

THE LIFE I ORDERED HAS ARRIVED, AT LAST

Some of us wake up when we find out that we have two months to live. Everything changes. We do those things that we always wanted to do, before it's too late. Some people wake up early -at age seven or at eighteen- and begin to make a plan for how they want to live. Waking up means realizing we have choices about how we want to spend this one and precious life. We start making decisions that reflect this awareness. I woke up at age 37.

At that time, I was married, the father of two wonderful girls, had a successful practice of psychiatry, and was becoming a respected person in my community. Until then, I had done what my parents, my genes and my compliant nature had led me to do: good student, solid citizen, not much flair, not much trouble. I had some trials. My sister's suicide when I was 25 was an enormous trauma, and might have been a real wake up call. It wasn't. There was medical school, struggles in my marriage, a stint in the Army, fatherhood, adjusting to a new community. But these were all things that seemed to happen to me. I adjusted pretty well. But until age 37, I didn't feel like I initiated anything. I was just going along for the ride.

Since age 37, I have gone about shaping the life with which I am happy. It is my unique path, very different from the life anyone else would have chosen. I write in hopes that you will be able to use my story in your search for your own chosen life. You will make choices very different from mine, and the resulting creation will be yours alone. I hope that these reflections may stimulate your search for the life that you want.

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GET A LIFE

I was 37 when Laura, my older daughter was nine, I can remember getting ready to go upstairs with her for “nightly”, which meant handsy-facy-teethy-peepee and story. That was always a sweet time in my day. But this night, Laura was not very interested, and I realized, for the first time, that this child of mine no longer thought of me as the center of her world, as she was the center of mine. This moment was my wake up call. I stood at the bottom of the stairs, and said to myself that I had to Get A Life. I realized that it would be bad for my daughters and for me if they remained my emotional focus. I started to think about how I could shift things.

I needed to have friends and interests in the bigger world. Building and nurturing the nest as a full time job was over. I started with the intention of investing more in my professional and social life. Gradually my world seemed to broaden. In that year, I accepted the presidency of the board of a local counseling center that had just formed. I got involved with Transcendental Meditation and began a life long interest in developing my inner world. At the clinic, I began to train myself and my team in family therapy and developed and accomplished the goal of having no waiting list for treatment. I started reading Carlos Casteneda about his encounters with a Mexican sorcerer, books that forever changed my notions about the nature of the world. I began writing poetry. I began keeping journals, and paying much closer attention to both my inner and outer lives.

Each of these beginnings has blossomed into a highway throughout my adult life. The counseling center has grown and been a major force in my community. It, and my friends from the board, have entrenched me in community work, and I continue as a consultant to the staff. Meditation has

been a lifelong practice that has shaped my personality, my health, and certainly my view of the world and of my relationship with the Divine. Professionally, the training I did at my clinic has led to a career as a teacher, with special interest in family and short term therapy. I have written many articles and spoken or consulted at scores of clinics across the country on issues of therapy. This role as teacher has defined my professional identity, but it began as I redefined my scope from therapist to trainer in that first year.

My interest in learning about the world of the spirit, begun with Casteneda, continued and spread. I have always sought out books, training and friends involved with psychic and religious interests. I am currently a member of a psychic group and also a spiritual reading group. My relationship with God is a center of my life. All this has connected with my practice of meditation, and also my journaling. The journals have been a record of my emotional, but also, my spiritual journey.

As with so many life changes, I sometimes become aware of going too far. Just before Laura's graduation from High School, she developed a herniated disc in her back, and needed to go to her graduation on a stretcher. She graduated on a Monday afternoon, at five, just after I was due to finish my golf game with my foursome (which formed during the year when I was "getting a life"). I arranged for the local fire department ambulance to provide transportation for Laura, and came separately. Even worse, that night was my golf partner Phil's 40th birthday, and we had planned to celebrate. After we got Laura graduated and home, off I went again, in loyalty to Phil, to celebrate. My wife was furious. I got a call from my younger daughter: "Please come home". Our family was in a crisis too awful to describe. I did finally get it that my first priority needed to be

family. Ten years previously, I knew that, but those ten years of pursuing a life had changed me.

A similar reminder came some twenty years later when my wife Linda was laid up with a bad back. I got her settled and fed each morning, brought lunch and did supper, but I kept all my clinical appointments and evening commitments. By the end of those two weeks, I was frazzled, grim and tight. Linda was furious, feeling neglected. My daughters, both mothers of young children, were resentful of my calls to them requesting that they look in on her, requests made with my tense, bossy, overwhelmed voice. After it was over, we had a family meeting at which it became clear to me that, again, I had overvalued my commitments to patients and meetings, and under responded to the needs at home. Two years later, when Linda needed shoulder surgery, I canceled the better part of two weeks of my schedule, and was able to provide care without either of us stressing out.

Another part of this issue of growing and changing is clearly getting and using feedback. Left to my own devices, I am likely to go overboard in my zeal to follow my own decisions. But with a little help from my friends, I am now at a new place. I do have a life, and I know I need to be more flexible about my pursuit of it.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- 1) Are you happy with your life?
- 2) Do you feel you have created your life or fallen into it?
- 3) Think of three things you might do to broaden your life.
- 4) Do you think you have the time, energy, resources to make changes?
- 5) How many hours of TV do you watch in a week?

THE JOY OF A DEPRESSED MOTHER

When I was about three, my mother had a “nervous breakdown”. I expect this was the 1930’s version of a major depression. What I know of it is that our family doctor ordered her into seclusion in my sister’s bedroom with a nurse caring for her at all times. We children, my older sister and me, were to keep away. This lasted about a month, after which, my mother could start going out for walks and gradually resuming her normal activities. From then on, I understood that I was not to stress my mother. My very kind father was her support system. We were all to conspire to keep her okay by “being good”.

I was a very good child, did as I was supposed to, and was sent to my room if I displayed defiance, resistance or anger. I can recall feeling sorry for myself and angry at the unfairness of it all. I could never be good enough. I would beat my pillow with my little black stuffed dog until my anger subsided and I was permitted to rejoin the family.

In therapy, years later, I recalled wanting to break down the door to that bedroom. I felt the helpless rage I must have experienced during that month of isolation. I also came to understand that being “good” protected both my mother and me.

As I write this I’m aware that it sounds pretty much like the complaining of so many of us in therapy: “look at what they did to me!”. Poor me.

But I have another slant on it right now. I think that learning, as I did, not to expect too much from the world, has stood me in pretty good stead

throughout my life. What I learned was that it was my job to take care of myself. I was responsible for not only taking care of me, but also keeping my world together. If entitlement is a disease of our times- expecting the world to take care of ME- I had a pretty good inoculation of the opposite: expect little or nothing, and do the best you can. This may sound self pitying, but in reality, it is a gift. I accept that I am responsible for the quality of my life, that my job is to care for others, and that that is all okay. Not a bad philosophy for a physician, a psychiatrist.

And there are some other silver linings. I tend to be very aware of and grateful for any act of kindness. I am joyfully aware of Kristin, a nurse in our clinic, when she takes charge of a situation that I would normally need to deal with. When my wife leaves the porch light on for me to come home to at night, I still notice and feel supported. And a bit surprised. I learned early to expect little, and very small kindnesses have always felt big.

There is a wonderful line from M Scott Peck's "The Road Less Traveled": "Life is difficult..." and if we can get over complaining about it, most situations are pretty easily managed and acceptable. I think I gave up most of my complaining about age 5 and now am pretty good at just getting on with it.

I do have my moments. Every year, for my birthday in April and Father's Day in May, I filled up with that old sense of "Nobody Loves Me". The final example of this chronic theme occurred about seven years ago. It was Father's Day. We were at church, and my daughter Laura came over to me to ask for suggestions about how to make the day special for her husband Brian. We talked a bit, and then I went home to sulk. She hadn't even said Happy Father's day! Julie had sent a card, but that didn't count.

And my own wife had completely ignored me!. I went to bed and settled in to have a good outrage. Still nothing from Laura! No one appreciates me! After all I do for them! I hate them all!

All the old feelings of an unloved child. I was right: no one cares about me. About 1 PM it did occur to me that maybe I should check the answering machine to make sure, but I was too involved to get up. I was too angry, and for good cause too. I'll show them!

About two, the phone rang. It was Laura. "Did you get my message? Happy Father's Day. Did Mom give you the present I left?" That was the end of my sulk. I went back to bed, happy and marveling at my own behavior. Of course I know my children love me. They have so often made that abundantly clear. What I realized was how much of me wanted to prove that I was right: all my life I was unnoticed and unappreciated. I always knew that, and now I could even prove it. I was amazed to realize that that childhood anger was still so attractive that I wallowed in it instead of taking refuge in the present reality. I am known and loved, especially by my children. It's been seven years now, and I haven't repeated that scene once. I think that catching myself in the act so clearly helped me to give it up forever.

My life as a child was not that bad. Our family had pretty clear and reliable routines. My Dad was wonderfully kind, and very available. The structures were all there to support a good life. It was just that no one was interested in my discomfort, my little slant on life, and certainly not in my anger or any inconvenient feelings. At 13, I went to a Prep School where I was miserable for four years, picked on and homesick. I never mentioned it to my parents. I "knew" that that would be too upsetting. So they thought I was doing well. My grades were very good.

I feel that this lack of entitlement has been one of the platforms on which my life has rested. I try to do a bit more than my share, to watch out for the other guy, to be aware of all kindnesses and be grateful. This has all been effortless, a part of my nature. These translate into making me a pretty good friend and decent parent.

It sounds weird to sing the praises of maternal deprivation, and God knows, I've seen plenty of examples of the pain many of us suffer for childhood deprivation, but at least for me, there is a bright side, and it is worth some attention.

- 1) What were the major stresses of your childhood?
- 2) What decisions did you make about how you must live to adapt?
- 3) What is the price you've paid for those choices?
- 4) What were the strengths these adaptations have created in your life?

OPENING MANY DOORS

One of the ways to lead a rich life is to open as many doors as possible, and at least take a peak inside. If it looks good, try entering. If it feels good, stay a while, at least. If you stay in one room and don't venture, you will feel secure, but your life will be very limited, dull. Staying secure is part of the death march. Trying new things does create anxiety. Part of finding the fullness of life is tolerating this anxiety, not letting it stop you.

Just for fun, I made a list of a bunch of doors that I have opened and entered and enjoyed:

First and best- having children

Making good friends

Meditation

Carlos Casteneda and the world of sorcery

Camping and love of nature

Gardening

Zen buddhism

Siddha Yoga

Journalling

Creative Movement and theater games

Reading auras

Teaching therapy

Flying a plane

Playing tuba

Doing the Phoenix puzzle

Lucid dreaming

Reading Tarot

Psychic exploration

I expect there are many more. The Phoenix puzzle is a good metaphor. It was a puzzle that appeared each week in the Boston Phoenix, a local newspaper. Each week it was different. One week it had pictures of twenty types of pasta and we had to identify them. Another week, it was a series of gravestones with initials and dates of death. We need to find out who was buried that day. Another time it was pieces of silverware needing to be named. Sometimes a number puzzle, or a code to be broken. And every week I would go on a journey, sometimes inside as I would struggle to decipher a code, or on an outer journey as I would ask five chefs if they would help me with the pasta. Sometimes it would take an hour, sometimes a whole weekend. I threw myself into them with my whole heart, which made them both exciting and fascinating. Then one day the Phoenix stopped publishing puzzles. A very sad day for me!

I learned a lot from this pursuit. For one thing, it was exciting only because I made it so important to myself. If I had accepted defeat when it presented itself, this hobby would have been pretty bland. For another I realized that one of the big plusses was all the interesting people I met looking for the answers: chefs, antique dealers, neighbors and others I enrolled in my pursuit. Finally it was a safe way to get involved in lots of different worlds. Every week a new search, unfamiliar terrain, struggle, get help, keep going, break through. This puzzle was a worthy but manageable opponent. It was a battle, but no one got injured, and in winning, no one had to be a loser.

Another personality trait that helped me to enjoy these paths is my willingness to do things badly. My wife, who believes anything worth doing is worth doing well, is in awe of me and my capacity for mediocrity. But I do

think that this trait has allowed me to follow my interests without asking “am I qualified?”, “do I know what I’m doing?” I tolerate failure pretty well, so there is little that looks like fun that I can’t at least try.

Some of the opened doors have led to lifelong pursuits, like meditation or journaling. Some have happily ended after a while- I gardened vigorously for six years, took a sabbatical, and never returned. I currently feel I have a rich life, full of passions, like this writing I am doing right now, and am glad for all the paths I have tried.

- 1) What are some doors you have opened?
Which have worked?
Which have not?
- 2) Were there doors you wish you’d opened but didn’t?
- 3) Where are you on the balance between choosing security (sameness) versus adventure (pushing yourself into new turf)?
- 4) Make a list of doors you might like to open.

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH ANGER

When I look at myself now, it is hard to believe that I came from the scared, timid child I was. In prep school, I was shy, lonely and picked on and above all, frightened by the meanness that seemed to dominate the school. At football, I prayed not to get hurt tackling.

By contrast, in my 50's, my wife and I were driving into town and saw a man dragging a woman down the middle of the street, screaming at her, pushing her down: lots of people watching, paralyzed. I jumped out of the car, went right up to him. "What's the problem?" said I, and engaged him enough to know that they were both drunk and he was fed up with her. I offered to take her off his hands, and eventually got him on his way and got the police to come and take her home. What shocked me was that I felt no fear. He could have had a gun, beaten me up, but that never seemed real. I knew something in me had changed.

This change began in therapy at age 28. I was, as always, a "good boy" who took off my shoes before lying on the couch, and prepared to leave three minutes before the end of the session, so that my analyst didn't have to tell me to go. I began to get angry at her for her distance and apparent dislike of me. I realized she was littler and older. I began to think I could pick up her potted philodendron and throw it at her, and there was no way she could stop me. I began to worry that maybe I would do that. I started visualizing my awful anger and how I could become a monster. One day, I imagined my anger boiling up and bursting out, splitting me open and destroying the whole universe. I stayed with that vision, and sure enough, something seemed to press its way out of my belly. But to my amazement, it was a balloon followed by a little teddy bear. It was cute and not at all

frightening. Maybe my anger wasn't so bad. In fact, I did not want to attack my poor analyst with her plant. The room felt safe.

This change had strange consequences. That spring, a fellow resident wanted me to play tennis with him. I knew he was a California state champion in his adolescence. And I knew that I had managed, despite lots of lessons and a graceful swing, to lose every match I ever played. He was desperate for a partner, and I finally agreed. We played and I beat him!!!! At least the first set. It was amazing.

As I felt stronger and more confident, I gradually developed a different fear. If I ever confronted someone with my rage, they would be destroyed. Or I would splatter from the internal pressure. As usual, I was in therapy, this time with a very trusting and loving therapist who seemed much less worried about this whole subject. We decided that I should try a growth experience. I went to an "Opening the Heart" workshop.

One of the exercises paired me up with a guy of similar stature. We were to put our hands on each other's shoulders and prepare to push. We were to look each other in the eyes. We were to shout "Get out of my way" and push as hard as we could. I pitied the poor slob. I was determined to pulverize him. At "go", I pushed. Not much happened! He pushed back. I kept pushing, some reassured. We each kept pushing our very hardest, but in about three minutes, he looked as tired and desperate as I was starting to feel. It was like a moment of truth, and an end to my fantasies of being an overwhelming, awesome force.

I could see that my fear of my own anger was related to my life mission to take care of my fragile mother. I had to protect her from me,

and that meant sitting on my own anger and assertiveness. It took a lot of therapy and a lot of experimenting to finally feel safe around my own aggression. My focus of concern had shifted from “them” to “me” as the source of danger. At last, I realized that I was hardly a danger at all. I did a high ropes course, and noted that my fear of altitudes had vanished. I began flying a plane, and, even as a student, I was happy to fly in bad conditions, even when experienced pilots stayed on the ground. In my child guidance center, there was an abusive father who brought a gun to his appointment. His therapist was terrified. I had no hesitation about seeing him and explaining that he had to take his gun home.

These changes occurred as a result of therapy. Psychotherapy is a great way to confront and correct the crazy beliefs and ideas that develop in our childhood. I didn't decide to start therapy; it was a condition of my training as a psychiatrist. But I have continued for years as a patient because therapy has been an important part of my personal growth.

- 1) What has been the hardest issue for you to deal with- anger, closeness, dependency, fear, passivity etc.?
- 2) Are your efforts succeeding?
- 3) Have you discussed this issue with others- spouse, friends, therapists?
- 4) What have you learned from dealing with this issue?

THE PATH OF MEDITATION

I have been meditating for about 35 years. At first it was twice daily in the model of Transcendental Meditation, with a mantra, and not too much philosophy behind it. From this practice, I gradually calmed down and became more peaceful and quiet inside. At times I could feel a peace that went beyond understanding. Then I began reading, and fell in love with the literature of Zen. “Three Pillars of Zen”, “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind” were the first of these books. I could sense a part of me that was separate from my everyday consciousness, a quiet, peaceful self that hid behind all the noise of my life.

I began to get in touch with a Self that seemed connected to Universal Consciousness or God. As I read on, I found words to describe these spiritual experiences. Several years later, a friend invited me to visit the Siddha Yoga ashram in South Fallsberg, N.Y. The first time I entered the meditation hall, I was surprised to feel myself crying and hearing the words “I’ve come home at last!” repeat in my head. Siddha Yoga was respectful of all the great religious traditions, and emphasized meditation as the “path to enlightenment”. This gave me a home for my practice and a structure to my understanding of the experiences of meditation.

At that time I was a Jewish Unitarian, but neither of these traditions seemed to relate to the inner world that was beginning to open. Meditation did offer me a path to God consciousness. I came to realize that whatever was going on in my outside life, if I sat for ten minutes or so, I could open into a peaceful place inside. At times, it got so deep that everything disappeared and I felt like all there was formless consciousness. That always felt warm and joyful.

One night, after a particularly stressful fight with my wife, I couldn't sleep. About 3 AM, I sat and let my mind empty. At first all I could feel was the anger, then the despair, as I realized how hopeless it all was; it would never change, my relationship was impossible. I sank into my despair feeling limp and completely helpless. I surrendered. Gradually, having given up, this helplessness turned to peacefulness, and finally to the deepest meditative experience I have known. In time, I began to resurface and I realized I had no idea if the body I was returning to would be awake or asleep. It was as if I was swimming under water and there was a line of buoys separating two swimming areas. One represented sleep, the other, wakefulness. I was coming to the surface, but where? As I became more conscious, I thought that I was in a part of Self that was independent of living or dying, an eternal part of myself.

This experience, which occurred twenty years ago, was probably the closest I have come to experiencing what is called Big Self or universal consciousness. It has helped me to know that deep inside is a Me that is quite independent of my external circumstances, a Me which I can always approach, even if I can't get all the way to Big Self.

This ability to move into a Me not connected to my physical body has been useful. As a result of gall bladder surgery in my forties, I often get an intense abdominal squeezing pain, very like the colic of gaul stones. It lasts just four or five minutes but at times is so severe that I sweat and get dizzy. For those minutes, my body is a pretty unpleasant place to be. So I open myself up and surrender me to God and go off towards Big Self until the pain subsides. Then I can come back. I am still aware of the pain while it lasts, but it feels remote. I am more aware of the sense of being held and

comforted.

Meditation has impacted my life in other ways. First, my mind is less cluttered when I meditate regularly. Second, my golf game improves. Finally, I am better able to separate myself from the everyday ups and downs of my life. I no longer attach so much meaning to events or feelings. It's as if there is a steady part of me that stands protected from life's storms. And most importantly, meditation has strengthened my relationship with God.

My most important experience occurred about 15 years ago. I was meditating in my office, and imagining that I was cupping my hands around a tiny buddha, just holding him with love. As I thought of this, I suddenly became aware that God holds me in the same way, also loving and protecting me. I felt certain just then that God loves me. That feeling has remained. It has been an enormous support ever since.

There have been months when I hardly ever meditate, and other months when every day I wake about a half hour before my alarm and decide that this is a sign I should meditate. Often my mind doesn't stop during the 30 to 40 minutes I sit. And often it does and I feel that peace that is such a comfort. I do know that the peace is always there, waiting for me.

- 1) Where are you on the scale of peaceful versus harried?
- 2) Have you followed any discipline designed to "improve" yourself?
- 3) How has that worked?

GIVING UP CONTROL

Ever since I was little, being in control was very important. My mother hated chaos, and it was really important to keep her calm. I came to be good at it, with good self-control- I'm one of those who can resist eating the toll house cookie until I've answered all my messages. I was also successful at controlling the externals of my life. I was the one who arranged a tennis foursome and called for the court time every week. Then I reminded each of my partners. I organized our once a month cooking crew at the homeless shelter and called each person to remind them of their assignment. Being organized and reliable was a pillar of my life.

But it had a price. By age 30, I had high blood pressure. Some years later, I took a course in art therapy with some other therapists. We actually learned to paint, not too badly. Once I painted a picture of a tomato with two vines around it, squeezing it. When I looked at what I had painted, I realized that what the vine did to the tomato I was doing to my own blood vessels. I could see all the ways I was putting pressure on myself. I was trying to manage and control too many things. I resolved to stop.

Stopping meant changing a lot of things. But I was determined to practice letting go and to tolerate the anxiety of being more helpless. The clearest example of this was my behavior at the beach. Since I was young, I would dive out through the crashing waves, pick a good one and ride in, as if my body was a surfboard. I was proud of this skill and my mastery over those big waves. But now I resolved to just lie in the water and let the waves throw me head over heels, or roll me, or whatever, and get used to being tossed around by fate. I was very aware that this was my physical metaphor for letting go. I practiced it for several summers.

I stopped calling my tennis foursome, and sure enough, people forgot and in a few months, we stopped playing. I told myself that was okay. Maybe it would save my life.

At home, I was used to arriving after work, dealing with the chaos of needs that waited inside the door, getting tense, annoyed, but remaining calm and helpful, and quietly resentful. Two events changed all that. One morning we agreed on a picnic after work. When I came home nothing had been done. My wife was fed up with the kids who were fighting with each other, yuck! The old me would have been grimly determined, taken charge and gotten us out of the house. The new me had a tantrum: "I hate this family! Everyone's yelling, you can't do anything! I quit!" A real tantrum like I'd never done before! A remarkable thing happened. My twelve year old Laura said, "Now Daddy, calm down. Why don't you get a blanket. Mom, you and I can make the sandwiches. Julie, get the basket". It was startling and profoundly reassuring. If I wasn't in control, it didn't mean disaster would follow.

Not that I was taking advantage or anything, but a while later, on my way home, instead of girding up for the inevitable recounting of the day's disasters, I noted that I was tired and didn't want to take care of one more problem. I entered, and, instead of waiting to hear about everyone's issues, I led off with, "I'm exhausted. What a day!" The same miracle repeated itself. Daughter Laura, "Sit down Daddy". Daughter Julie, "Put your feet on this pillow. Would you like some tea?" Wife Linda, "Do you want to talk about it?" Incredible! Not only did the Earth not fall apart, but everyone rose to the occasion and all was well!

For many years I have been working at taking less responsibility. My Mantra is Rainer Maria Rilke's "God doesn't care who does the flying. He only cares that there be flying". If anyone else is willing to do something, it's going to be fine. I need to relax and trust the universe.

I went too far. A few years ago, my wife and I set off to do some hiking in England. I had vowed not to be so compulsive about checking every three minutes to make sure I had the passports and tickets. After we went through security, an inspector came running after me, "Don't you want your passports?" and handed them to me. I had been relaxed, and now I had only to thank God for watching out for me. In England, I changed two hundred dollars into pounds. On leaving the bank, the teller met me at the door and handed me an envelope with the five hundred dollars I had left at her counter. Thank God again! After we arrived back in the states, I got a call from the airport. I had left my wife's passport at immigration! Thank God again.

From all this I concluded that I was hopelessly absent minded, but that it was all right because the Universe so obviously would take care of me. I liked relaxing, and it all turned out okay in the end.

Later that week I had the following dream: Linda and I were leaving the White House to go to the airport. I was Mr. President. We were dragging our bags. There was no limousine! We were carrying our own bags. What was wrong with my administrative assistant? Where was he anyway?? Someone in the crowd outside volunteered to drive us, but I was stewing about needing to fire him and hire someone competent. When I woke, the message was clear. Relaxing is fine, but I do need to take better care of the details. Since then I have remained relaxed on trips but haven't lost anything in the past four years.

Being less controlling is probably the clearest example of a planned change in my way of being. I saw a problem, vowed to change it and worked on it in small and large ways, very consciously for years. When I went too far, that became clear and I could adjust back a bit. The change process is often subtle, only becoming clear in retrospect.

- 1) What are some of your strong character traits?
- 2) How do they help you in your life?
- 3) Do you also pay a price for these traits?
- 4) If you wanted to moderate one of these traits, how might you begin?

MARRIAGE AS A CHANGE AGENT

Probably the most influential person in my life, since age 3 anyway, has been my wife. Like her, I married for all the right reasons: she was nothing like my mother. She was full of life and energy, vibrant, sexy, open about her feelings, and great with anger. A real teacher. And I was perfect for her: nothing like her unavailable, sadistic father. It took us about 3 weeks after marriage to realize how wrong we were. I became a dead ringer for her dad- distancing just like him, disapproving, mean. And she was a dead ringer for my mom- self involved, depriving, fragile. Such is marriage.

So we ranted and went at each other through our early years, defying the best of couple therapists who, never the less, kept us together somehow. From Linda I learned that I had feelings, especially anger, and struggled to learn to express and deal with them. I wasn't wooden inside after all, more like molten lava. In the world of emotions we were the superbowl. Linda was nothing if not authentic, and always pushed for resolution, even when resolution was impossible. It took her twenty five years to accept that sometimes we had to go to sleep angry, as there was no chance of ever working it through at 4 AM. I believe that any "well behaved" wife would never have pushed so hard and so persistently. But that's exactly what I needed.

My poem to her after the dust cleared a bit on our 14th anniversary:

Snuggled in the gray haze
That bathed my life with soft comfort
There were no dragons
No jagged rocks;
That I could see.

Gray washed away
night and day
work and play
gull and jay
sad and gay
in its soft comfort.

Then, in you came
Crying of dragons and butterflies,
Singing of suns and storms,
Purring and screeching
and turning the air ELECTRIC.

Your lightening gaze
Blazed through the mist
Found crags and crevices,
And made a mapmaker of my soul.

Today, that soft fog lines only
the distant mountains.
In my jungles,
On my sun drenched beaches,
The air is clear.

There are so many ways in which this marriage of 45 years has changed me and made me who I am today. Linda's insistence on intimacy, honesty broke down my commitment to niceness at all cost, and blasted me open.

Some years ago, Linda and I were asked to speak at a local Divinity School on the topic, "Power in Relationship, Is Marriage a Level Playing Field?". Typically, we accepted, then went our separate ways to think and plan. When we finally shared our visions, they were strikingly different. My marriage was to a woman whose emotions kept me subjugated. I lived on tip toes trying to avoid another outburst of rage or depression. There was no room for my wishes or feelings.

Linda lived with a bully. She was in awe of my knowledge of manners, menus, how to create a functional family. She had to do everything the way I wanted to, as I, her lord and master, had superior knowledge. She was my former slave, now turned rebellious. Our talk was sensational. It was also an eye-opener for us both, and led to lots of surprisingly open discussions between us.

For our 35th wedding anniversary, I wrote Linda the following:

Two Old Shoes

We've been stretched,
stretched as far as we can stretch.

In fact, we're both bulging now.

Worn, tired, soft to the touch, comfortable.

We're a good fit now, our contours molded,

Soft to the touch

And we march well together.

Sometimes adventure,

But mostly down our familiar, well trodden paths.

If married:

- 1) What attracted you to your spouse?
- 2) What behaviors has your spouse “taught” you?
- 3) What uncomfortable feelings has your marriage brought up for you?
- 4) Have you loosened or tightened in response?
- 5) What have you “taught” your spouse?

If not Married:

- 1) What qualities do you need from a spouse to help you grow?
- 2) What would you hope to offer in return?

STRUCTURES THAT SUPPORT LIFE

Over time, my life has become more and more a product of my own wishes and vision. A favorite book title is “The Life You Ordered Has Arrived”. For me, it has. I have created the routines and structures that well match my inner yearnings and preferences. I am a terrible creature of habit. I exercise three mornings a week, I show up at work every day at eight, and am home for dinner at six. I wear a turtleneck and one of three pairs of pants every day. Every Sunday, my wife and I show up at our Unitarian Church. I have lunch with a fellow therapist, Bette, every month on Tuesday. Same with another colleague, Ned, on a different Tuesday. My friend Rick and I have had breakfast together every other Tuesday for over fifteen years. Forever, I have had a date with my wife every Thursday afternoon. Every summer I play golf Monday and Wednesday mornings at 7 AM. I meet with my psychic group the first Monday night of every month. Every other month I meet with my spiritual therapy brethren. Every Sunday afternoon all fall I go to Evan and Philippa’s house to see the New England Patriots play football. And on and on.

These activities are the product of years and years of choosing and committing, pruning and adding. I do almost nothing I don’t want to do, and feel that what I have settled into is a pretty clear externalization of who I am. We have no television in our home, no daily newspaper. Our home is warm, but unimpressive. In short, it’s all the way I (and my wife) want it to be.

These routines are not the soul of my life. They are the skeleton, the structure which enables. My life is like the water which flows up from the structure of the fountain. Life is the people, the relationships, the work

that these structures help me to manage. In a monastery, there are powerful structures that support the spiritual work. They are not the spirit. In themselves, they are dry and could become a prison. And my life could be viewed as a prison. But, as some prisoners say, all that structure leads to a great freedom. With few day to day choices to make, my spirit is free to focus on living and creating a life.

Another way I have imprisoned myself is by my internal commitment to keep my word. If I say I will be somewhere at a certain time, I always show up. Once I give my word, I never have to ask myself “do I want to?”. “Do I feel good enough?” Again, a kind of prison, but also a way of making each day simple, predictable, without choices. That plus my daily meditation and my constantly being in some form of therapy give me plenty of time to focus on inner, rather than outer, aspects of my life; on my yearnings and wishes rather than the day to day details.

It’s hard to know whether this structure is more like a shell to protect me from the world of choices, or a skeleton which holds up and supports the flesh of my life. But having fewer worldly decisions to make certainly helps provide space to create an inner focus.

- 1) What are some habits (structures) you’ve created?
- 2) How do they support your life?
- 3) How do they limit your life?
- 4) What new habits (structures) might support you better?

VERMONT AND NATURE

One of the best decisions we have ever made was to live a little closer to nature. When our younger daughter, Julie, was four, we bought a tent and tried camping. We were not too confident nor competent, so we began in our yard. The first night with the four of us in the tent was pretty successful, and exciting too. A large dog brushed up against the side of the tent as we were waking, and we pretended it was a bear, adding adrenaline to our experience. A while later, we camped in a neighbor's yard. And finally at a State Park about ten miles down the road. We were now experienced. We began out of state camping.

When the kids were eight and six, we bought land near a friend's house in Vermont, and began camping there, with our own stream nearby to serve as a refrigerator, bathtub and sink. We loved it, but noted that almost every weekend, Saturday morning at about 4 AM two things happened. One of the kids woke crying with a fever, and it also began to rain. This had happened in the State Parks too. We often just packed up and headed home after one night of some sleep. The tent was always soaked. We were pretty miserable. A few years into our Vermont experience, we built a wooden shelter, and said "let it rain".

One sad night, while we were in Massachusetts, our shelter burned to the ground. It took us several years to decide to rebuild. By then, our children had grown up, and our family had grown with the addition of Brian, Laura's sturdy and willing husband, so we built a 21x12 foot structure, working weekends all summer. The next summer, loving the process, we expanded to 21x24 feet. No electricity, no plumbing, no heat. Just a wooden shell. But were we proud and happy!

Living was very primitive, with a circle of stones for a stove, a hospital potty chair over a new hole each weekend, our dear stream for washing, no radio or TV. Very little protection from the weather. We lived at the mercy of nature. But we also lived in the midst of nature. We got good at finding snakes and newts, indian pipes, fish. We learned about the stars and constellations, we saw fireflies, we learned about clouds. We did lots of hiking and learned the joy of trail mix. Instead of TV, Linda read us stories like "Watership Down". In short we felt like we were in heaven.

One of the big advantages was that this living lessened our preoccupation with our country's destruction of the environment. Our kids felt safe in Vermont, and saw this land as offering a retreat from threats of nuclear attack and pollution, fears so prevalent then. More important, and relevant, we slowed down, and we all gained a sense of Nature's pace and its awesome power. It helped us to see ourselves in a new perspective.

Nature was a most reliable and generous mother, even if it did rain and thunder at us. The abundance of life around us, the lushness of the fields, made clear to me the nurturant capacity of the God force. On a sunny day, I could not help but feel how kind and fertile were the forces of sun and soil in which everything grew in such abundance. When I think of how God loves and nurtures us, the visual image is always the lush meadows of Vermont.

I began to see God's work in a fuller way: when a tree died and became earth again, it didn't seem tragic. We were aware of the cycles of dying and rebirth that we witnessed every year. Death became more a part of life, not an attack on it. My sense of man's cruelty was in a new perspective. We saw trees struck by lightning, injured animals, animals hunting animals, all the

destructive force that, in civilization, seemed so “bad”. In Vermont, we left the value judgments behind, and I came to see God as embracing all of life, not just the pretty part.

Finally, Vermont taught us all how little it takes to be perfectly happy. Getting up with the sun, foraging for firewood, cooking eggs and coffee, resting in hammocks from all that effort, hiking, reading, bathing in the stream, cooking supper, looking at the stars, hoping for a shooting star, these are the substance of our life there. And it is more than enough. After a week in Vermont we are thrilled to get back to our shower, and we would not do well in the cold of winter up there, but the simplicity of life in the woods is startlingly agreeable.

- 1) What experiences have you had living closer to nature?
- 2) What did you like about them?
- 3) What did you dislike?
- 4) Do you have ways of getting away from the busyness of your life?

TO HELL WITH DIGNITY

At fifty two, I took up the tuba. I had played trumpet as a child, so the finger placements were not new. I had never particularly liked the trumpet but had always loved the deep rich tones of the tuba. And sure enough, I found it very exciting to play. Soon I had mastered “Happy Birthday” which I inflicted on my extended family on all occasions. I wasn’t very good, but no one seemed to mind. When a dear and quirky friend, William, from Vermont died, at his wife’s request, I played at his funeral. He and I had struggled with some of his home made instruments, and I knew that competence was not one of his requirements. By then I played a beat up sousaphone I’d found at a yard sale. I learned “So long, it’s been good to know you”, and my wife was good enough to lead us in singing along. William’s wife, and I’m sure his spirit, enjoyed the resulting din. And people laughed. I was delighted with the result.

My musical adventure has continued. I played at both my daughters weddings- “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” and “Carolina on my Mind” - and at several friends weddings-including “Pachabel’s Canon”, and a few graduation celebrations- “Pomp and Circumstance”. Occasionally at church services. I have even auctioned myself off at the church auction. I would say I have had a very successful career in music. The problem is that I have never gotten past my early level of incompetence, and am only loved for how awfully I play and how earnestly I try. Audiences roar, and even ask for encores.

I think dignity is the enemy of freedom. Saving “face” limits our capacity to have fun, to be real and to be at home in our flawed selves. From my tuba I have come to see that playing well is not necessary in order to provide pleasure to others. Making a spectacle of myself is quite okay as

long as it makes people happy and doesn't offend anyone. Whether I "look good" or not doesn't seem to matter. Playing tuba badly has been good for me.

Another example of not trying to put on a good face occurred when I was one of three family therapists invited to interview a couple for a Harvard Medical School conference on couples therapy. I was both honored and nervous at the opportunity. All three of us were videotaped interviewing the same "couple", role played by an actor and actress. After the interviews we had time to review the tapes and plan our presentations. When I reviewed mine, I became aware that parts of the interview were badly flawed because of my tendency to side with a beleaguered husband against his hostile, aggressive wife. I wouldn't give her enough space, and I protected him. I failed to notice or deal with his provocative passivity. I made my presentation about these mistakes, showing each one and then discussing what in my own history predisposed me to make these errors. The other two therapists presented their extremely skillful interviews, each one a work of art.

My behavior was not typical for Harvard presenters. I got a big ovation for my presentation and so many grateful comments afterward from therapists who loved seeing an "expert" make the kind of mistakes we all make. I felt as triumphant after this conference as I had felt nervous before it.

Not having to look good gives me freedom to try new things. When someone has to do a role play and be interviewed in public, or to try anything new, I generally volunteer. Most of my friends worry about looking stupid. Playing the tuba has moved me past that concern. I have little trouble

talking about or showing my faults. I am unusually open about who I am, because I don't have to hold myself up to any particular standard. Good is fine, okay is fine, lousy is fine. My wife has a framed statement, "Don't criticize me for my faults. It's what makes me human". I do think that leading with my worst foot is a good way to put myself and my friend at ease.

- 1) How important is "looking good" to you?
- 2) What price do you pay for "looking good"?
- 3) Do you have ways of letting down your guard?
- 4) Are there things you'd like to do if dignity weren't an issue?

What?

COMPANIONS ON THE ROAD

Wherever we are on our journey, our beliefs and behaviors are embedded in the network of our relationships. We usually try to find friends who agree with us, help us to be comfortable with who we are. And if we change, this is likely to be reflected in changes in our network. I look at the therapists I have chosen, and can read the history of my relationship to myself as it evolved. I chose my first therapist, Dr S. from three that I interviewed. I chose her because she was the only one who seemed not to like me. She seemed stern and I figured she wouldn't let me get away with anything. She was very helpful, but I always felt her as unloving. After a stint in the Army, I chose a second therapist. Dr N. seemed to like me all right and that was okay by then. My third therapist, Dr B., felt like a good and loving friend. One could say I was getting better. One could blame it on the good therapy I was getting, or on other changes in my life.

A similar progression occurred in communities of worship. When our children came, we tried a local temple recommended by family. We were very unhappy with the materialism and lack of compassion we felt there. After five years, we finally quit, and felt much more comfortable in our downwardly mobile, very tolerant, very liberal Unitarian Universalist Church. It supported a search for God, rather than any particular path. This environment supported our non-hierarchical relationship with our children, our efforts to avoid the materialism of the culture, and our general openness about our feelings and our life. And in supporting our lifestyle, it also helped us move further in our chosen direction.

In 1982 I helped form a men's group that continued for 19 years. We could discuss our families, our relationships, and our style of interacting. We

tended to be honest, confrontative, helpful. But it was not a place where we discussed spiritual questions or yearnings. After it broke up, its place was taken by a small therapist group interested in reading about spiritual therapy, and also a group of psychics eager to share extra-ordinary experience and to support each other in this pursuit. Both of these new groups supported my own changing interest, from the world of relationships to our relationships with the transcendent.

In general, we are likely to find ourselves attracted to a different set of friends as we evolve. We need to seek support, information and encouragement that fits with our own evolution.

I would also like to mention individuals who have offered not just support, but leadership along the path. Everett, a rabbi, helped me to fall in love with the natural world around us and to find God there. Ward, a minister, suggested transcendental meditation before I had even heard of it. He also introduced me and my wife to creation spirituality, which had a huge impact on our world view. Rick, an old friend, arranged a life-changing psychic reading, and gave me my first deck of Tarot cards. And Mary, my minister and spiritual advisor, helped me to move miles further in my spiritual quest. And of course, my wife, with whom I feel like I share a common mind and a common path through life.

All these people, and many others, have led me along the path. My main contribution was that I was often seeking ideas, feedback and suggestions. I was asking for help. And, more important, I was willing to try something new. I took risks.

1) Think of three people who have most affirmed and supported you in life.

- 2) Think of three people you have affirmed and supported.
- 3) Do you have a community of faith? Does it support you and your growth?
How?
- 4) Do you have other affiliations that support you?

DISMANTLING SELF

Getting rid of a big investment in self has been a long complex struggle. As a teenager, like most of my friends, I was morbidly self-conscious. I knew my breath smelled, I was too bland looking for anyone to be interested in me. Even in my residency training in psychiatry, my main goal in supervision sessions was to keep my supervisor from finding out what an incompetent I was. I began developing some self-confidence toward the end of my training. But even self confidence is all about the self.

This preoccupation began to wane in my forties. By then I was becoming passionately engaged with things outside myself. I was immersed in the human potential movement, and found the EST training mind and life altering. Professionally I was writing about new ideas in therapy, and doing lots of teaching. This was challenging, and kept me on my edge. I was also reading about new ways of understanding reality. I was entering the world of psychic phenomena, learning to see auras, watching people who could read other peoples' minds, reading about energy bodies. I was developing my relationship with God. In short, I was running into lots of stuff that seemed more interesting than worrying about whether I was okay or not.

Later I began serving meals at a homeless shelter. Then I worked on creating a child walk-in psychiatric service at an inner city health care center to avoid the six month wait at other clinics. In short, I was doing things that kept me too busy and challenged and excited to worry much about ME. This gave me freedom to just ignore concerns about my "image". I could be myself and not be too invested in whether that was okay or not. As I've mentioned, playing tuba badly helped too.

This freedom to be openly myself has been a huge relief. All the energy that I used to put into keeping up some appearance- of normality, or of competence, or worse, of being a hot shot- I can now put into living my real life. Also, I am freer to become who I really am instead of who I think I should be. I do think that one of our goals in being here in these lives is to become truly ourselves, as different and quirky as possible.

The overall movement is that I am much less invested in self than I used to be. To uphold any belief about who or how I am, limits my capacity to change and to grow. The Taoists talk about the value of water which flows anywhere. A fluid sense of self allows me to flow freely in the situations of my life, without fixed notions of how I must respond. I have a greater ability to respond from my instincts, a freedom to be both more genuine and more spontaneous. And detaching from the certainty of self frees me up to see the world in ways that are unfamiliar, ways that are new and exciting.

- 1) How much of your thought is self evaluating, e.g. "I'm stupid" or "Wasn't I terrific?"?
- 2) Do you do anything that is so important that you forget yourself in doing it?
- 3) What do you do that is a service to your fellow men and women? Do you enjoy doing it?

DOUBLE VISION

There are times when it helps to separate out two kinds of vision. Our first vision is aware of time, place, our list of to dos, the drama of our lives. The second vision is of the world of soul and is full of compassion and love. Instead of seeing others as neurotic, problematic, attractive or funny, we are aware of the soul of the person and see their striving, their wishes and efforts to be better. Sometimes when I am with a patient who is exuding resentment or bitterness, I tune out for a minute, unfocus my eyes and imagine the hurt and despair that are driving them. I can then feel compassion. At these times, I am seeing them more as God sees them, and as God sees us. I am using second vision.

We can use both kinds of vision. First vision is much better when we are driving a car, or working on our income taxes. But the more time we spend in second vision, the closer we come to the world of Love: to God's world. And the more we dissolve our sense of a self that is connected to the surface of things, the more we can live in that second world. This is God's realm, where time and space dissolve. It is probably here that "mystical" experience occurs.

1) Have you ever had the experience of tuning out from the anger or bitterness a friend is expressing and sensing the pain and struggle within? Does that change your reaction?

WHAT SHAPES MY LIFE

Although so much of my life results from conscious choices I have made, I increasingly feel that I am also being led. For example, fourteen years ago I just happened to be at a lecture by a nurse who was caring for traumatized Cambodians at a local clinic. She did it single-handedly, so I met her after the talk to volunteer some time. That led me to her clinic, Lynn Community Health Center, with which I have had a rich and rewarding relationship. When I was 63, my friend Rick gave me a reading with a numerologist, Louisa Poole, which changed my life. I wasn't looking for anything, but when it came, it altered the course of this lifetime. As a result, I began major innovations in my clinic and also began my career reading Tarot. Years later, my minister Mary, suggested the sabbatical which has allowed me to write this. Neither she nor I had any idea where this sabbatical would lead, but here I am. One could say that I am a willing follower. But more importantly, I feel I have been led into the life that I now love.

While I can definitely see God's hand in shaping my life, I do feel that there is a small engine inside me that also moves me along. I call it the "me-in-me". It is like my will. I have an intention, like get rid of the waiting list at my clinic. My motor gets going in that direction. Hundreds of things happen that either help or hinder. They all are bigger than my small motor. Amidst this ebb and flow, the me-in-me keeps chugging away, slowly, always leading toward the same goal. I have little control over policy, but what little I have a remark here, a decision there- always pushes in that same direction. And after a long while, I get where I am going.

This has certainly been true in my gradual approach to God. A long

time ago I set this course, and the me-in-me began pushing. A friend suggested writing a “letter to God” every morning. So I tried that for a while. Then we had a spiritual retreat at my church. I went. Conversations with friends head off in the direction of spirituality, so I move a bit further. A setback: I stop meditating for a few months. Then start again. I chose to see the movie that has a heroic character. I inch forward. And so forth. There are few dramatic breakthroughs, but I am on a path, and the me-in-me-keeps chugging on. I am almost unaware that it motivates my everyday decisions, but when I look back, I can see the direction I’ve been following.

- 1) Do you see your life getting nudged in some direction?
What were some of the things that nudged you along?
- 2) Do you see yourself as pursuing some path that gradually shapes your life?
- 3) What were some of the choices you have made that changed you and the direction of your life?

TOLERATING GOD'S LOVE

If we all are the sons and daughters of God, as I believe, any of us could, at any time, wake up to this reality and have a palpable relationship with God. God's love is everywhere around us. I believe He yearns for us, as we yearn for Him. For me the issue is our willingness to receive. I am convinced He is always there, but I am startled to watch the struggle I go through to inch my way towards acceptance of His Presence.

In Siddha Yoga, as in many Eastern traditions, the Guru is a fully enlightened, Godlike person. The guru has the capacity to transfer this fully awakened state to each of us. When I was at the ashram, I had several opportunities to encounter my Guru, Gurumayi, but I declined. I recall being afraid that if I looked deeply into her eyes, I would lose myself. This was in 1984, and I was afraid of the awe and yearning that would be aroused by this encounter. By 1995, I was trekking in Nepal, and had a similar opportunity to meet with another awakened being. After 3000 feet of exhausting climb, I reached Tengboche Monastery, and even arranged a visit with the Tengboche Rimpoche, an incarnate Lama. He was kind, and humble, and delighted to greet me and my friend. We had tea and a brief talk despite our lack of a common language. As we said goodbye, I was so overwhelmed by his kindness and presence, that my body threw itself down to prostrate myself before him. Needless to say, this is not my normal way to say goodbye, but it happened out of my control. I was literally carried away by my feelings. I got up and left. The fact that I could let this happen, tells me that this time I was a little less scared by my feelings in the presence of the holy.

Seven years later, in a spiritual counseling session with my minister, Mary Harrington, I again confronted similar yearnings. Mary's capacity for

joy and for gratitude were amazing. I was frankly in awe of her and kept asking her to teach me, to give me the secret of her aliveness. Finally, I confessed my impulse to bow down at her feet. By then, Mary had had it with me. “Jack”, she said, “You are making me very angry with you. You are making me very uncomfortable. This is something you need to find in yourself. Stop trying to get it from me”. We kept at it for months, and I do think that I learned to become so much more aware of my strong yearning for a spiritual connection.

The most important aspect of this relationship is how it helped me to be more in touch with these yearnings, how deeply I wanted to receive from God. This led me to feel emptiness like I never felt it before. But I did learn, over time, to become more comfortable with that emptiness. When I look at the fear that kept me from approaching the Guru, I can see that it has gradually diminished. I still struggle to accept the depth of my yearning to receive and to surrender. I can see how far I would need to go to be like Jesus and truly feel my connection to God. But I am opening up and I am allowing God in a bit more each year.

- 1) To what extent do you allow yourself to approach God?
- 2) Are you aware of anything which keeps you at a distance?
- 3) Are you aware of fears of greater connection?

MAKING FRIENDS WITH GOD

My religious education as a child was left in the hands of my Christian Scientist grandmother, whose life was rescued by her conversion to “Science”. It never took, nor did one year in Hebrew school. In prep school I won the senior religion prize for an essay agreeing with George Bernard Shaw that belief in God was a hoax designed to pacify and enslave the “masses”. I did like the hymns, but as a good Jew, I wouldn’t sing the word “Jesus”.

My first spiritual experience followed my sister’s suicide just after my marriage at 25. I was in agony, but the episodes of crying were occasionally followed by my first experiences of ecstasy. The encounter with death showed me that we can’t take life for granted. There is an alternative, and it is vast. I had the image of living on the surface of the ocean, seeing only the waves, and now realizing that the ocean goes down miles. All of a sudden, what I had always taken for granted seemed like a huge gift. I came to see the enormity of the gift of life.

Then things went on as before. We joined a Temple, for the sake of our two daughters. Services seemed empty. When the Temple voted to spend more than \$100,000 on modernizing our perfectly adequate bathrooms, we left in search of a new home. The Unitarian Church, with its emphasis on social action- opposition to the Vietnam War, respect for all other religious paths- suited us and we settled in. Still no sign of God though. Simultaneously we joined a small group of renegade Jews and formed the Alternate Religious Community, seven families including Everett Gendler, a Rabbi open to alternate ways of celebrating Jewishness. Everett oozed out a deep love of Nature and God, taught us the lunar nature of Jewish observance, and tolerated our child centered celebrations- for example,

baking a birthday cake for the earth on Rosh Hashanah, meeting at the beach at sunrise and letting the wind blow out the candles. Through his eyes, I could get a sense of the grandeur that surrounded us and the joy of being alive and awake. It was around this time that we began camping and bought our land in Vermont, where we were surrounded by nature's beauty and lushness.

A minister friend, Ward, introduced us to Creation Spirituality. Creation Spirituality teaches that God can be felt and understood by paying attention to His creation, and that to learn the laws of the universe was the way to learn about God. We learned the story of creation and the fifteen billion years of unfolding that led to our capacity to create and appreciate the symphonies of Beethoven. And all the "coincidences" or synchronicities which allowed life to go on and not perish in the face of an evolving planet. It was heady stuff, and suited us well. Our religious edge, at that time, was seeing God in nature.

By 1973, I was involved in "getting a life", and had started a meditative practice, which began a search for God within rather than just in nature. Eastern philosophy, especially Zen, focussed on going inside to experience the fullness of the creation. Another path that opened then was the books of Carlos Casteneda about the world of his sorcerer friend Don Juan. This was my first encounter with the notion of other, or alternate, realities. Don Juan's world was both full of fascination and strangely convincing.

It got worse. At that time I joined a psychic exploration group, learned to see auras- a manifestation of our energy bodies. I also saw some convincing demonstrations of mind reading, and found out that a minister

friend of mine regularly spent time out of his body visiting friends. These experiences were surely loosening my grip on the solidity of my ordinary belief system. I got even looser when I read “Journeys out of the Body” by Robert Monroe. He wrote convincingly of his experiments with out of body travel, “astral projection”, and also other realities encountered in such journeys. All this served to focus my awareness on the idea that our normal perceptions were only one familiar way of understanding reality. I became fascinated with exploring alternatives.

In short, I was looking everywhere in my eagerness to understand the mystery. In my ninth year of meditation, I had an experience that has shaped me ever since. As I wrote earlier, I was sitting in my office imagining that I was cradling a tiny buddha in my arms, holding it in my love. Quickly I had the sensation that I also was being held and loved in the same manner. Although I didn’t hear the words, I knew that God was saying He loved me. That had such force that it has become a lasting internal reality. Since then I have felt held and protected by God. It has changed my life. I feel safe and befriended by the universe, not alone.

At that point, I experienced God as a Universal Kindness, loving, but impersonal. God waters all His plants but doesn’t talk to us. Some years after I figured out He loved me, it got very personal. Linda and I went to bed, and Linda began telling me about her newly developed interest in spirit. She followed by lamenting that she had married someone who was not spiritual. That really got me going. I must have spewed out my outrage to her for five minutes about my years of reading, meditating, my relationship with God: I was MUCH more spiritual than her. In fact, I was a Very Spiritual Fellow. Finally we got to sleep. I woke at 3 AM to find I had created a well formed, large poop in the bed. It had never happened before (or since). I laughed out

loud, because I knew immediately that God had reminded me I was full of shit.

This one incident has pointed out another important aspect of our relationship with God: He does notice, and will intervene in very personal ways, at times. Although this particular noticing was in the form of rebuke, generally God appears in the form of small kindnesses delivered from the hands of strangers: someone handing me my keys that I dropped, or helping me with a flat tire. So I feel surrounded, protected, loved, and bathed in God.

This emersion in God is a gradual, ongoing process. I have a friend who has had such vivid, and frequent, experiences of God's perfect love and light that she would prefer to vacate her "real" life and die now. She might, except for her husband and children who anchor her in this place. By contrast, I am still in love with this life with only occasional glimpses of the paradise that awaits.

My work is to experience God as best I can. For me, this means quieting my mind, going deep within and opening to the peace that I find there. The more deeply I can experience this peace, the closer I am to God Consciousness. In Siddha Yoga there is a saying, "God dwells inside you as you". I believe that that inner Presence is always available if only we can leave the drama and chatter behind. Buddhism has many examples of "enlightened ones" who always lived in God Consciousness. And Jesus, in recognizing himself as the Son of God, is the main example in the western tradition. However unattainable, His example is a fine goal for a lifetime.

- 1) What role does God play in your life?
- 2) What helps you to feel closer to your God?
- 3) What gets in the way of your feeling closer to God?