a long string of experiences designed to force us to bring the fear to full consciousness so its soul-level lessons can be learned.

I have come to understand that my fear of being crazy served to attract a whole lot of craziness into my

life. Disowning the fear was like turning on a cosmic magnet for craziness. The more I tensed against and refused to accept the “not-good” state of craziness, and the more I struggled to explain it in “normal” terms, the more craziness rushed in to confront me with my limiting misconceptions. Craziness pursued me until I was forced to become fully conscious of my fear and follow its lead. It was only then that I could glimpse the unconditionally loving benevolence of Spirit behind the not-good mask I kept hanging on its face.

The Architecture of Fear

As I have examined my own fears, I’ve realized that fear has a certain architecture, rather like a candy fireball, with outer layers that are not as “hot” as the core fear that is embedded at the center. On the conscious level, what we say we are afraid of may represent a relatively minor loss, but the closer we get to the core fear, the more catastrophic and death-like it seems.

For example, what might I mean when I say, “I’m afraid I’ll miss the bus”? The potent charge and energy of my fear lies not so much in fear of missing the bus as it does in fearing the consequences of missing the bus. I may not even be conscious of this deeper fear. Illuminating the meaning of the fear at its deepest levels and making its energy available for soul-level work involves following a string of feared consequences until I arrive at the core fear that’s driving the whole process.

Starting with the conscious, voiced fear, we can melt down through all the layers to get to the “hot” core fear that lies at the very center. It is at this deeper level of fear that we discover what Spirit is preparing our souls to do and come to know. Using the bus example, it might go something like this.

“What am I afraid of?”

“I’m afraid I’ll miss the bus.”

“Why am I afraid of missing the bus?”

“Because I’ll be late for work.”

“Why am I afraid of being late for work?”

“Because I don’t want to let my boss down.”

“Why am I afraid of letting my boss down?”

“Because he’ll get angry with me.”

“Why am I afraid of my boss getting angry with me?”

“Because he would be mean to me. He might fire me.”

“Why am I afraid of him being mean to me and firing me?”

“Because it would hurt me and ruin me financially.”

“Why am I afraid of being hurt and ruined financially?”

“Because then I won’t be able to take care of myself.”

Ah, we’re getting somewhere. At this point, all kinds of layers are being exposed, and fears we might not have even known we had start popping up into our consciousness. Their quality is more dire, more threatening to our sense of stability and well-being, than just missing the bus. We’re close to the core fear, but we’re not there yet.

“Why am I afraid I won’t be able to take care of myself?”

“Because [the most catastrophic thing(s) imaginable].”

“Why am I afraid of [the most catastrophic thing(s) imaginable]?”

“Because it would kill me.”

Clearly, fear of missing the bus is more than it seems. With every fear I’ve tooled down to this level, I’ve always arrived at the fear of some kind of death. These deaths are never really about external events—what somebody’s going to think of me, how I’m going to suffer, and the like. They are always about the perception of the death of my self—in other words, permanent, catastrophic annihilation—a “fall” with no getting up or going back. But at the level it is connected with Spirit, my soul knows it cannot be annihilated. It knows that, after a death of any kind, rebirth—and new growth—will surely follow.

I believe each soul has agreed to come into *precisely* this life to have the kinds of experiences it needs to grow and also to help other souls to grow. I’m convinced each soul is prepared for this ahead of time and helps plan the life it will live once it is in embodiment. The soul, then, knows what it’s getting into, but the conscious self—the ego—does not. At a deeply unconscious level the soul knows that, until the transition is made through a process of dying and rebirth into a higher level of consciousness, the ego does not believe it can survive even the smallest of deaths. This is why death is almost universally feared, and it’s why we work so hard to repress this most fearsome of fears.

Our egos avoid the very death/rebirth processes our souls came into this world to experience. Why? Because we’re certain that death is going to be painful and permanently alter us—and we’re absolutely right about this. We’re not so certain what rebirth will be like, and we secretly fear that maybe it won’t be all it’s cracked up to be. We’re pretty sure, however, that rebirth will also be painful. (We have, after all, all had birthdays. You and I may have forgotten that day, but it’s still recorded in our subconscious minds.) For these reasons, Spirit has provided a transitional state we all can tap into to help ease the pain of transformation. It is an ability that is neurobiologically wired into all of us—the ability to grieve.

Transitional States: Grief and Depression

If fear is the anticipation of catastrophic loss, grief is what we experience when that loss, that death, occurs. As I mentioned in the Preface, grief is like a dark crow that lights on top of the fragile egg of the transforming self, warming and incubating the fledgling inside until it is able to break out of its shell and emerge to new life. Grief has elements of shutting down, of becoming still and numb. As with depression, it involves a certain amount of non-volitional withdrawal from overwhelming events, which I believe has a protective and regenerative purpose. It is egg-like.

Is It Depression, or Is It Grief?

What's the difference between grief and depression? I used to think I knew. Grief is considered a normal response to a major loss such as the death of a loved one, and the "normal" time frame for processing grief is a year or more. It takes at least that long to adjust to the many life changes that follow catastrophic loss, to sort through all the conflicting thoughts and feelings, and to rest and gradually restore one's zest for life as a *transformed human being*. Unlike depressive episodes, which are considered a sign of mental illness and something to be gotten rid of as soon as possible, society generally respects and honors the grief process.

What I want to know is this: What is depression if not a death, and what does a depressive episode entail if not grief? The only difference I can see between grief and depression is that, in the latter, the loved one who is perceived to be lost is the self—the most devastating loss of all—but very few people appreciate the depressed person's need to grieve this loss, much less honor and respect it.

Another problem is this: Although grief and depression are supposed to be viewed as different conditions with different causes, they are often treated by healthcare providers in exactly the same way: with powerful psychotropic drugs to mask symptoms. The idea is to make it go away. It's easy to assume defective brain chemistry—the now in-vogue explanation for depressive reactions—in anyone who appears to be shutting down, then experiment with altering brain function with drugs to see if the symptoms will lift. It is very much harder to find the underlying cause—which I now believe in many cases is the linked fear of and ultimate realization of catastrophic loss that presage a soul-level transformational process. The goal of most antidepressant therapy is to return the person to their former level of functioning. But is this what Spirit is calling for?

In some cases, of course, depressive symptoms really are caused by disordered brain chemistry; in some they arise as tip-offs to emerging physical illnesses that, unfortunately, after the psychiatric label of depression goes into the chart, are often no longer considered or investigated; in some, the symptoms are directly caused by nutritional deficiencies, systemic infections, or medication side effects; in some, they are caused by a crummy lot in life. But in many cases of so-called depression, including most of the ones I just mentioned, I suspect a grief process is going on that can be counterproductive, even perilous, to mask.

Treating grief reactions as a disease that needs to be medicated away serves only to frame as defective or a failure what may be, at the very least, a vital survival strategy—a means of recovering from and restoring equilibrium after a traumatic loss. As I now believe has been the case with my own depressive episodes, attempts to suppress symptoms can also circumvent important transformational work engineered by Spirit in service to the soul's growth—but only for a while, because the force of Spirit is stronger than flesh and more powerful than any drug mankind has developed. Sooner or later, the soul will out. If the person has to "lose everything" for this to happen, as I did, then everything will be lost.

Depression: A State or a Part of the Process?

I've struggled with depression and fear of killing myself for most of my adult life. My doctors never could understand how I could be so frequently suicidal and, at the same time, have such a strong will to live. "What do you mean, you're hopeful?" One psychiatrist once asked me. "Hopelessness is one of the main diagnostic criteria for depression. As depressed as you are, you could not possibly be hopeful." Another, when I was in the hospital under strict suicide watch, incredulously asked, "What do you mean, you don't want to die? Of course you want to die! That's why you're here!"

When depression is viewed as a disease state that, unfortunately, frequently does end in physical death, the bewilderment of my doctors and their efforts to make me "face" my own hopelessness and suicidal

impulses does make a kind of sense. But when viewed as a part of the process of fear/death/rebirth, the paradox of my hopefulness and strong desire to live—even while I was deeply mired in depression—is easily resolved. Hope and desire to live were two of the three strands of rope I clung to as my soul was being pulled through the deep, dark waters of transformation. Spirit was the third and strongest strand, and this is what my acupuncture angel was trying to tell me. Instinctively, I knew there was life on the other side of the death of depression. A part of me also knew that, before I could be reborn, *something* inside of me had to die. My task, as my acupuncture angel had told me, was just to hang on to that rope until the trickiest and most perilous part of the process—dying—was successfully concluded. I doubt very many clinicians think of depressive episodes in these terms.

Few patients or clients strike fear in therapists' hearts as quickly as someone who is deeply depressed. Perhaps in part because they unconsciously fear their own death, but mostly because they fear what a client's death might mean if it happens on their watch, most therapists are powerfully compelled to try to shut down the process. They insist the "sick patient" be made well aware of the danger they are in, too, and so they may forcefully dismiss any expressions of hope or will to live as part of the illness: denial or self-delusion or even deliberate manipulation so nobody will be paying attention and then the patient can hoodwink everyone and commit the crime of checking out of life. The meaning of the depressive episode or its possible purpose is a secondary consideration—if it is considered at all.

Each time I have presented depressed, I have been quickly dosed up with antidepressants in ever-increasing doses. These drugs never worked very well or for very long, and then I would become severely depressed again—often while still taking the medication. My depression was labeled treatment-resistant and ultimately disabling. It was not until I could no longer afford to pay for treatment (and would not have accepted it even if free) and stopped taking *all* medications that I discovered something that utterly amazed me: all that pent-up momentum for transformation that had been repeatedly talked down, drugged down, and beaten down for so many years was released in a mighty flood! I have not been suicidal since I gave myself over to this process and allowed to die what needed to die within me.

I wonder what my life would have been like if such strong efforts had not been made to suppress what I now believe were Spirit-driven transformational processes as they began to occur. What if I had not fought death when something within me was crying to die to prepare the way for rebirth? What if I had openly grieved my losses, whatever they were at the time, honoring and respecting that grieving—and others had done the same? What if, instead of accepting the prevailing view that my depression was yet another sign of my sickness and craziness, I had asked a different set of questions and sought the answers within myself for what was happening? And what if I had given myself the space and time to learn what I needed to learn, to process what I needed to process, instead of trying so hard to restore myself to my "former level of functioning"? Was it the intent of Spirit that I stay at my former level of functioning? Apparently not!

The "Jump Program"

Unless we are into business forecasting or fortune telling, "What if?" is a question we tend only to ask ourselves in hindsight. But like the wise teacher that it is, Spirit has foresight into our process. It knows when we are ready for transformation. It also knows it may take many tries and many, many falls before we finally "get it."

I think about another movie I like a lot, *The Matrix*. There's a wonderful scene, one of the first virtual training simulations, in which Morpheus is trying to teach Neo to overcome his fear and the "reality-based" limitations he imposes on himself by hanging onto the belief that he is still in a physical body that can be harmed. It is the jump program. Morpheus demonstrates to Neo his task: to jump from the

top of one virtual skyscraper to another. From Neo's physical frame of reference, which is not applicable in the context of this simulation, the jump is "impossible." Morpheus tells Neo, "You have to let it all go...fear, doubt, disbelief. Free your mind." Then he confidently leaps the chasm between the two buildings.

Neo looks over the edge of the skyscraper, fear clearly coursing through his virtual body, and says, "Okie, dokie...free my mind...no problem...right." But despite all his efforts to charge up his will power, to psyche himself into success, when Neo makes the jump, he falls. He falls because he has to learn from his fall. He falls because he has not yet gone deeply into his fear of pain and annihilation, the fear that he will die. When he falls and discovers the fall will kill him only if he allows his fear of its finality to consume him, he is transformed.

And so it is with all of us on our journeys. We make the jump from one stage of life to another only when we are ready to let it all *be*. If this takes one year or a billion, Spirit is patient and gentle with our souls. It knows we're going to "get it" eventually. It's going to make sure that we do. This is more than the work of individual souls; it is the quest of the entire universe as it unfolds.

Getting to Green

Before I move on to explore some more "crazy" experiences and their possible implications for the evolution of human consciousness, I want to re-emphasize and elaborate on the idea that we *will not* and *cannot* come to recognize the divine as long as we are engaged dualistic and judgmental polarizing and the fearful disowning of things not-normal, not-good, not-God.

When I began to look for Spirit at both ends of a polarity—crazy/sane—not just in what I thought of as good or godly, soul-work intensified and became more productive. Because dualistic judgments are so built into our language and also are largely unconscious, becoming conscious of them has been hard to do. A tip-off to me that I may be thinking judgmentally is when I start contrasting opposites to accentuate differences. We all do this to a large degree. Good/not-good is often expressed in terms of light and darkness, black or white. We know that between the colors black and white lie infinite shades of grey; between light and darkness, sunrise and sunset paint our world with breathtaking beauty and lively shadows stretch and dance, lending to our vision a greater multidimensionality.

At the most literal level, we don't attach judgments of good or bad to these contrasting elements or to the many subtle shadings that flit and unfold between them. But when we use light/darkness or white/black metaphorically to contrast aspects we perceive to be good/not-good, we are at least subconsciously judging one to be better than the other. For example, if light is good but darkness is not-good by contrast, we'll seek and accept the light but shun and reject the darkness. We either won't see the darkness at all, as in denial, or we'll project it and see it everywhere else or in everyone else but ourselves. The more we succeed in rejecting the "not-good" part of any given polarity, the more we shut down our awareness and our ability to experience the divine. What happens then is Spirit gets more extreme in hitting us over the head with whatever it is we are rejecting, because Spirit is in that part, too—and in all the shades in between.

I find it useful, in trying to articulate why it is critical to get away from judgmental white/black thinking, to substitute other colors because black and white have too much judgmental baggage attached to them. A simple analogy that helps me visualize the spiritually restrictive nature of polarized thinking is this: Imagine a painter's palette with two daubs of paint, blue and yellow. Blue is very different from yellow, but each has a purpose and place on the painter's canvas. Each can convey a certain feeling or mood. Yellow is warm and bright like the sun, and blue is cool and soothing like the sky. Yellow is generally perceived as a happy and lively color, while blue may suggest stillness, rest, or

even despondency. The painter knows that one color is not better than the other; it all depends on what he's trying to express. In other words, the painter does not think of yellow as good and blue as not-good.

But even stripped of judgment about which is better, there's more to these colors than how, in stark contrast, they appear to us. What if it never occurs to the painter to blend yellow and blue together? What if he fears or flat-out refuses to do so? The myriad possibilities of blending the two colors will always remain a deeper potential the painter can never reveal to himself or others. In other words, we'll see blue or yellow on the painter's canvas, but never rich shades of green.

Like the colors blue and yellow, the differences our polarities represent are evidence of the vast creative unfolding of the universe. Both separately and combined, they are the gift and the creative intention of Spirit. Rather than rejoicing in our unique aspects and *also* exploring the deeper potentials of the sensitive, creative blendings of our consciousness, we reject those differences—even to the point of thinking only one daub of color should be on the palette. But I wonder: At higher and more creative levels of consciousness, could our differences—the potentials within ourselves that can only be revealed when we stop insisting on viewing the world in terms of sharply defined good/not-good dichotomies—not be the very pigments that our souls, like painters apprenticed to the master Spirit, are meant to discover and blend to make shades of *green*?

Chapter 7

Being Myself, Warts and All

What would happen if I stopped being so afraid of who I am and what I was given—or at soul-level chose—to work with in this lifetime? What if I were to accept the context of a life in which, at the level of Spirit, crazy experiences might come together in a meaningful, not-crazy way? What if I fully accepted my *being* without feeling compelled to justify my existence or explain it away in limiting “normal” terms? And what if, instead of worrying about what others think or how I fit into this world, I embraced and explored what makes me uniquely me? Would the world come to an end? The fear, of course, is that it would.

I'm going to share with you now some perceptions I have that you may think are evidence that I am crazy. Believe me, it's taking a lot of courage on my part to write about them, because I've worried that they are evidence that I'm crazy, too. What's important for you to come away with here, however, is that it was not until other people deemed them “abnormal” *and I bought into that notion* that they became a problem for me. Before then, they were a source of inspiration, pleasure, and delight. To the degree that I've allowed myself to be afraid “this means I'm crazy” and tried to blot my experience out with denial or psychotropic drugs or a headlong rush into “normalcy”—that crazy/sane dichotomizing again—that's the degree to which I was hooked by fear, depression took solid hold, and discovery and joy evaporated from my life. I am writing this as a means of fully owning who I am, but I also hope there are others who have experiences similar to mine who will derive some comfort and courage from my sharing.

I said before that, after my experience in my early twenties with hearing a divine voice speaking to me, I'd feared I was losing my mind and ran away from anything remotely spiritual. Well, that's only true in part, because some things I couldn't run away from because they were an integral part of me. I didn't even know they were not considered normal until I had the following conversation with Ralph.

Feeling Inside My Brain

In one of our therapy sessions, I casually remarked to Ralph that I had just moved into the right side of my brain. I've always been sensitive to hemispheric shifts, and I'm well aware that I process reality differently depending on which hemisphere—left or right—is dominant at the time. Actually, this awareness can be a lot of fun. I was chuckling when I remarked that I had just shifted, because I very much enjoy being right-brain dominant. Ralph sat up at attention and responded with some astonishment.

“You what?” Ralph asked, crossing his arms and legs.

“I just moved into the right side of my brain.”

“What do you mean?” He had such a quizzical look on his face.

“Well, you know how you feel inside your brain?” The look on his face, which he hurried to hide, was a lot like Malcolm's look when Cole told him he saw dead people. Ralph was quick, but I was quicker. He failed to disguise the alarm on his face from me.

“You mean, you don't feel inside your brain?” I asked, rather astonished myself now.

“No...”

It was the first time anyone had reacted like this. I thought everyone could feel inside their brains! I took this so for granted, like sight or hearing, that it hardly rated a comment. In fact, with the exception of conversations with my oldest sister (who also feels inside her brain) or other family members, I realized I had probably never mentioned it to anyone before. Anxious, I began to pull back, fearful that Ralph was changing his mind about me not being crazy.

First, a little history. When we were little, with no apparent reason for this conviction, my sister and I both believed we were from Venus. (This was long before the idea was given new meaning by the *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* book.) We still joke about being Venusians who just want to get back home. We often laugh about some of our “strange brain” experiences, and we have shorthand descriptive names for them that we both understand.

“I'm getting the ‘creeping cold’ again,” my sister will say, and I know that's when a cold feeling starts at the base of the neck, inside your skull, and creeps up slowly over the occipital lobe and on over the topmost layers of your brain, covering larger sections with a blanket of cold as it moves.

“Doesn't it feel *wild* when it goes into ‘Vicks’ salve on the brain’?” I'll laugh.

“Yes! Yes!” She knows exactly what I am talking about. “Vicks’ salve on the brain” is when it feels like somebody has rubbed big globs of Vicks' salve into the convolutions of your brain. It's a funky feeling.

In our session, I described these experiences to Ralph. “You don't ever feel that?” I asked incredulously, still finding it hard to believe him when he said he did not feel inside his brain. “No...” he answered, hurrying to add, “but we're all different.”

I told him about “Coke in the cone-head.” That's when it feels like you have a large, inverted, three-dimensional cone extending from the top of your brain down into a point somewhere in the limbic system, and somebody has poured very effervescent Coca-Cola into it. It's a very tingly, energetic, happy, aware, good feeling. Ralph and I again discussed my seizure disorder, and because the experiences I'd already described to him happened transiently, I was quite willing to accept the theory that what I was experiencing was caused by heightened electrical activity in my brain. What I didn't want to accept—again, because I was afraid it meant I was crazy—was the fact that the anticonvulsants did very little to diminish the frequency or intensity of these experiences.

Visions of Universal Light

Seizures tend to cause sporadic, stereotypical alterations of consciousness that come and go. There is a beginning—sometimes perceived as a warning aura—a middle that is the full-blown seizure, and an end that usually involves a sense of slumping, or resting, as the brain and body recover from the heightened seizure activity. A person may sleep for hours after a seizure or may feel low-ebb and depressed. My “strange brain” incidents were almost always energizing, however, and I often found them quite pleasurable. After my seizure disorder diagnosis, I figured they were probably just atypical seizures.

But I had other experiences that were pretty much constant. These, too, did not abate on the anticonvulsants and, because they never stopped, they were even harder to dismiss as caused by seizures. The most pervasive experience was a visionary and vibrational one.

The first time I was consciously aware of seeing what I called “atoms” or “light grains” was after a particularly long and lively lecture by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi at a transcendental meditation teacher training course I attended in the early seventies. We had been meditating and doing yoga for much of the day, and we were eating nothing but fresh, whole, organic foods, so my consciousness was pretty “clean and clear,” you might say. I’d also like to say here that, at this point—other than the usual teenaged experimentations with alcohol and the occasional antibiotic or novocaine—I had never taken drugs of any kind, pharmaceutical or otherwise.

The Maharishi had talked non-stop for many hours in that high-pitched giggly-sounding voice his followers know so well. By the time he concluded, I had glazed over and ceased to process anything he was saying. I left the lecture hall about 3 a.m.—the Maharishi was still going strong—and crossed the unlit football field heading toward my dorm. Suddenly it struck me: It was not dark outside. Instead, everything seemed to be made up of *extremely* tiny, densely packed, rapidly vibrating spheres of light that twinkled and hummed and lent to what I knew must be the darkness a quality of sparkling grey aliveness. *Everything seemed conscious and intelligent.* Now I can say this was rather like being inside and aware of the intricate firings of the mind of God.

These spheres were so tiny—much smaller than pin pricks—I didn’t know how I could possibly be seeing them. I couldn’t focus in on and see just one, but taken as a seamless fabric, I could see them quite clearly. With my vision softened to include the whole and my brain not insisting on scrutiny, I could glimpse a certain architecture to the light grains; each had an incredibly brilliant light at its nucleus, like a very bright white star, and a distinct cell-like membrane that seemed filled with clear, less-bright, but *humming* fluid light. The contrast between the centers and edges was distinct enough that I would almost describe the outer edges as dark.

Standing in the middle of that football field, I blinked my eyes tight several times, but the vision and vibration of these light grains did not go away. I was then hit by such an intense surge of energy, my body could not contain it. I ran around the football field nine times before collapsing on the grass, wondering if I had been struck by lightning, my senses completely filled with this awesome impression of lively, energetic, conscious light. It did not go away. It never went away. My vision to this day is permanently locked at this level, and so it has been for going on thirty years.

For years I searched for an explanation for what this might be. One ophthalmologist told me I was seeing floaters. I just looked at him and said, “Okay,” knowing he couldn’t imagine what I was talking about. Years later, still seeking an answer, I told another ophthalmologist: “I know what floaters are, because I have them. I know what a congenital cataract looks like, because I have one. I also know what those floating lights are like; I think they may be light shining through platelets moving through the capillaries in my eye and landing on my retina. This is something else. I want to know what it is!”

The ophthalmologist found no indication of eye disease, but he speculated that the electrical activity in my brain might be higher than normal but that I'd managed to adjust to it. "Ask a neurologist," he said. I already had, and the neurologist couldn't explain it either.

I wrote researchers investigating effects of diethylstilbestrol on fetuses, because my mother had been given DES when she was pregnant with me and only later was the estrogen-like drug pulled from the market as harmful. One of the researchers I contacted was investigating congenital changes in the eyes of DES offspring. Another was looking into possible neurological effects. Both said they understood what I was describing and that what I was seeing might have been caused by DES, but they hadn't done enough research yet to be able to say for sure. I also looked into synesthesia—a type of inter-sensory mingling that can manifest in all kinds of interesting ways—even going so far as to participate in a national research study. At the end of the study, the researcher asked me if I thought I had synesthesia. "I don't know," I replied. "You tell me."

I even considered if what I was seeing might be caused by toxic byproducts of various systemic infections. I knew I had had Lyme disease, and I also had been treated briefly on several occasions for mycoplasma infections. When I searched the Internet for information on these infections, I learned that mycoplasmas were being implicated in chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia, both of which I suffered from, as well as some other debilitating diseases with overlapping features of fatigue, chronic pain, and depression. "Hallucinogenic mycoplasmas! That's gotta be it!" I exclaimed to my sister in one insightful moment, thinking I had hit on the key. If the substances emitted by molds or magic mushrooms could cause hallucinatory experiences, it stood to reason that perhaps microscopic "critters" colonizing the human body and pumping out their own unique brand of neurotoxins could do the same. Maybe I had the equivalent of a mini LSD lab in my body!

And, of course, I could just be crazy.

Universal Oneness and the Golden Braid

In the early nineties, I began to see something else in addition to the light grains. It was transient, so I could explain it somewhat as related to fluctuating brainwave activity or some type of altered state of consciousness. I was on anticonvulsant medication at the time, so I thought (as with the neuroleptics before) that my perceptions might be being altered somehow by the drugs, but I could not determine a pattern that was in any way related to timing of medication doses. I noticed that it usually happened after I'd been meditating or right after I awakened from sleep or a nap. I would see a thick, loose, yarn-like braid of translucent golden light—a web or meshwork that reminded me somewhat of the fairy-tale elf's spun gold—over everything in my visual field. This braiding seemed superimposed on top of the light grains, which winked and twinkled through it in a most happy-seeming way. I came to call this "egg yolk yarn." When I saw this golden braid, some of the light grains became more intense and bright and seemed to be—for lack of a better way of saying it—more purposefully clumped together. It was like what I imagine early galaxies forming might have looked like except on a much smaller scale. I would then, for a brief time, enter what I can only describe as a charming and joyful state.

Always, this state was associated with a deep feeling of peace and at-oneness with the universe, an "all's right with the world" kind of feeling. Still, I could not accept that it might be a spiritually connective experience, something I didn't need to be afraid of, something benevolent and good. Once it fully dawned on me that I was seeing this, I would always begin to lock down on it again, framing it either as crazy or a sign of some as yet undiagnosed disease process. Each time, fear would rear its ugly head. The worst thing of all was, I couldn't explain it and therefore had no clue as to how to "fix" it.

Once somebody told me that there was a mystical explanation for my visual experiences; that maybe I'd flashed into cosmic consciousness. That couldn't be it, I thought at the time, because didn't cosmic

consciousness mean your life gets easier; that you're in the world but not of it and nothing gets to you anymore? No, I was definitely not living the life of somebody in cosmic consciousness! But I did have—and have had since earliest memory—the sense that my consciousness is “out,” not contained within the confines of my body. This is perhaps why I do not feel anywhere near as physically small as I actually am. Most of the time, wherever I am, I feel that my consciousness extends through and includes/is included in everything—people, plants, the sky, the stars, my little yapping dogs—everything.

The only word I ever found that came close to describing this was “solipsism.” That's the idea that nothing exists except the self, that the entire experienced universe is generated from the self. But I never really felt that I had generated the universe—I was certainly never so grandiose as to feel like I was God!—only that my consciousness was seamlessly woven into and through it, blurring the distinctions between self and other. The word, then, was not terribly precise or useful, but I had no other way of describing my experience.

So inherent to my sense of being was this awareness of being “out” that, the few times I had a sudden “in-the-body” experience, I had been sharply taken aback. Like the time I was walking down the college breezeway, minding my own business, and my consciousness bumped *hard* into the nose on my face as if I were a cell in a system of cells that had suddenly become quite self-conscious of its separateness. This was very disorienting!

My training in psychology gave me a different way of examining this phenomenon of being “out”: object relations. Very young children supposedly have not developed to the point that they differentiate between self and other, subject and object. A baby, for example, does not know it is separate from its mother. It is only after a few years that a young child's brain, through a series of instructive experiences in his or her environment, crystallizes into conscious awareness of his or her separateness. This, it is theorized, is when the “I,” or the ego, is born. It happens around the time of the “terrible twos.”

I have wondered if, because I was about two years old when I witnessed that murder, this did not somehow prevent the natural differentiation process from locking solidly into my neurons. I know from my clinical training and experience that this can occur, and I know it is almost always framed as pathological by clinicians. Many people who have difficulties in the object relations department are seen to have problems with “boundaries.” They can get very confused about where they stop and the rest of the world begins, and because of this their perceptions and behaviors can be quite faulty. They can, for example, believe they are reading people's minds and then act on what they think other people are thinking, sometimes with very tragic consequences.

Ironically, many people with object relations difficulties have been traumatized as children and have developed as a survival mechanism an exquisite sensitivity—one that borders on the psychic—to what's really going on in their environment that nobody else wants to own up to or talk about. When they tell you they “know” what someone else is thinking or what they're going to do before they do it, they are often at least partially right. With their “fear” antennae up, they pick up on subtle cues in facial expressions and body language that other people miss, and their gut intuitive senses can be quite strong. They either actually do sense ahead of time that something they fear is going to happen, or else they expect it's going to happen and thereby participate—often unconsciously—in the creation of what they fear. How well I understand this dynamic in my own life!

It's easier for treating professionals to say these people are hopelessly crazy or arrested at primitive levels of psychological development than it is to help them sort out the subtle nuances of what is/was real and what is/was not; what's probable and what's not; the tiny external signs of others' thought processes that they are likely to act on, and those they are not. Few clinicians frame this heightened sensitivity to the environment as a potentially useful tool; they dismiss precognitive anticipation or

feelings of oneness with the universe as paranoia or pathological enmeshment.

Neurological and Quantum Explanations

Researchers in the new field of neurotheology are now investigating what happens in the brains of people—yogis, mystics, and those with seizure disorders, not just the “mentally ill”—who experience this kind of “knowing” and feelings of oneness with the universe. Could it be that these sensitivities are not as crazy as they have been made out to be in the West? Centuries of mystical and shamanic teachings certainly suggest they are not.

In my efforts to understand my unusual perceptions, what I wanted most of all was for some knowledgeable expert to give me a hard-and-fast explanation for why I was having them. Maybe then I could find out how to be normal. I was by now rejecting the pat, too-easy variations on the “you’re crazy” theme—I’d experienced both personally and professionally how that was used as a means to pass the buck—but nothing else served to explain what was going on. There didn’t seem to be any knowledgeable experts.

Then I started reading about discoveries in quantum physics. I read with great interest theories of infinitesimally small miniwhiteholes inside miniblackholes, 10 to the minus 33 centimeters in diameter and 10 to the minus 5 grams in mass; of subatomic-sized wormholes being everywhere, with trillions and trillions of them winking in and out of existence every second in the space occupied by a quarter; of cosmic quantum potentials arising out of an energetic “soup” of quantum foam and manifesting as various physical realities depending on conscious expectations of “what will come true.”

It was clear to me that a number of quantum physicists were concluding that physical matter is not as solid or as permanent as our relatively slow-on-the-uptake brains perceive it to be but, instead, is made up of intimately connected, rapidly vibrating packets of energy in a constant state of creative—some would say conscious—flux. This sounded a lot like my light grains to me. These physicists were also discovering that everything is subjective; that, like time, objectivity is a human construct we use in an effort to sort things out. What, I started to wonder, is objectivity if not polarization and artificial boundary-construction?

Dancing Photons

Even before encountering quantum physical ideas, it seems I understood far more about the nature of reality than I gave myself credit for. I once tried to describe my light grains to a few close, trusted friends as being rather like the kinetic grainy-textured picture on a television or movie screen, except the grains are very much brighter and infinitely smaller, more luminous, more energetic, and more densely packed. “I don’t know how to describe it,” I told my friends. “It’s like everything’s alive and conscious, not locked into solidity, and it seems like everything’s in the process of becoming all at once. The solidity, like the picture on that screen, is just an illusion.”

I read somewhere that the grainy movie effect results from photons bombarding us from the screen; that the picture we see is actually a dancing array of photons blinking on and off. This is another way of saying the movie is made of light. That’s what some of the New Age writers have been saying: that everything’s made of light. Maybe, I started to think, this is more than a metaphor for what I am seeing. Maybe what I’m calling light grains are actually photons, and this whole big movie around me that I think of as physical reality is really a grand collection of dancing photons. Maybe I’m just seeing reality for what it really is at the subatomic level. But how, I asked myself, could I be seeing something too swift and too small to be seen by the naked eye? I don’t know how; all I know is that I see what I cannot possibly be seeing, and the vision never goes away.

Now, not only does everything seem to be moving energetically and changing constantly, but the world does not seem very solid to me. I often have the uncanny sense that I could put my hand through people and objects; that all it would take to radically change reality is strong expectation, intention, and a wave of my hand. I know: crazy stuff! But I have begun to relax with the idea that the universe literally does wink in and out, all the time, rapidly and constantly. However, to be sitting in a room of twinkling-spinning-humming-vibrating light grains, with little sense of boundaries between yourself and everything else, expending enormous amounts of energy just to do what “normal” people seem to take so for granted—feel solid!—well, it’s very different from reading about it, I can tell you. It’s taken me a long time to get to the point that I can *sometimes* say, “Stop wasting your energy trying to make things solid and be yourself! Your neurological filters are just different from other people’s.”

Reality and Normalcy Are Not the Same Thing

It has helped me cope as popular books began hitting the market about higher vibrational levels and the whole idea that consciousness creates *subjective* reality, not that consciousness registers *objective* reality. There is simply no such thing as objective reality, and we delude ourselves if we equate normalcy with an objective “reality out there.” We know that bumble bees, fish, bats, and our pets perceive reality very differently from the way we humans do. But if someone thinks or perceives or performs “outside of the box” of the narrow perceptual range most humans share, they are immediately perceived by others as weirdos. Yet this is precisely what expanding consciousness involves.

I read somewhere that our entire planetary consciousness is now vibrating at such a higher rate of speed than it was 200 years ago that people living then would not be able to perceive us. We could exist side by side and yet we would literally be invisible to them—and vice versa. Some have suggested that many worlds exist in a parallel, infinite present, divided from each other by levels of vibration we might, in our mind-boggled human way, call “time” or “space.” What prevents us from perceiving these other worlds are our neurological filters, which are limited to registering a relatively narrow range of wavelengths. In this sense, “normal” is the lowest-common-denominator range of abilities and perceptions experienced by our species, but we err if we believe this is the same as “reality.”

I remember wailing to Ralph in the early days of our therapy, “I just want to be normal!” I didn’t really register the depth of his wise answer until years later: “You’re trying to make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse. Why would you want to do that?”

Yeah, why would I want to do that? Because I was so afraid of being perceived by other people as crazy—so much so, that I was ecstatic to think a physical illness might explain what was “wrong” with me—that I was willing to do anything to limit and deaden my perceptions. But with no brain tumors on my MRI and the failure of a spate of medications to make me perceive things in a so-called normal way, I finally decided to accept the evidence that I am just different from other people. Even my sister has said this to me many times, half jokingly.

“It took me a long time to realize that other people aren’t anything like us,” she once said. “But they’re not! They’re *not!*”

“Yeah, it’s because we’re from Venus!” I answered, chuckling.

Chapter 8

Varieties of Mystical Experience

April 1994. My marriage was over, and I was struggling to survive with my young son, who on this evening was staying with his father. Because Ralph and I had agreed I was isolating too much and needed to get out more, I had reluctantly agreed to attend a lecture with my neuromuscular therapist. I would be driving. I was rather irritated when I arrived to pick up my passenger to discover that she'd brought a friend of hers along without warning me in advance. I'd always found it extremely energy-zapping to be around people I didn't know. This friend seemed very spiritually prideful, and as she rattled on and on in the car about all her mystical experiences and endeavors, I found myself increasingly regretting I'd agreed to go.

The lecture we were attending was given by Lazaris, a supposedly channeled higher being whose topic for the night was "Waking the Magician." The lecture hall was packed, and as soon as this supposed entity Lazaris entered and began speaking through his host, Jach Pursel, people all around me began to furiously scribble notes. The most furious scribbler was this friend of my neuromuscular therapist, and I decided I just really did not like her. Although I didn't know it at the time, I expect I was strongly resonating with her at an unconscious level; her spiritual pridefulness was too close to something in myself that I was disowning. All I could think of at the time was that I wanted the evening to be over so I could get away from these people, get back home, and climb into my cozy little bed.

This is what I remember of this evening. For the first part of the lecture, Lazaris didn't talk about magicians. He was spouting some crazy nonsense about how a planetary alignment would be taking place on April 23, just a week away, and then the "Sirius vortex" would open and start bathing Earth in some kind of new and different energy that would sharply accelerate the development of human consciousness. "This is all a crock!" I remember thinking. Within seconds, I heard Lazaris speak these words:

"Some of you in this audience are thinking 'This is all a crock!' But it isn't a crock. These are things you need to know."

When someone seems to be reading your mind, it kind of makes you sit up and take notice. I listened a little more carefully as Lazaris explained the implications of this vortex opening up.

"Now, some people on this planet are already experiencing this to some degree, but when the Sirius vortex opens, the temporal lobes of a large number of this planet's inhabitants will become sensitized. This sensitization has enormous implications for the evolution of consciousness on your planet. You will know this is happening because *people will start to feel inside their brains.*"

Every cell in my body felt suddenly electrified with energy. Needless to say, I was completely knocked out by this comment. So stunned was I that I remember little of what happened next, and I don't even remember driving home. But almost seven years later I found in my papers what I had documented about this long-forgotten experience. Lazaris had moved on to his announced topic, and we'd done a group meditation to "waken the magician."

The initial portion of the meditation involved going back to a time "before the wounding," before we lost the sense of our own omnipotence—a time when, as children, we were fully in touch with our powers and not yet constrained by fears of hurt or loss. Unlike most mental health professionals would do, Lazaris did not denigrate this stage as infantile, grandiose, or psychologically primitive. He insisted our ability to remember and reengage with this state of consciousness was essential if we hoped to

awaken the magician sleeping within us.

Following the first half of the meditation, we proceeded to the part where we were to seduce the magician within us and wake it back up. This is what I wrote about this phase of the meditation:

Lazaris tells us we are to look around us for whatever comes, for these will be of help to us in awakening the magician within. What comes to me is a rolling glade with fresh spring grass—about a foot long, softly green, and gently bending—that sings and waves in the wind. “Who has seen the wind?” comes to me as though asked by someone else, and I recognize this as a line from a poem I’ll have to find. Various light floating things come, some like the petals of violets except they are mild yellow; some like tinier white star-shaped flowers; some very tiny specks that I think are fairies; some are like golden bees. I have the sense that nature spirits are congregating around me, and everywhere there is a singing, almost-electrical humming, only softer than the buzz I get in my head. It is more like natural energy intensifying, and my brain responds by getting onto that frequency; the crown of my head and the surface of my scalp begin to tingle.

Lazaris tells us to look around until we can see hidden doors. I look to the horizon and see, in a twilight sky deepening into night, a starless double-door shaped portion of the sky that is slightly deeper in color than the sky around it. Light is leaking around the edges of these doors like you see around the edges of certain nebulas. It seems to me as if something very bright is on the other side.

Lazaris tells us to let ourselves be moved toward these doors, slowly, slowly, and I feel myself being lifted as a very young child (two or maybe not quite two) and loved. Loved! Surrounded by love! [This, I would add now, is like having the support of nature, the felt sense that I am a child of the universe who has every right to be here.] And I trust this embrace to carry through with me until I am right before those doors, floating on my stomach.

Lazaris then says, “Now, push through those doors,” and I hold up my little hands and push/dive through them into an intensity of stars, so many stars that for a moment I lose the vision of them entirely—seeing briefly again the reassuring, sunny green glade—until my eyes adjust and are able to perceive the magnitude of the depth of space in which they are shining. Depth!

I begin to lose the coherence of Lazaris’ voice at this point, even though he continues to direct the meditation, telling us to seduce the magic; that first we must seduce the magic, and then the magician within will awaken and seduce us. When I attempt to do this, I go into some kind of whirling, centrifugal experience that pulls me completely out of my body and into the enormity of that space; and then, suddenly, it is as though my consciousness breaks into a million little pieces—I want to say “Z” shapes, except they are more like upright, snake-like glyphs—that go hurling upward and outward.

I find myself standing on solid ground with the heavens all around me. I hold out my hands, palms upward, as though I am feeling for rain, and rays of light from various stars begin to shoot down into my palms. This is when I begin to feel my “Coke in the cone-head” sensation. The base of the cone at my crown begins to slowly widen, while the point at the base of my brain remains fixed, until it feels like the edges are starting to fit around my skull like a snug little hat.

Lazaris begins to command, “Let the magician awaken!” and I see myself wearing a pointed magician’s hat, the classic night blue with moon and five-pointed stars like Mickey Mouse wore as the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. I am standing with the heavens all around me, and these heavens are so much more enormous and real than the attempt at their duplication on that hat that I think it is pretty ridiculous to think that any mortal human could dare to command a power like that. And I think to myself, “How cliché,” but then these judgmental thoughts are completely blown out of me by a great rush of wind.

And then I feel—oh, God, I feel!—that cone shape in my brain rotate suddenly upward so the point of the cone at the base of my brain turns up into the hat, and the hat fills with such a blazing intensity of

light coming out of my own head that it burns through the star shapes I realize are actually holes (like in a punched-tin lantern) and, at the speed of light (of course!) creates, blazes, flings the stars all over the heavens...connecting me with threads of my own light to the whole universe!

This is the most incredible thing I've ever experienced in my life! It is like all the stars on the fabric of space are being generated by me, but also like the stars are feeding energy back into me, too, creating/illuminating me even as I am creating/illuminating them. When I turn around slowly, the stars turn too, in response to my own movements. I am a universarium!

How could I have forgotten an experience that, at the time, was so extraordinary? But forget it I did, and so I was quite astonished to find this again. After recording the meditation, I had made a note in my journal about our conversation on the way back home. My neuromuscular therapist said that the most significant thing Lazaris had said all night—something I noted I did not even remember him having said—was that “Disaster is being abandoned by the stars. Dis-aster.” Asters were the tiny white star-shaped flowers I had seen in the meditation. I also noted the impact Lazaris' statement had on me: “In all its complexity, I begin to know what this has meant and what it now means for me.” Then, for some reason, my soul tucked it all away into my unconscious. It would be almost seven years before I was ready to know this again. There were lessons, apparently, I still had to learn before I could integrate the magnitude of this knowing into my conscious awareness.

We Are Not Alone

Rediscovering my writing about Lazaris' teachings helped me get conscious with the fact that I am not alone in being different. There are others who, like me, have had experiences that they do not understand, experiences they may fear mean they're defective or crazy, experiences that they hide from others for fear their “flaws and defects” will become known.

There are also those who, like me, have been all around the world of their monkey minds trying to explain to themselves who they are and why they have the experiences they have. We have trembled in fear and run from our fear and drawn our most fearful lessons inexorably to us, over and over and over again, until we are *again* ready to know. Separately and together, and in the face of an increasingly stressful world, we have sought to understand, to stretch our consciousness, to stay alive—but, more than that, to grow. Our souls have known all along what they are doing, even if this knowledge has not always been available to our conscious awareness.

All of us are so profoundly affected by the world around us, whether we “get conscious” with it or not, that I am becoming more and more convinced it's a soul-level conspiracy, a contract for learning and growth that we make ahead of time with all participants involved. I am also convinced that we ourselves, often unawares, act in ways that draw us into destabilizing (and therefore polarizing) situations to force us into doing our often-painful, yet deeply transformational, soul-level work.

A big piece of this work, for me, has been finding that in-between space where we can forgive each other and love and be ourselves—a space where we know that we *all* have a right to be here. Sometimes we have to get very far from this centered, central space—all the way out to the edges of our polarities—before we begin to see that we need to make a 180-degree turn and reengage with its benevolence. In retrospect, this is exactly why I was led to and took the job that would “kill” me.

Now when I find myself caught up in a fear spiral born of polarized thinking of any kind, I go into the silence within myself and ask of the person or situation, “Are you the demon casting this shadow over my heart? Or am I?” If I stay clear and focused on the space that lies between us, not heavily clinging to or rejecting either extreme, the answer is always “Neither and both. We're in this together.” In the space between us, our differences blend. This takes the golden rule—“Do unto others as you would

have them do unto you”—to a much deeper level. In meeting halfway what our egos think is an enemy or a polar opposite, we can see the green and shimmering depths of our souls reflected *ad infinitum* back to us. In this moment of recognition, we blend and merge with Spirit. Then we deeply engage with who we really are and were born to be.

Trauma and Evolution of Consciousness

Not long ago, I went to see an energy worker. She told me something that surprised me at the time. Assessing me only by looking into the layers of my aura, she said she had never worked with anyone who had been through as much trauma as I had. Maybe she was referring to this life, or maybe she was referring to past lives, too. I didn't ask her what she meant. What I found surprising about her comment is that I don't particularly feel like I've experienced that much trauma—certainly not compared to some of the clients I have worked with as a therapist.

Besides, it's not the quantity of traumatic experience that shapes a person but, for lack of a better word, its quality. One three-second trauma can “wreck” one person for life, whereas another person may suffer repeated traumas and emerge pretty much unscathed. I have known many traumatized people, too, for whom the trauma served as an important “breakthrough” point—albeit after years of integration and “working through”—to a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Although few of us would wish a traumatic experience on anyone—not if we knew our wish would come true—and we certainly wouldn't consciously choose one for ourselves, some have actually told me that they are grateful for the traumas they have experienced. I know I am grateful for mine, and I am convinced my soul knowingly chose everything that has happened to me to afford me the conditions for my own growth. We can understand the dynamics if we look to those who have survived cancer or who are living with HIV. Trauma can wake us up to the richness of life.

One thing certain about traumatic experience is that it changes the way the brain and the human organism as a whole develop and work. As I've said before, childhood trauma is especially significant in this regard, because the brain is still growing, but even trauma experienced as an adult can alter a person for life if the stress is great enough. In the cosmic scheme of things, I do not think of this as bad; nor do I see it as some kind of deserved punishment for sin or “bad karma.” Traumatic experience may wrench us out of the frame for a while, but I know it can serve to expand our awareness and ultimately align us with our highest good.

The energy worker and I had a conversation along these lines that I thought was rather enlightening. She said that many of the more sensitive souls in embodiment now are the way they are because of abnormal stress and trauma. “It's caused them to develop relatively more quickly at a spiritual level,” she said. This was a spiritual explanation for what I had before tried to explain in strictly physical or psychological terms.

I've thought a lot about the idea that traumatic experience has implications for the evolution of consciousness. People who must contend with too much conflicting and painful information must find a way to adapt; if they can't, they will die. This happens to rats if they are put in inescapably stressful situations—such as being repeatedly shocked inside a box with no exit—that they have no way of modulating. Rats have a relatively limited capacity for developing creative adaptive strategies; when faced with too much trauma, they'll just plain die. But we humans are an extraordinary lot. We can choose all kinds of “deaths” and “escapes” that do not involve the death of the body. Some of these methods require pushing the brain to levels of functioning it has not drawn on before. Most of them involve a dogged insistence on staying alive no matter how bad things get, and most of them involve *leaps into the unknown*.

A good example of an adaptive strategy all humans are capable of that requires a leap into the unknown is the dissociative response. We can leave our bodies and go somewhere else; we can release our “spirit” to free-float in the universe; we can even become “someone else” if we need to. When taken to extremes, and when the strategy is used persistently over long periods of time as a knee-jerk means of escape, dissociation can evolve into what is now popularly called multiple personality disorder.

I’ve known and worked with a few multiples, and I don’t mean to belittle what can be a very confusing and painful way of being—one that can, indeed, be pathological and life-wrecking. But think of the creative intelligence that is involved! Multiplicity is essentially different quite-strong aspects of consciousness, each with demonstrably different psychological and physiological states of being, all acting out of the microuniverse of one supposedly limited little body. It becomes a disorder and a big problem only when there is no one in charge of “driving the car.”

In simplest terms, the difference between singular and multiple consciousness is rather like the difference between having an old computer with just a word processing program on it and a new, fast, multitasking computer that can run many different programs at once, some in the background, and perhaps only one on which our attention is focused at any given moment. Had there not been minds capable of functioning in the same manner, multitasking computers could never have been imagined, much less invented. What often is not realized is that all of us are capable of multitasking, and we do it all the time without even thinking about it. We are ever engaged in a complex orchestration of consciousness, right down to the cellular and quantum levels. We run thousands of “programs” simultaneously, although we are generally unaware that this is happening.

In the evolutionary scheme of things, and at the level of soul, multitasking of consciousness can be seen as a kind of higher-level functioning that is in so many ways more creative and intelligent than the strictly linear, fundamentally judgmental, “one answer” approach to human existence that has seemed to serve the Western mind relatively well up until now. Whole books could be written on these “new” ideas, and many already have been; but even the briefest foray into centuries-old mystical writings suggests that we humans are only now reawakening to a wisdom and functionality of consciousness that we’ve forgotten we already have.

Personally, I believe that the acceleration of pace and stress and the technological advances we humans are exposed to are causing our brains to stretch in ways that have exciting implications for the evolution of human consciousness. I’m also convinced that trauma, if you don’t allow it to break you, plays a big part in the evolutionary process. What is happening now is a paradigm shift in consciousness of huge proportions. Heightened sensitivities are one indication we are stretching our brains into higher levels of functioning. Being able to make connections between very different ideas and ways of being—what I mean by getting to the soul lessons in the middle—is another.

Even as you read this page, more and more people are coming to understand what is happening to our collective consciousness and how fear and other strong emotions that take us beyond the “rational” mind can serve to advance each of us on our path to higher awareness. I am indebted to those who have already courageously and openly spoken out on these issues, for they have modeled courage for me.

To make a long discussion very short, the days of reductionistic thinking about what constitutes normalcy and craziness are coming to an end. Although great entrenched pockets of hidebound resistance and fear-based judgments still exist, as a whole we are evolving past construing life in such limiting, limited terms. The paradigm is shifting to embrace multiple dimensions of consciousness and “parallel worlds” in which curiosity, child-like playfulness, and the creative stretching of inner and outer boundaries can lead to transformation, connectedness, and joy. Our souls are the painters of consciousness, and we are learning how to make green. Those people who continue to frame unusual abilities and perceptions as pathological or crazy and project them off onto others who they believe

need to be eradicated or “fixed” will not be able to catch this wave of changing consciousness. Instead, they will remain polarized at one edge or the other of craziness/sanity and, as a result, they will miss out on all the fun.

When We Turn, the Stars Turn Too

We are not one- or even three-dimensional. Although at the level of physicality (and ego) it can be useful to perceive ourselves as different and engaged in disparate soul-level journeys, at the level of Spirit, we all float in the same “soup” of infinitely multidimensional being/becoming. We are at once different and the same, sane and crazy, evil and good, successful and unsuccessful, light and dark, being born and dying and being born again. Each of us is inextricably bound up in the unfolding conscious universe—Spirit—in which boundaries serve as grandly instructive illusions and polarized judgments as elementary-level pedagogical tools.

When we see that our essential selves lie at once within and without us, and when we find the courage to expand our awareness to take in and love what we now most fear and disown, then we’ll begin to reawaken to our power. Another way of saying it is this: *When we turn, the stars turn too*. This is how I understand my “waking the wizard” meditation. When we, individually and as a species, begin to push through the doors of the constructed limitations that divide us from the wisdom and wizard-like power of our Spirit-connected souls, what we’ll see all around us are billions of stars—and the stars will not abandon us.