

Mysticism and Meaning

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

edited by

Alex S. Kohav

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3. Breaking out of One's Head (and Awakening to the World)

Gregory M. Nixon¹

Abstract

Herein I review the shattering moment in my life when I awoke from the dream of self to find *being* as part of the living world and not in my head, discovering my perspectival center to be literally everywhere. Since *awakening to the world* takes one beyond thought and language and also beyond the symbolic construction of time, it is strange to place this event and its aftermath as happening long ago in my life. It is forever present. This fact puts into question the reality of my daily journey from dawn to dusk with all the mundane tasks I must complete. My linear march into aging and death inexorably continues, yet it seems somehow unreal, worth a smile as the inevitable changes ensue. Still, I write of the events leading up to my time out of mind and then review the serious repercussions that followed when I was drawn back into ego only to find I did not have the conceptual tools or the maturity to understand what had occurred. I close by looking back with theories that might explain what happened. I am now ready to allow the memory to sink into peaceful oblivion and reference it from within my mind no more. Ironically, the memory itself with its facade of knowledge may prevent me from a new, unexpected mystical experience. Only by forgetting can I hope to leave a crack in the verbal armament of self, so the world soul may break through and free me once again.

[O]ne of the things we scholars of mysticism lack are good, healthy autobiographical descriptions of mystical phenomena. We find ourselves often trying to tease our phenomenological description from a source's very complex interpretations, and it makes our work that much trickier. . . . Autobiographical reports are stronger "raw material" for the explorations of philosophers, scholars, mysticists (scholars of mysticism), and psychologists.

—Robert K. C. Forman²

I'm in words, made of words, others' words. —Samuel Beckett³

¹ Previously published in the *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* (JCER), vol. 2-7 (2011): 1006-34. Reprinted with permission.

² Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 139.

The Call

The call began in discontent, a sense of purposelessness that drained all meaning from my life at that time, even though I was, to all appearances, running over with intense experiences. I had a strong sense that I was playing a role in someone else's movie, that life was an illusion. Such anomie may have been merely a sign of the times, but I lived the illusion to the hilt.

I'm going to tell this story without filters, without shame, and without bravado, so you can believe me when I tell you that in my final high school years I was a robust and lusty youth who was somewhat wild in the country. In Alberta, Canada, the youth revolution of the late sixties was late in arriving, so I was still doing all the things an eighteen-year-old male in the fifties ethos that preceded the hippy ethos would be expected to be doing. I had a regular girlfriend, "Ellen," with whom I was at last having sex as often and as long as possible. Naturally enough, I cheated on her with any other girl who would accommodate me. I was an athlete who won the grand aggregate in track and field; I played on the high school football team as the fullback and jokingly called myself "The King" even though my actual touchdowns were few indeed. Ironically, I also hung out at a tough pizza joint on the north side of town called The King's Inn. The joke spread, and soon the other students were greeting me with, "Hi, King," in the hallways. Our northside "gang" would raid the south side and get into memorable brawls, or we would defend our territory should any southsiders dare to enter the King's Inn. I had a *rep*, but I was mostly well liked because I liked to fight loudmouth bullies but was not one myself (at least not the latter). Fights were fists and sometimes boots, but weapons were unthinkable. However, I got drunk at least every weekend, sometimes during the week, and my schoolwork, sports, family life (such as it was), and relationship suffered. This noisy life was about implode.

No doubt much of this bravado was overcompensation for my shy childhood in a village on the prairies of Saskatchewan. I was a hypersensitive kid who went into shock when the bigger boys shot a sparrow from a shed roof and it fell dead at my feet. I was especially attuned to animals, but all suffering caused me anguish. I would drive my bicycle into the hills alone and spend hours among the trees by the river where we were forbidden to go, just to be near the rustle of life happening. I was never still for very long, however, and loved to play rough with other boys in town, but when the big, stupid farm boys failed to pass their grades and were added to our younger class, I experienced real cruelty that surpassed anything called *play*. I was bullied mercilessly until a growth spurt in grade 8 and the release of pent-up rage showed me that

³ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 386.

bullies really are cowards inside. Now in high school in a new city, I was playing the extrovert game and much enjoying the attention.

But I still felt unease; a despairing empty place within seemed always ready to consume me. Despite being *king* of my little world, I knew it was all a show, and a sad one at that. The king saw no future and wondered at the hatred in the world. I was lost, a corona of activity around an empty center. I yearned for adventure, to be sure, but also somehow felt that what the world was offering me had no real importance. I desired trial and breakthrough, not conquest or fame, but fucking and fighting were ends of their own and good ways to laugh in the face of adult society. The wild life put me in with a crowd who were in the nonacademic stream or already out of school in the world of work. I still did acceptably well in school in the matriculation (academic) stream (my mother pushed me), but the only subjects that held any interest were English and social studies, both containing stories of people who did extraordinary things. I had emotionally divorced myself from home life, I thought, since my parents never got along and were soon to be divorced themselves. I disdained the few long-haired guys appearing in our town, the messy chicks with them, and the whispers of “drugs” that surrounded them.

Everything changed when an acquaintance from class—let’s call him Jake—invited me to smoke some hashish with him. I loved alcohol intoxication, so I was excited at trying a new way to achieve it. Such hash was far from the rough pot that was being smoked at that time with its seeds and twigs. It was Red Lebanese hashish, pressed flat in tinfoil and sent in an envelope to Jake from his hippy Hare Krishna sister now living in East Germany. We skipped school, went to my empty family apartment nearby, and smoked up in a pipe made with a simple spool, one open end blocked with a broken off piece of pencil. Jake had made a pipe bowl in the middle of the spool, covered tightly with a needle-perforated tinfoil to hold the drug while the other end of the spool was plugged with a hollow pen barrel that became the pipe stem through which we inhaled the smoke. A match was lit and the cinnamon-brown chunk glowed as air was drawn over it. The little toke of hash caught fire as I inhaled fire onto it. Jake blew out the flame, yet the lump continued to glow like a coal and release its rich pungent smoke. I quickly learned to inhale slow and steady right into my lungs, enjoying the heavy yet spicy-sweet flavor. I held my breath and tingles ran from my lungs up into my brain. The effect was nearly instantaneous. This was not like drinking at all! The room tilted, and the world seemed to be made of chuckles. Everything was suddenly brighter. I felt giddy and went with it while more-experienced Jake mumbled on about listening to music and tasting apples while high, though he too chuckled with pleasure. Suddenly I realized what a good guy this quiet, thoughtful neighbor from my classes was. It was the beginning of an eventful pothead friendship.

Jake became my main smoking partner, and it wasn't long until we had hooked up with other *beats* around town and bought a head-shop hookah—a water pipe—to which we added almond extract to flavor the smoke. I was graduating high school and had finally discovered what the hippies and the burgeoning counterculture were talking about: there was another way to be conscious! This way was open, laid back, and absorbed in sensual experience, especially music and psychedelic images (a far cry from the chaotic liberation of drink). We youth were bound together by our discovery that what the social mainstream called a crime was in fact a gateway to warm friendship and higher consciousness. I felt I could see that my sense of meaninglessness was from living society's big lie. Mistrust of the establishment “plot” (which I could now clearly see) led many to abandon their old friends, schooling, or employment and *turn on, tune in, and drop out*, as Timothy Leary suggested. I liked the scene, and I did drop many of my old friends, but I also entered university and hesitated to step fully into the new conformism of being a hippy. However, within months of entering university, I had new friends, a new way of dressing, had given up all sports, rarely got drunk and never violent, but was continuing to mess up my academic career by smoking the weed and even experimenting with soft-core psychedelics. Ellen showed no interest in pot or higher consciousness or the youth movement, so we saw less of each other. Our coupling became less frequent but, with the THC enhancement, more sensuous and slow, not to mention experimental.

Threshold

The lure of . . . *something* had me in thrall. I can look back now and call it higher consciousness (or at least more of it), and there's no doubt truth in that, but what we were after at the time was not exactly clear.⁴ Jake and I would hit the library intent on reading up on eastern religions, meditation practices, or exotic rituals that were said to lead to *transcendence*, a new word I found compelling. Most often, however, we ended up finding good stuff on various forms of psychedelics or more physical drugs that we had not yet tried, so we learned about them instead. Most of our education was in the streets, of course, and in the secret places where everyone shared what they had and all got high with good vibes in the air along with Janis Joplin, the Beatles (post-*Revolver*), or the Jefferson Airplane. Of course, everyone had the fear of being caught, of *the man* bursting in upon us and locking us up like animals forever. It was obvious at the time that the police really did hate the counterculture, as it represented the freedom and disorder they most despised. In some people, this fear of “the

⁴ “There's something happening here. / What it is ain't exactly clear. . . .” Steven Stills, “For What It's Worth,” recorded with Buffalo Springfield and released as a single, 1967.

pigs” developed into a form of paranoid mistrust of the establishment *conspiracy* that interfered with the good vibes of the love generation. But no matter to me; I had crossed the threshold.

I did various psychedelics and a lot of *weird things happened* to me and to others, sometimes simultaneously, but in retrospect, it was never truly *transcendent*, just weird. (So many tell stories of such altered states including hallucinations, mind reading, or moments of insight and with the afterglow of hindsight declare that, oh yeah, they were *one with the all*, mystically realized, but such declarations are most often memory pink-clouding simply being tripped out—not at all the same thing.) My high school friend, “Jarot” (from both football and The King’s Inn), and the little Japanese-Canadian girl, “Naoko,” who always seemed to follow him around with moony eyes, joined our group of high-flying, antiestablishment explorers who often shared our *weird things happening* tales. At the end of my first university year in April, everyone I knew seemed to go somewhere out of town; there were a lot of hippy meccas drawing heads to them like Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco or, closer to home, Gastown in Vancouver or the mountain town of Nelson. The highways were crowded with hitchhikers, and Jake and I made our way among them to the big city of Calgary, where we lodged in a cheap skid row, cockroach-infested room. I quickly screwed up my job as an encyclopedia salesman (my official reason for going there), and we fell in with local tripsters.

We dropped acid in a suburban house one night, and this guy came in with his buxom young girlfriend in a tight white dress. “Tell her she’s got big boobs,” someone whispered to me. “She really likes that.” So I told her, she giggled a lot, and then followed me around afterward. As we all slouched quietly around the living room listening to The Doors, I saw her watching me so looked boldly back at her through my ever-present red shades. The vibe we exchanged as we looked at each other was overtly carnal. I had big can of apple juice on my lap and made use of it by staring intently right at the girl’s dress while slowly ripping the paper in strips down the sides of the can. Her eyes widened, and she asked no one in particular, “What’s he *doing*?” But she never looked away. Something real began to happen between us along the lines of ectoplasmic sexual intercourse, if you’ll forgive the corny expression. The sexual vibe was electric, in motion, going forth and back between us. I could see shadows in the air intermingling. I would say it was all in my mind, but the girl felt it too, glowing deeply red and moaning low, moving her body lasciviously. I felt myself growing tense and nearing some kind of apex when I noticed that several people, including her boyfriend, were agog, watching the invisible exchange between us. I felt like a thief, so abruptly rose and left the room, breaking the spell. The girl came after me, but I waved her off. A friend whispered, “It’s not cool to take another guy’s girl, man.” *What just happened?* I wondered.

Confused and guilty, I left the back of the house and went up on the big hill behind the house that seemed to overlook the whole city. Below the roads and buildings looked like a vast tree inhabited by . . . What monkeys we are! Weird as the exchange below had been, my slow awakening awe at the city laid out before me soon overwhelmed its memory. *What is really going on here?* I wondered to myself, thinking of all the people living their lives like busy insects in the hive below me. *What are we?* For the first time in memory (it may have occurred in childhood before strong memories formed), I felt a tingling above me, like a doorway in the air beginning to open. My breathing slowed almost to a stop, then held. I felt a blissful anticipation—something big was about to happen. Then a thought intruded: *Dare I go through?* The doorway seemed to withdraw and close. *To think is to fear.* The moment passed. I felt remorseful yet excited and hyperaware as I walked back to the house around through the neighborhood. I had never heard of such a doorway opening for anybody, so I felt I ought not to share the experience (or near-experience).

Suddenly, a police car pulled up and asked me to get in. I grew tense but kept my cool when they asked me what I was doing on the hill. Neighbors had complained. I told them—in the sincere tones of a young man alone—that I was looking for work in the city and had just been viewing the city wondering about my future. I saw them glance at each other in approval; I was glad my hair was short. They nodded sympathetically and spoke encouraging words and dropped me off at the house I indicated. The car drove off as I went inside and, to my surprise, was greeted like some sort of hero. The police car had apparently stopped in front previously and freaked out everyone to the core of their trembling souls; they were deeply relieved that I had, in their eyes, saved them all from eternal imprisonment.

I mention this trip not because it has any deep significance but because it was the first time something completely *other* beckoned to me (at least the first time I had consciously noted it), something far beyond “weird things happening” (like the apple juice can incident). Though I had not gone through, I could not forget the *edge-of-miracle* anticipation sense. Later, I did tell others about it, and they pretended they knew all about it (“It’s nirvana, man?”), but Jake was the only one who listened. I wondered, afterward, if the opportunity for what I imagined must be transcendence had occurred because I had shown compassion by being, for once, unselfish and keeping my distance from someone else’s girl, or perhaps it occurred because I had already begun an out-of-body experience. Not likely, to both, I decided. But I also clearly saw that we crowded humans were just animals, blindly running about, like any other. Finally, who knows? Ordinary events are linked. Extraordinary events need not be; they may not be caused at all.

Later, I returned to my small-city home, and Dad informed me that he had found me a job on the Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories as a

deckhand. It seems a Department of Transport (DOT) official from Hay River had stopped by his barbershop and, upon hearing of my lack of employment (and likely my *waywardness*), had offered to hire me immediately as a deckhand on a DOT boat that put in buoys and light towers and kept the shipping lanes open for commercial transport on the big northern lake. The season up there was just getting started as it was the end of May, so I shipped out on the Greyhound bus to Edmonton, whence I was flown to Hay River on the shores of the huge, cold lake and put aboard *The Dumit*, a DOT construction boat hauling a long work barge. I was excited by this new adventure (and a true adventure it was, trials and tribulations galore, though it won't be told here), yet felt let down because so much was happening in the urban world to the south. I was going on one adventure at the cost of postponing another.

I need not have worried. By early July, I had been fired for drunkenly sleeping through my turn at night watch. The first mate, who took me into town and got me drunk, would not speak up for me, and I could not get myself to apologize to the cranky old Scots skipper, who hinted if I did so I could keep my job. We were deep down the Slave River at that time, and it took nearly a month to get back upriver to our landing station on the Great Slave, so I had time to think about my choices. There was much I had seen and done in that short time, certainly grown stronger and richer compared with the year spent sitting around and smoking pot, but I was anxious to check in on my friends, who, I had heard, were living in cheap cabins in the forest by the Strait of Georgia on Vancouver Island. That quest still beckoned.

I arrived back in my city just long enough to make rash, passionate love for two days to my still-abiding girlfriend, Ellen, since the apartment was empty while Mother taught school. Ellen certainly noticed that I had not been so eager or vigorous during the past year in the pot haze of university. Then, with the callousness of youth, I left Ellen behind and caught a ride in a crowded little car with a group of heads that took me right to Vancouver Island and even down from the highway on a curving gravel road to a little colony of cabins near the beach. Jarot, Naoko, and Jake were there in one cabin. Bill and Jay, two American draft-dodging pot dealers, occupied the cabin nearby but were temporarily away on a *mission*.

"Well, Nixon is here. Now we can head down to California, right?" Jarot drawled as I arrived. It was nice to hear I had been awaited, but I had the vague intention of returning to university after the summer. After warm greetings and hugs, they dug out their bag of weed, which was great after the dry months in the territories, but nothing compared with hashish. I sensed some tense distance between Jake and Jarot that neither had with me, and I noticed how sexy Naoko looked in her skimpy outfits. Jarot, however, hardly paid her any attention. We smoked up, felt great, had *deep talks*, laughed a lot, but soon ran out of weed. Now what? I was the only one with money and I was willing to use it,

but my friends only scored their weed from Bill and Jay who were not around. “*I know where their private stash is,*” Jake offered in low tones, as though he could not believe the words coming out of him. After intense discussion, we agreed that it *might* be okay if we took just a little bit out and left some money in the bag.

Needless to say, we smoked most of it, and Bill and Jay were not happy dealers when they returned and found cash instead of their primo bud. “Cash ain’t grass, man,” Bill said mournfully, his long moustaches hanging in his coffee. But it really was incredible smoke, since, as I recall, I went on a walk alone in the woods with my brain singing and zinging, the twigs crunching beneath my feet, and the squirrels darting from tree to tree. Suddenly everything went silent. Even my brain activity paused. I stood still with that hair-raising feeling that something was about to happen. I heard the noise, low and far off at first, then the wind picked up volume and appeared, seeming to soar right through me. A small thing to describe, but I was shaken. It was as though I were being given notice that there was more here than meets the eye; the uncanny was afoot.

Bill and Jay eventually forgave us, and we set up a bonfire on the beach that night. Jake and Jarot talked passed each other in quiet disagreement about *our* direction. Jarot confided in me what a pain it was to have Naoko always hanging around. Jake confided in me how hot he thought she was. Across the fire, I misunderstood Naoko’s inward gaze, thinking she was looking at me with sexual challenge. I tried to lie down with her, pulling her to me. She pushed me away in shock, and I, just as much in shock, returned to my spot. Neither Jarot nor Jake stirred one iota but gazed steadily at the flames throughout.

Later, Bill and Jay brought us hits of blotter acid that we cut into little squares, one for each of us, and we tripped out in our cabins. Only one memorable thing remains from that trip, but it was evidence of the rising tide against the gates of the normal *me*. We dropped the blotters, time went by, but nothing happened. Nothing happened and it showed; it felt heavy. We all withdrew into ourselves and busied ourselves with this or that, scabbling around with a spot on the floor or absently turning pages in a picture book. Jarot scratched and yawned. We were waiting. *When is something going to happen?* We waited for the excitement to begin and in so doing became agitated and discontent. I watched everyone, Jake, cross-legged with his full black beard pawing away at something on the floor, big-shouldered Jarot looking around nervously, and Naoko trying to hum and move to some rhythm only she could hear. I felt on edge: there was a thought approaching that I was trying to resist. It kept coming closer and closer until it was on the edge of my mind. I resisted the apperception and sunk nervously into myself, but it would not be denied, so I opened my mind’s eye: As clearly as anything I’ve ever seen in my life, the obvious was revealed to me,

and I felt the trapdoor of light invisibly crack open and shine upon me: "We're animals!" I burst out with relief. Everyone looked at me startled. "Don't you see? We're animals, here in this room, on this floor, *we're just animals!*"

"Yeah? So what?" Jarot said. My revelation was obviously not as profound to my fellow tripsters. "Is that a bad thing?" Naoko asked. "We know that already," Jake said, but then as his mental antenna opened up he added, "Don't we?" Jake and Naoko looked vaguely hurt and Jarot confused, so they all three returned to their mundane, inwardly focused preoccupations. I was very excited and felt like a science fiction tractor beam was pulling me up toward that invisible trapdoor. "Don't you feel it?" I asked trembling. Blank looks. "What?" Jake asked. "Don't you feel the . . ." I paused shaking my hands in frustration at the lack of words: "Don't you feel like something is gonna happen—something *big*?" Now they all three looked intrigued. I tried to explain what I was experiencing, but neither then nor now do I have the words. "It's like a door is opening, just above me . . ." I attempted, "Like, like it's beckoning, and I really want to go through!" "Why doncha?" Jarot asked. Was there malicious curiosity in his eyes? "What's on the other side?" asked Naoko. "What's stopped you?" Jake. "I dunno. I'm afraid . . ." I managed, but even saying that word *afraid* made the intensity of the moment lessen. I tried to get it back. "I don't know what will happen. It's big. I might blow my mind, or die." There, I had said it. I named the guardian fears on either side of the doorway, both involving ultimate loss of self.

With that, the opportunity began to fade. To get it back, I went from person to person, talking right to them. "Do you feel it?" I would ask. When we connected, the air seemed to lighten and the promise of paradise hinted again. Jarot had the least patience for me, though we did briefly link. "I don't feel anything," he said finally, looking away. Naoko and I linked right away as she looked at me and listened to my words, but the link had some sharp edges, and she broke it off immediately. Obviously, the strain of my imposition on her person by the fire was still with her, and understandably so. I talked to Jake, and his eyes widened as he felt the connection that wasn't just between us two: the world seemed to be looking in on us. "Watch," I said, and turned away and the world immediately turned away too—energy lapse like music slowing on a turntable. "Do you see?" Energy return, a lightning and pleasure. "Wow," he said (an expletive heard often in those days). Perhaps at that point, I needed more being, another source. There was nowhere to go with this, I soon realized, and walked out into the forest again, which itself seemed about to awaken. The feeling faded, and soon I was left just walking and thinking about it but realizing that I had nothing concrete (no-thing) to think about.

Days went by in stonerville with an oyster bake consisting of oysters stolen from a nearby farm and an incident when we all showered in a private campground and I had to pay off the irate owner to prevent him from calling

the RCMP. Bill and Jay arrived back from United States (the country whose draft they were dodging) with a kilo of marijuana wedged between their radiator and the grill, as well as a “surprise for the weekend.” We had already lost track of when weekends were, but in a couple of days they told us in whispered tones that they had “purple microdot acid, man. One thousand fucking micrograms of lysergic acid dia-something or other in each hit.⁵ First thing tomorrow.” Naoko and the chicks the Americans brought back with them immediately began to plan dinner, as though tomorrow was some sort of special gathering, like a hoedown.

Awakening

“Attainment,” which I originally called this section, is all wrong, for what happened on the trip was not really *attained*, that is, it was not an event that took place along the timeline of daily events. It is not my achievement, for it had little to do with my sense of self at all, so it was not even “mine.” *Awakening* might be better term, for awakening is not part of the dream narrative from which one awakens. It is the end of the dream, just as it brings this narrative to a sudden stop

This is where the story ends. Up to this point, I have been telling a condensed tale, with varied settings and characters and, I hope, with something of a suspenseful plot. However, here the narrator exits so that the narrative must be left hanging. For how can I go on when I, myself—this writer, this narrator, this teller of tales, this self—was superseded by his own source? I can say, *time stood still*, but what can that really mean in a narrative since narrative is made of time as we know it? Both time and narrative have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and both contain events that cause further events and so on creating a linear unfolding as time progresses. Words will simply fall short, yet I must make an attempt with the poor metaphors of language to suggest my awakening from the dream of the language-enclosed self.

We each took what looked like a purple Sen-Sen (tiny licorice candy seeds), and the guys went outside to a shady spot at the edge of the evergreen forest overlooking the strait below while the girls stayed around the cabins. We chatted, kept busy, but, really, *waited*. Eventually, “O wow” things began to be noticed or claimed, but the *weird things happening* were just events of the imagination, and I knew it. “Wow, my mind just flew down this hill to the bay. I mean

⁵ The microgram (μg) levels were never confirmed, of course, but 1000 μg is *very* high. See the Erowid site http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/lsd/lsd_dose.shtml, in which anything over 400 μg is *heavy*. Ram Dass claims to have given his guru in India 10,000 μg of LSD with no discernible effects, showing that the guru was already transcended. Ram Dass, *Be Here Now* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1971).

I *was* the bay, man!" I settled into a spot with a view. I thought a bit, wondering where my trapdoor was, but then my thoughts trickled off and went utterly silent. Everything within was still, but instead of ascending or awakening, I began a descent. I didn't notice it at first; I just felt heavy, drawn into the earth. "What a thin shell is the ground," I thought vaguely, and the fragility of the surface presented itself to me. Irrationally, I began to feel I was about to break through the ground and fall helplessly into the depths. I held tightly to my spot, for the surface was in motion, wrinkling and cracking. Vertigo dizzied me. Just holding on, I began to shake. This went on for quite some time without anybody noticing. My terror slowly subsided but was replaced by utter abjection; a deep feeling of hopelessness expanded in my brain. I heard a whispered couplet from a disembodied voice, "Drifting shadows desert the night, bringing darkness to the light," and felt dead inside.

Jake appeared, "What's happening, man?" "I think I've lost my soul," I heard myself say flatly. "That's not good," he said, putting his hand on his chin somewhere beneath his thick black beard. He squatted down beside me, saying, "You can't just give up. There's got to be some way . . ." His words drifted off, and we remained in silence while in the distance Bill and Jarot talked of American submarines that were said to move under these waters. "There's no hope for me," I said, and in that context it seemed to make perfect sense. "But I'll go on. I might as well live for others." "Live for others . . ." Jake repeated thoughtfully, then suddenly looked up.

A bird cried. Jake, who never moved quickly, stood bolt upright with his index finger pointing up. I didn't know what he was doing as he walked quickly out of our shady spot and up a nearby hillock into the sunlight. He beckoned me, the darkness dissipated, and I felt the tingling all around me suddenly begin again. I *ran* up that hillock, I ran into the light, and then everything, literally, *happened at once*.

Remember, this did not take time, yet there was enough of me the observer present to recall that tingling flickers of light, like tiny sparks—more felt than seen—formed an invisible whirlpool right over my head. I felt, not *my self*, but my life energy, being pulled up into it. I tried to think, to comprehend, to warn myself, but the thoughts entered the inverted whirlpool until they were spinning too fast for me to catch. I could not block myself this time. I recognized the whirling thoughts as originating from the outside, from others. These thoughts transformed from concepts into feelings (for that's what they really are), also learned from others; and every feeling spun itself around a core to which it was attached—a vertical vortex pulling the me-fragments back into it. All thoughts and feelings were spinning, recombining back into their source. I may have been thinking, but I could not catch up to such cognitive speed. It was too overwhelming, too powerful and happened too fast for me to resist. Those *feelings* returning to core awareness, I know today, were the essence of

my self-identity—all the conditioned inhibitions as well as the elements of vanity on which ego thrived. In an instant the thoughts that were feelings were pulled back into core *being*, and psychic energy reached such a point of intensity that in a jarring, orgasmic spasm of release, like a drowning swimmer surfacing, the awareness that had been contained by me broke free, *out of my head* becoming centered in the world around.

Only much later did I discover D. E. Harding's description of his startlingly similar moment of awakening while walking in the Himalayas: "I had lost a head and gained a world."⁶ This was life-altering momentous. It was sudden, miraculous, dramatic, and it was definitely categorizable as a *transformational transcendent singular event* (TTSE).⁷ Later when trying to write about it, I referred to the breakthrough as "The Cosmic Hammer," as it had metaphorically split my head wide-open and freed natural awareness from the house of mirrors of the socially constructed self. It came apart—and suddenly together—and I was bursting through.

Such a harsh, sundering ecstasy *hurt*—then with an echoing shudder I was through, the anguish was gone, and I was sublimely calm. But, ah, these words won't do; no words will. *Who* was sublimely calm? The sense of "I" was left behind, so why am I stuck with the first-person pronoun? *All was calm* yet vibrantly animated. As you can see, it is impossible to describe. I can only say that, for once, or for the first time in a long, long time, I burst free of the interior isolation of learned selfhood. My senses awoke—and perhaps other senses of which I had been only subliminally aware—and with an orgasmic thud, my being ecstatically escaped from my skull. At once, each worldly entity was preternaturally lit from within and glowing with life, and each thing was enmeshed in the golden web of all things. It was the most extraordinary and wondrous moment of this little life, and perhaps of other lives. I turned and saw Jake's eyes shining with joy as he looked in awe around him. He had awakened too!

Jake and I *recognized* each other, and in unfettered joy we opened our arms and leaped toward each other for a soul embrace. But Jake, a shy guy in ordinary life, suddenly froze. He looked at me in shock before we could even touch. "I can't do it," he said, pulling back. "What?" "I can't . . . *What does it mean?*?" he asked. The words sounded distant and hollow to me, and they did not seem to matter. The wind tore across me, and I remained ecstatic. "What

⁶ D. E. Harding, *On Having No Head* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 24. I was not aware of this coincidence of titles until coming across Harding's book during rewrites.

⁷ Phil Wolfson, "A Longitudinal History of Self-Transformation: Psychedelics, Spirituality, Activism and Transformation," *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 2, no. 7 (2011): 982. Wolfson, a psychiatrist and veteran researcher into altered states of consciousness, drew up an insightful chart of various transformations of consciousness. The TTSE – singular and dramatic – is rare compared to transcendental transformations that happen gradually or more subtly.

does what mean? What are you afraid of?" I asked. "You know what I'm afraid of," he said. I clearly saw his inhibitions, but they seemed so foolish. "Of what, *love?*" Jake looked hopeful for a second, then his face fell, "What kind of love?" "What does it matter? We're here!" I cried. I could see he was afraid that hugging another man in such a state of joyful release implied homosexuality, but all such terms meant nothing to me at moment. "It doesn't *mean*, it's *here!*" I said and went spinning around to see the 360° panorama of the light, the wildflowers, and the forest around us. Jake wilted: "But I don't want. . . that." I couldn't wait for him and began to wander off; in retrospect, there was a slight diminishment to the intensity, but the wind blew through a bush full of quivering blossoms and I wandered off. I wish I had chosen my words more carefully, but at that moment words were just that, meaningless icons of ego.

I cannot describe the next hour or two, or however long we measure eternity, but I simply wandered about, part of everything—*of* it, not within it. This is not a metaphor: I merged with everything I observed in any sense or all senses. Corny as it sounds, butterflies paused near me, and birds kept singing even as I approached. I *was* those butterflies, I *was* that singing bird, and I *was* the bramble bush that took such pleasure (a pleasure I shared) in scratching my calves as I ambled by. Especially memorable was the wind. It blew with laughter wherever my attention went; it blew right through me, through my body. Today I still have no doubt: The wind was alive and playing with me, guiding me, though I realize that such a statement will cause a derisive smirk from the skeptical. I felt invisible presences who took delight in my joining them. I did not *do* anything during that period. Nothing crossed my mind, in general, though I did have one clear thought: *I am not going to forget this. I know in the future my own mind will cast doubt on this experience, but I am going to resist. I will keep this moment alive.* And so I have.

How was my experience so different from that of my tripper pal, who had earlier declared he *was* the bay below? For one thing, I would have been incapable of making the declarations I am now making. To even use the word *I* was not thinkable. I was no longer observing the world; *the world was observing itself through me.* I sensed my body, my power of movement, though not from *within* it. I was not me. My living body had become a sensorium through which the natural world could experience itself, to its joy and my bliss. According to a well-known writer on mysticism, Ken Wilber,⁸ I experienced a lower level of mystical experience—the sense of atonement (at-one-ment) or unity with Nature, which is realized as alive and responsive. This is our natural condition, according to David Abram, and falling under the spell of the sensuous had liberated me from linguistic enclosure: "We can perceive things at all only because

⁸ Ken Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* 3rd ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).

we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us.”⁹

I really don't know about this notion, but I have been something of a pantheist ever since, even though I sometimes need reminding. Panpsychism is a more secular choice, but how small bits of consciousness could combine into larger wholes resists explanation, so pantheism, with its hint of a natural, perhaps sacred, teleology, maybe better describes my experience. The whole thing is not an object of knowledge to me, just a strange interlude. I will speculate further in the last section.

At some point, Jake found me. His brow was creased and he had apparently been thinking furiously for the past hour. “So what about death?” he asked me out of the blue. “What about it?” I said. “It’s nothing to think about.” “What? What?” he asked. “Doesn’t matter,” I smiled, but Jake was totally confused. He could not grasp the meaning in my simple words. I had nothing to say, it’s true, but we soon discovered it was as though I suddenly spoke another language. Before I got to the end of the sentence, he interrupted because he could not follow me. We were on different wavelengths, so to speak. Our rapport was broken, and at this point, communication was impossible. Later, with others, I discovered that my inability to speak sensibly to their understanding continued, but for the first time, I seemed to hear what others were really speaking to me.

We walked back down the path to the cabins and were met by Naoko. I saw and felt a warm glow of affection rise in me. “Hi,” she said, and I gently took her hand. She was pleased and as natural as could be we walked hand-in-hand while she said something about the cabbage rolls being ready. Once we got there, I found that I wouldn't know what an appetite was if it was explained to me. I could not eat. I did, however, take great pleasure in every person I saw. I knew them. I loved them. I identified with them. There was nothing else to think about. My mind was still silent, but I found that certain people began talking to me and could not stop themselves, as though there was just something they had to communicate or some wound they had to reveal. It happened several times, sometimes taking only minutes for the speaker to be satisfied. I uttered hardly a word. To speak engaged a part of me that was just a sideshow, not the being who I was. Later, after dark, Naoko began a long, long talk about her dissatisfaction or frustration with something or other and the way she felt others' expectations on her but could not quite get to the point. Bill sighed from the shadows, “You're just afraid to be a woman.” “No!” she snapped, then added after a pause, “Well, maybe.” She left.

⁹ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 68.

Jake appeared again, even more haggard than before, eyes all red-rimmed. He had a big revelation to tell me: "I'm a virgin," he whispered hoarsely, as though his secret might unhinge the masses. "That's why I didn't trust myself." He ran off again. It got confusing after that. I ran into Jarot, and we had nice heart-to-heart. I was surprised to feel the heavy sadness he carried within him. He smiled with pleasure and only a little confusion when I told him that I loved him and understood his pain, less from my words than my attention. We went back to our cabin. In a while, Naoko and Jake came in all bedraggled. We later learned Jake had told his terrible secret to Naoko, so they had found a place in the woods and managed, with some difficulty, to do something about it.

Somewhere toward morning I awoke. I was thinking again, already trying to grasp the fading impressions. Later, I made my way back to my home city, but even before the fall term at university began, I found myself the bewildered subject of a relentless interrogation by that same self. The objective self (perhaps *ego* is a more accurate term) that could not speak or think while my core subjective self (perhaps *soul* is a more accurate term) had escaped from its grip now demanded an explanation.

The Revenge of Ego

I call this penultimate section "The Revenge of Ego," for that is inevitably what occurred and continued for several years. What should have been my reintegration into my social self and society instead turned out to be my disintegration. It is not a pleasant tale, though not without gallows humour.

It took time for the objective self (the ego self) to reveal its antagonism to what had occurred, but soon everything changed for me. I returned to university that fall and, driven by a need I did not have before, began to take thoughtful courses more seriously. I—the culturally constructed self that says, "I"—needed to deal with what had happened. On the bright side, I sought explanations in literature, philosophy, and sometimes other people. I began my lifelong journey into learning. I found no answers in philosophy, of course, but did learn how to ask better questions. Something wonderful had been revealed to me, and I wanted to learn how it fit in my life, how to explain it, and perhaps how to return to that state, but my own obsessive thinking became my trap. I dug myself into a hole and hoped to get out by continuing to dig. I did not realize that thought cannot think its way out of a conundrum that thought has constructed. "No one can jump over his own shadow," as the enigmatic Heidegger expressed it.¹⁰ I am still trying, however.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 199.

My obsessive thinking and reading found a new outlet in philosophy. I adopted it as my major. Philosophy gave me no answers, but it taught me how to question the given and to think with concepts I would have formerly found too abstract to understand. Metaphysical ideas became a searchlight into the unknown. Such words or ideas, I realized, did not have self-contained definitions that could be learned from a dictionary. Abstract thoughts were themselves creative explorations in which the amorphous shapes of nonconscious experience could be made conscious; one could *come to terms* with the unknown. My GPA soared.

On the dark side, however, I began to feel self-conscious in a whole new way. Since I have claimed that all human consciousness is self-consciousness (since all our experience is filtered through self-awareness), I suppose I became self-conscious of my self-consciousness. I felt different from others. All their chatter and concerns suddenly seemed so pointless, so random to me. I had no interest in idle conversation (which remains true to this day) or in partying. Most strangely, I began to feel uncomfortable smoking marijuana, unlike before. I no longer trusted spontaneity. I watched myself interact with others, and pot made the consciousness of self even more debilitating. When I smoked alone, thoughts arose that did not seem to come from me; they denied my own natural flow of cogitation. I do not mean they were *voices*; the negative thoughts mocked my inner monologues, in which, like most people, I often envisaged a bright, successful future. The dark thoughts told me that there was no longer any hope of a normal life in an abnormal world without mutual recognition or self-transcendent love. Dwelling darkly that now I was changed, that I was unlike anyone else, I concluded I must be crazy, for how could I love *everyone*? I found that when I talked, stoned or sober, most people did not understand me. My intensity sometimes intrigued but more often unnerved them. Not that much has changed, but now I sometimes get to finish my sentences and take a thought to its completion, like I'm doing right here.

The proud, extroverted young man I had been was gone. In his place was a nervous introvert who spent most of his time reading or looking into himself. My posture even changed. I felt rejected, lost, and, to say it outright, *guilty*.

I began to abandon my friendships, preferring to vegetate in the basement of my mother's apartment, where I lived. Ellen stuck by me and, in many ways, held me together. I became less interested in sex, but she understood. I tried to explain to her what was happening, and though her response was incomprehension, it was also compassionate. In this period, my intense inwardness grew manic. I could no longer sleep at night. The thoughts would come and grind on beyond my control. They most often used the pronoun "I," but if it was *me* thinking, why could I not shut the thoughts off at will? I accused myself of weakness in coming back to society, and I accused myself of arrogance for daring to transgress its constraints. I worried that maybe, in ignoring Jake's

fears of sexuality, I had in fact accepted what he feared. I had my own life as evidence to the contrary, but ego accused nonetheless. I wondered about returning to the *state of nature* that I had apparently experienced, and sometimes I wondered if death was the only way back. The thoughts were like an ingrown hair that continued to work itself deeper. The only way I could manage them was to think thoughts of my own, that is, think the thoughts inspired by philosophic or literary discussion or to write another rambling academic paper. Philosophy, mad as it is, was my one respite from madness, but thinking in any form would not let me sleep.

There were physical repercussions, too, and I refer to more than sunken physique and general nervousness. My arms and ankles began to itch, and I scratched at them furiously, thinking the little purple lesions might be pustules. Eventually both my forearms were covered with scabs, as were my ankles. Job would have understood. The doctor misdiagnosed me first with hives, then psoriasis, but finally sent me to a dermatologist who, after some research, discovered I had lichen planus, a noncommunicable itchy inflammation that revealed itself in little purple lesions or bumps with cause and cure both unknown, apparently related to a mistake of the auto-immune system. The itching was maddening. I still have it, but it is now under control with corticosteroids. Was this self-loathing? Or had the purple microdots come back to laugh at me?

Exhausted and feeling that I was about to go over the edge, I told my regular doctor, who suggested he make me an appointment with a psychiatrist. My sensible side was very much against doing this. It meant going to the establishment for help with something that had begun by escaping the establishment and escaping much enculturation, too. "Once they get their hands on you, they won't let you go," a troubled young man with experience in such things had once told me. It turned out he was right, but what else could I do? I wanted a magical cure, a return to bliss.

My first session with Dr. Earloom lasted all of ten minutes, since he had an appointment at the hospital. I told him I could not stop thinking, and he asked me if I was hearing voices. "No," I said, "not voices. But it's not like me thinking them. They won't stop." "Do they accuse you or belittle you?" I admitted they did. "Ah," he nodded, satisfied. He briefly explained that the brain is a complex piece of electrical machinery. Sometimes wires get crossed, and things in the mind go haywire, too. When I asked why the wires get crossed, he admitted he did not know, but he assured me that they had the pharmaceuticals and, if needed, the *medical interventions*, to straighten things out. I admit I was somewhat relieved to hear this explanation and that I could be fixed so easily. He wrote me a prescription for some sort of antipsychotic drug that came in a very big pill and told me to take about five every day, and that I should "expect to be sleepy, at first." Sleep sounded *sooooo* good. As I left after my ten-minute

diagnosis, I asked him what I had. “Schizophrenia,” he said with a shrug and rushed out passed me

To make a dreary story short, the drugs, whatever they were, worked wonderfully for sleep. I slept all through the night; in fact, I began to sleep all the time. I nodded off in class. I found isolated lounges on campus where I could go completely out. People walked around me unconcerned. There were a lot of layabouts in those days. However, whenever I tried stopping the pills, the sleeplessness and mental agitation came back. I got so tired it’s amazing I kept up with my schoolwork at all. If I took a drink of alcohol, I would nod off. Papers became harder to write, but I had put my trust in medical science. I was caught in a trap.

By the next summer, after two years in university, Dr. Earloom, who occasionally talked to me just to make conversation, would occasionally refer to my “delusional experience” but generally avoided anything *psychological* (which he abhorred). When I insisted my self-transcendence had not been delusional, he decided my therapy was not progressing fast enough. He recommended electroshock treatment. I would not agree, but my father and one of my so-called *mature* friends thought it would be a good idea. Ellen did not know what to think but did want me back as I was before. It involved spending ten days in the hospital psyche ward and receiving the treatment once a day while I was under total anesthesia. The rest of the day we were to participate in group therapy (run by a woman) and rest. I resisted, but I had no will. *I just wanted to be clear again.* I was assured it was not like the electroconvulsive therapy depicted in the movies, for a much more gentle current was sent through my brain. In short, I went through it, making friends with a quite few girls who were doing group therapy for “suicidal impulses,” every one of them a young, unmarried mother left on her own. I found my sense of humor appeared again, and I made them feel good about things. The therapist encouraged me to keep coming after my ten days were up. Ellen and I even once managed to make out behind the white curtains around my bed—and got caught, of course. Jarot and I drank wine in the chapel and laughed about life. Each morning when they administered the knockout anesthesia, I would crack a joke and try, unsuccessfully, to get a rise out of the anesthesiologist while I went under. She was unmoved, expressionless.

I’ll never know whether the daze I was in for the next several years came from my dis-integrated self or from the medical treatment I was given for it. I know that today I have very vague recollections of my childhood years compared to other people, but I cannot know if there were any other repercussions. In my final year of university, I continued on the antipsychotic drugs and was sleepy all the time. I took a compressed course load, so that I could complete my degree early. I’m amazed I managed, but topics like “The One and the Many” (in a metaphysics course), “Love: Personal or Transpersonal?” (an inde-

pendent study), and “The Universe as a Mind” (a nonmathematical quantum physics course for arts majors) continued to fire my imagination and give me direction. By my last semester, Ellen read assigned chapters aloud to me, then used the shorthand she had learned in business school to record my dictated essays, which she would later type up into presentable form. Without her, I may not have finished my major papers and graduated. Part of the bachelor’s degree I finally got should have gone to her. In any case, I graduated, worked part time in the local brewery, then at the end of the summer took off for Europe with Jake and another pal, Brin.

Before leaving, Ellen pressured me for the engagement ring I had promised her, but when the time came, that is, when we were actually standing outside the jewelry store, I found I could not go through with it. There was no one in my life at the time to whom I owed so much, but I knew that by buying that ring I was committing myself to the sort of life everyone else seemed to be living, but, dozy as I was, I still felt sure there was still some great mystery out there for me to pursue (or perhaps a great mystery “in here” for me to reawaken). So in an attempt to rediscover selflessness in what was perhaps the most selfish act of my life, I refused to buy the ring and in a week had left for the postbaccalaureate European tour. (Hate me, if you must, dear reader. Writing this I feel I deserve it.)

The trip for the three of us was a bust. I was a drag on everyone, so after England and Amsterdam, the three of us went our separate ways in Düsseldorf, Germany. Brin went to Spain, Jake to East Germany (yes, to see his sister and bro-in-law), and me toward Greece. I ran out of my antipsychotics somewhere hitchhiking through Austria, continued to sleep well, and have never used them again. In Greece—my land of dreams since falling under the spell of Greek mythology in grade school—I experienced something of a hard-won renaissance. I spent a year there, mostly failing at everything I attempted, but, eventually, I learned to socialize again. I had trouble relating to old friends once I returned to Canada and the same old city (where Ellen let me know I still had a chance), so I left for Edmonton, Alberta’s capital. Strangely, Naoko and I took up with each other at that time and went through a short, disastrous marriage. I rarely used marijuana or psychedelics again, though other, harder recreational pharmaceuticals like cocaine or oxycodone held brief appeal for me in the eighties and nineties. Slowly, my career path took over, such as it was, so, ever-watchful of judgment, I confined my energies to teaching (I have no other skills), first in high schools, then in universities, and in writing philosophical research. The irony never escapes me: How can I teach when I still have so very much to learn? My life has hardly been that of straight arrow since then, for I never forsook the belief that one should be willing to abandon everything if the right door—the door to awakening or vital life experience—swings open.

Aftermath

I am no longer the hero of this life story. This writer, this me, now reflecting on a life that was unfolding in vigorous but predictable ways until being humbled by the cosmic hammer, is not the same me who lived that reflected life. (Obviously, I still had the same genetics or soul and the same childhood experiences, but the crisis meant that the deck of possibilities had been reshuffled; I now faced a different reality, so the choices that seemed open to me were entirely different.) Pre-crisis, I was just learning mastery and becoming the hero of my own life; I was a seeker but probably more of the conquistador seeking *treasure* (something tangible) than the saint seeking self-negation. The explosive awakening of a more profound and timeless awareness shattered that nascent, heroic ego, and all that remained was the wreckage of my imploded social self, the fallen hero as Icarus. I who write am the outsider who emerged from the collapse of that social self, but I am more of a witness who reports these events from the sidelines of memory than the proverbial *doer of deeds*. After returning from Greece and becoming a professional, my life energy mostly returned and my time abused by the psychiatric industry was mostly forgotten. I became a sexual being again, but in all honesty, I must admit that I discovered a new taste in me for allowing myself to be easy prey to strong, sexual women.

I am unable to truly forget the events that undid my former self since the tale you have just read remains at the silent core of all my thought today. Beyond this recounting, however, I do not dwell on the transformation. In fact, I consider this writing a final closing of the door on such conscious memories lest such memories themselves bar the way to the possibility of a return to the state of selfless awareness. Looking for a way to return to that state very likely makes such a return impossible, for I can't help but project thoughts before me, thinking I know what to look for. However, it seems to me that such reified concepts lead one only to frustration, fantasy, or nostalgia, making authentic experience beyond words impossible.¹¹ For me, the romantic and tragic memory of that LSD-inspired miracle dies *now*, so that awakened—sacred—life may again spontaneously break through to disrupt my existence.

Certain questions remain that I have only limited space to touch on here (though I have addressed them in considerable detail in other essays).¹² Includ-

¹¹ This is why I tend to distrust religions, gurus, and perhaps even meditation practices that promise to guide the seeking soul on the path to higher awareness. In all fairness, some of these practices, less burdened with extraneous ritual or doctrine, promise no such rewards, only the loosening of the bonds of ego, which may or may not lead to breakthroughs into higher planes of awareness.

¹² The most complete rendering of my philosophy of mind to be found in one place is: "Hollows of Memory: From Panexperientialism to Individual Consciousness—Featuring Gregory M. Nixon's Work with Commentaries & Responses," *Journal of Consciousness Explora-*

ed among these, is, *What is the nature of the reality to which I was awakened?* And another is, *Why me?*

I will limit myself here to objective consideration of these events and experiences of so very long ago in the attempt to avoid applying conclusions to which I came much later as the result of immersion in the field of memory and consciousness studies and the cognitive contortions of phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. I will not be citing every author who has written on each idea I suggest. This way, I can focus on what this inadvertent experiment reveals or seems to reveal to me today and avoid fine-point dissection of well-known philosophical issues or speculation on the great unknowns that are only hinted at here. This is not too much of a limitation since much of my thinking has sprung from these primal experiences, even though my understanding has radically shifted over the years as the result of study, research, and philosophical disputation. One thing I have learned by now is that I am far from alone in experiences of such a mystical nature.

What worldview is this that allows for mystical experiences that transcend one's daily sense of identity? It's notable that the fact that I had no cultural knowledge to help me understand what was happening to me is both indicative of my youth and of a culture without a wisdom tradition and without any sacred sense of daily life. Yes, the libraries are full of writings on such arcane topics, but I, a twenty-year-old man in a small central city, had no exposure to their contents, and I only gained somewhat more once I switched my major to philosophy. The closest I came to understanding was the smatterings of "eastern thought" that had been filtered through the hippy sub-culture and the psychedelic wonder-world of those gurus of LSD like Timothy Leary. It was quite an affirmation when I discovered the writings of rare geniuses like Aldous Huxley, who used all sorts of psychedelics, and Joseph Campbell, who used none but noted that the path to awakened mind is no longer the possession of particular cultures but is instead the *creative* journey of the modern individual. Through them, I discovered the *perennial philosophy*, of which Huxley presents but one version.¹³ The reality of such experiences is strong evidence that the conscious sense of self is largely learned, that is, it is a product of cultural construction. Since such realizations do not happen to everyone but are often the result of choosing to live in such a way as to make such transpersonal consciousness events more likely, it appears that we not merely externally deter-

tion & Research 2, no. 3 (2010): 213-401. This focus issue includes three essays, "From Pan-experientialism to Conscious Experience" (216-233), "Hollows of Experience" (234-288), and "Myth and Mind: The Origin of Human Consciousness in the Discovery of the Sacred" (289-337), followed by seventeen commentaries from others on these works and my responses to each of them.

¹³ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 1st ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946).

mined products of particular cultures and relationships, but that we have a certain degree of free or at least creative will.

So the first truth I learned is that I—my *self*, the interior lens through which I filtered all my experience and isolated the world *out there*—was made of a complex of feelings, too many to count and many of them conditioned by culture. Moreover, I learned that this complex of feelings that were self-referenced by the word “I” was almost entirely made of words. Every feeling that had shaped or conditioned me was originally a phrase or a sentence that I had internalized to become who I am. “I’m in words, made of words, others’ words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words, the whole world is here with me,” as the mournful existentialist Samuel Beckett once wrote.¹⁴ I know this with special clarity, for I *saw* all the words of my mind unite into a whirling vortex of feelings, just before I was catapulted through them.

But what was on the other side? My sense of an inner self (as opposed to an outer world) both enables me as a social being and inhibits me as a natural being, so what would I be without it? It seems clear that the experience was not atavistic in any way. I did not become a speechless prehuman animal again, free to release my natural instincts on the world. As noted, I was still capable of speech, though it felt artificial and seemed to communicate with few. Furthermore, I had no active animal instincts or drives of which to speak; I was neither hungry nor horny, angry nor placid, neither fearful nor desirous. Besides, the earlier awakening moment in the cabin when I realized that we were all animals somehow freed me from that incarnate limitation. Once I returned to society after the experience, learning to be an animal again (even a socialized animal) was one of the most difficult projects. So I would have agree with Jean Gebser,¹⁵ an important proponent of integral consciousness, that transcendence is not a romantic return to Nature (as imagined, for example, by David Abram, who believes becoming animal is our highest attainment),¹⁶ though its concomitant immanence is profoundly natural.

It would seem that such transpersonal awareness is indeed “ever-present,” as Gebser suggests, but it is not common to daily human experience. Gebser has called this transcendent state the integral state, a term Ken Wilber later appropriated.¹⁷ It has of course been called by many, many other names in the various world traditions, perhaps going all the way from *unity with God* to the *void consciousness* of Zen satori, the former implying the All, and the latter

¹⁴ Beckett, *Unnamable*, 386.

¹⁵ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, trans. Noel Barstad (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985).

¹⁶ David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon, 2010).

¹⁷ Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit*.

expressing ultimate nothingness. The Chinese Flower Garland (Hua-yen) school indicated that everything in existence is mutually embedded, so it is equally true to say either that everything causes everything (pratityasamutpada) or that nothing (śūnyata) exists, since each term is the obverse of the other.¹⁸ Heidegger¹⁹ referred to the trans-subjective state as *Dasein* (being-in-the-world), to avoid even mentioning the word *consciousness*, and Merleau-Ponty²⁰ called it the *chiasm*, to indicate the intertwining of the subjective and the objective but going beyond both.

I know nothing of the ultimate truth of these things, only that I awoke and felt myself *as the natural world*, no longer a distinct entity but a joyful expression and perhaps a witness or a conduit for that natural dynamism. I cannot imagine a higher or deeper state of consciousness, but I admit that I could not imagine the state of consciousness to which I was awakened until it was revealed to me. Still, if there is a PCE (pure consciousness event), as explained, for example, by Forman²¹ and beautifully expressed in various eastern traditions, sometimes as nirvana or moksha, it must be also ever-present, and perhaps the visible Nature to which I refer is wrapped within its invisible embrace. It is by definition, however, empty of content (*śūnyata*, *basbo*); that is, it is awareness-without-an-object-of-awareness, so it neither has content that can be later recalled nor includes the self-as-observer to do the remembering. In this sense, the PCE is indeed nothing but may well hint at the timeless, spaceless ultimate awareness that preexists being, if you can follow this logical contortion. “It” is present as background during existence, and continues to “exist” when natural existence ceases, that is, in and after death.²²

As I say, I can only know of my own experience—even granting all the illusions and interpolations created via interpretation through speech. I know the experience had content, I knew vast awareness, but I also felt myself not to be present as primary actor, or at least, not as a presence central to the experience. If we view the stages of consciousness as evolving from the flickering spasms of microorganisms to the self-conscious awareness of human beings, why would such transpersonal consciousness have evolved? I can only say with Gebser that, if the transcendent has always been present, it did not evolve (go-

¹⁸ Khalil Atif, “Emptiness, Identity and Interpenetration in Hua-yen Buddhism”. *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* 23, 49-76. Online, accessed Jan 11, 2019: http://dharma-rain.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Hua_Yen_Buddhism_Emptiness_Identity_Inte.pdf

¹⁹ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*.

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible, followed by Working Notes*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

²¹ Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*.

²² See various viewpoints on this most ultimate of questions in Gregory M. Nixon, ed., *Theories of Consciousness & Death: Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 7 (11), Dec 2016. Online: www.academia.edu/30690806/Theories_of_Consciousness_and_Death_JCER_7_11

ing beyond panpsychism). If human consciousness has shown a tendency to move toward this higher state of awareness that involves such feelings as unity and love and selflessness, it may be that Nature is seeking awareness of itself. In this way, evolution can be seen as having a teleology, as analytical philosopher Thomas Nagel has recently expressed this idea of natural purpose (as opposed to the purpose of a divine designer or deity).²³ He does not give due credit to Henri Bergson, who formulated a similar theory earlier.²⁴

That's as far as analytical philosophy dare go, it seems. However, the phenomenologists saw what we call the subjective and its presumed opposite, the objective, as a primordial unity in which the two are inextricably intertwined. After a schism, probably the schism of experience becoming conscious of itself in stages via language, we began to imagine the two as distinct—the subjective self within the head, behind the eyes and between the ears, while objective reality became, by default, “the world” out there. In the age of science, the world out there is the ultimate reality from which the mind in here derives. However, those with a spiritual bent see the subjective mind as a soul originating in the ultimate subjectivity, God, who created the objective world.

The phenomenologist says neither one is possible: you cannot have a subject without an object, just as you cannot have an object without a subject. In this way, picturing planet earth before there were observers is an illusion created by the imaginative act of picturing, which is an observation. Absolute (unobserved) objectivity is an illusion. In the same way, speaking of a pure consciousness event (PCE) that is entirely without content or even an observing self is the illusion of absolute subjectivity (which can have nothing to do with intentional consciousness, which requires memories or purposes). For the phenomenologist, it is the phenomenon itself that more nearly approximates the ultimate ground of being. What is the phenomenon? It is the ever-present event of an experienced world coming into being, a process that unites the observer and the observed (or the experiencer and the experienced) in an eternal dance of creation.²⁵ It needs hardly be added that the dynamic dance of reality creation is a vital, living process, as intimated by such luminaries as Whitehead²⁶ and Merleau-Ponty.²⁷

²³ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (1911; repr. Lanham, MD: Holt, 1983).

²⁵ It is perhaps worth noting that the controversial observer effect in quantum physics indicates the same strange notion—that to be is to be observed—but I won't go into that here.

²⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (1929; New York: Free Press, 1978).

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and the Invisible*.

From my awakening and my observations since then, it is clear to me that the world and everything in it is indeed alive, and there is no real distinction between subject and object, between being in one's head or in the world. However, this unity has by now been largely relegated to the unconscious. In our cultural sphere (which is today assuming global proportions), we reduce reality to materialism. This worldview implies that we (feelings, experience, life) are separate from the objective world and that the objective world, in this sense, is virtually dead, not a direct part of our lives. My experience gave the lie to this worldview. That the world is alive and somehow aware (perhaps *aware through us*) is neither materialism nor subjective transcendence but more attuned to phenomenology, as ground to both. As I mention above, an alive, mystically participating world suggests panpsychism or, better, *pantheism*. The latter suggests divinity rather than merely mind; the presence of the sacred that immersed me and threw me out of my self was a form of divinity, though it was multiple, playful and exuberant, more suggesting the invisible forest gods of Grecian Arcadia than the weighty holiness of omnipotent deity. The big question is, if we have access to such a joyful, timeless, sacred level of awareness, why do we do everything in our power to hide from it, even to demonize it?

This leads me to the second question that I shall briefly approach here, "Why me?" or "How did I cause this to happen?" The most honest answer is I do not know, but I might also express the thought that since such transpersonal awareness is ever-present, it does not need to be caused, and opening to it may be as random as where a leaf in a storm may land or the path waters take to the sea. If Nature is seeking self-awareness, it may be that I happened to be just the right vessel for this process at that moment. I was, after all, a reckless, reasonably intelligent, open-minded young man who was at that time intensifying his mind with massive doses of lysergic acid diethylamide. And there I was amid some of the most awesome natural landscapes on the planet. Of course, this explanation won't quite do, as many, many people have used various psychedelics or entheogens, and as many of them claim to have had mystical experience as have suffered the sort of breakdowns I myself later may have experienced. The many people who have told me about their self-transcendent or mystical experiences, whether via psychedelics or meditation, with a shrug of "been there, done that," leave me totally unconvinced. A mystical experience is not something one "has done" and then left behind as if it were nothing more than a neat happening. If the experience is truly self-transcendent, it will remain a *presence*, whether acknowledged or not, the rest of one's days. Furthermore, these claimants often describe how they became aware of their time of mystical union only in retrospect.²⁸ "Oh yes, I can see now that back then I was *there*."

²⁸ Forman (*Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*) admits that one realizes one has experienced a pure consciousness event only after the fact since the event itself has no content. My "event" was

“I know I had a PCE because I have two hours of blank memory!” Very few people, aside from the great mystics of the eastern tradition or certain western saints, claim to have experienced a sudden, unexpected moment when everything changed. Richard Bucke,²⁹ who coined the term *cosmic consciousness*, experienced the phenomenon as uncaused, unexpected, and sudden. For me, the cosmic hammer defines that moment; it happens all at once or not at all (though it may last from minutes right on up to a lifetime for those few realized individuals).

For me it lasted about ten hours with moments of return in various follow-up acid trips. It is no longer with me, but I am still changed, and I still feel the presence of the greater reality around me through the permeable wall of self. I know *there is more here than meets the eye*. Which brings up a final corollary of the *why me* question: *What happened to me afterward?*

I feel we are most truly in touch with soul when we transcend our daily selves, and that may occur in moments of crisis, during intensely creative action, or, perhaps most importantly, when love overwhelms common sense. We cannot culturally avoid moments of crisis, but we are constantly training ourselves to quickly and effectively contain them, so whatever awakening the moment of crisis has released is quickly dissipated in orderly routines. Creative action we seem to encourage, but every culture has developed ways to guide those impulses down socially acceptable channels that soon narrow into convention. Love, however—not romantic love but the unhindered energy of universal love that I felt sear through me like that animated fire we call *wind*—has been most effectively repressed and transmogrified by the forces of cultural domestication. Aside from the containment in family, tribal, or national groups mentioned above, we have developed organized religions and a whole culture of caregivers and charities, both of which offer sanctimonious substitutes for the transcendence of real love. But the most effective counter to the life force of love within us has been the constructed self, the individual ego that confines us within acceptable attitudes and supplies us with social roles that in subtle ways specify generic appropriateness. If one dares transgress such roles, one had better have a ready support group or at least mindful conceptualizations at hand to help soul to reintegrate itself. The use of LSD may have rushed me through to reality when I was not yet ready to deal with it. As Roland Cichowski wrote:

Such a forced breaking of the veil . . . often leaves the experiencer shattered and in some ways dysfunctional if the mental thought patterns that might al-

rich with content, and *I*, the witness, was part of this content. Subject and object were merged but not obliterated.

²⁹ Richard M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness* (New York: Innes & Sons, 1905).

low you to accept such a revelation have not had cause to develop, and are not in place. Even when they are partially there, as may have been the case with me, you can fear for your sanity as I did. It is not for nothing that the spiritual traditions that use drugs require the guidance of an experienced shaman or guide.³⁰

Clearly, in my youth, I did not know how to live with what I had found or, perhaps, who I had found I was.³¹ When I returned, I not only lacked the conceptions to explain my experience to others; I lacked even the cognitive tools to explain it to myself. I certainly encountered no one of wisdom who could smile with understanding at my confusion and offer me words of insight, which I so desperately needed to retain a solid sense of self-identity. Perhaps I was like Plato's seeker who is thrown into the direct sunlight of truth too quickly and, as a result, is blinded by light. As I wandered confused but unbound among my still-bound but ordered countrymen, always facing ahead, is it any wonder my tales were rejected and, through repressive drugs and electricity, subjected to banishment? Is it any wonder that by treating me as insane I was very nearly driven so?

My final suggestion is that current self-consciousness originally emerged out of unbearable fear, and that is to what I returned. I doubt that our reductive materialist culture originated this fear, but it may have exacerbated it through its morbid attachment to technology and weapons and its denial of inner experience. What fear is this? It can only be the fear of death. When our ancestors achieved enough language to gain foresight into the inevitable destiny that waits for each of us, there must have been a truly existential crisis as word of undeniable mortal knowledge spread. Why struggle to live when death awaits us in any case? This primordial knowledge must have been more unbearable than it seems to be now. Is it any wonder that we hid mortal knowledge under all sorts of guises to give us hope for a future that surpassed or denied it? This creation of culture for the sake of denying death has been a theme of several important authors, and some of them see in such denial an inherent denial of life. Ego, the creation of individual self-identity within a culture of denial, must also be built of the same primary emotions. To overcome one's culturally

³⁰ Roland Cichowski, "Self-Transcendence as a Developmental Process in Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 2 (7), Gregory M. Nixon, ed., 2011: 976.

³¹ However, many innocent minds suffered trauma from the overthrow or transcendence of the ego-self during LSD or other psychedelic trips (or the return to it afterward) because of ignorance at that time, others today see serious psychedelic research as currently undergoing a renaissance. See, e.g., Thomas B. Roberts, *The Psychedelic Future of the Mind: How Entheogens Are Enhancing Cognition, Boosting Intelligence, and Raising Values* (South Paris, ME: Park Street Press, 2013); Ben Sessa, *The Psychedelic Renaissance: Reassessing the Role of Psychedelic Drugs in 21st Century Psychiatry and Society* (London: Muswell Hill Press, 2012).

constructed ego flies in the face of the greatest (and most repressed) cultural terror we bear, the fear of death. We fear those who make us face our fear. So when I came back from rejecting my fearful ego, it should be no surprise to find that fears arose all around me like shadows in the night in the attempt to make sure I never ventured such boundary-breaking again.³²

But the other thing the fear of death protects us from is the secret realization of oneself in another. If we opened ourselves to the realization that we find our most intimate self in the world and in other people, we have to bear the burden of unconditional love. Even toward the end of my fateful trip, I wondered whether I dared live with the absolute love I felt while listening intently yet with a heart wide open to the needs of others. As I neared sleep, I concluded that such an open heart would almost certainly lead to martyrdom. Bleeding hearts are killed, I thought vaguely, and remembered with comfort my previous life. Later, on the shallow emotional level of the self, I was simply afraid that what I had discovered was dangerous to my sanity, perhaps even too lovey-dovey for my concept of masculinity, and certainly to any success I might wish for in life. Of course, back then in my “return” I had twisted everything backward. Today I know since I have managed to think through it: *The walls of ego are made of fear.*

Self-transcendence is very real—more real than the moment I write this and you read it—and, as indicated by the Zen master D. T. Suzuki, such transcendence takes us back *into* the world, not beyond it. It is indeed the “discovery or the excavation of a long lost treasure.”³³ However, there is a price to be paid for this treasure, and it is the price of the self we each believe we are. Before we find ourselves amid the light of the *anima mundi*, we have to enter a dark night of the soul (and, in my case, maybe return to it). Our assumptions about nature, world, love, and being may have to die before we can be reborn, that is, reawakened to being.

Words twist again: I now realize that this will never happen again to me alone. In fact, it never did happen to me. *Dynamic being* itself broke into awareness by breaking through my sole ego-self. I now know that one is not truly an

³² Well-known authors with this perspective include Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973); Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959); Ajit Varki and Danny Brower, *Denial: Self-Deception, False Beliefs, and the Origins of the Human Mind* (New York: Twelve, Hatchette Book Group, 2013); and, less known, my own essay, “Myth and Mind: The Origin of Human Consciousness in the Discovery of the Sacred,” *Journal of Consciousness Exploration & Research* 2 (3), 2010: 289–337.

³³ Daisetz T. Suzuki, “The Awakening of a New Consciousness in Zen,” in *Man and Transformation: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series, vol. 30, no. 5 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), 179–202, here 179. Original published in *Eranos-Jahrbücher* 23 (1954).

isolated being, so it cannot happen *to me* again. Being is always happening; somehow, we have become isolated from it. Awakening to Being is the dream that needs to come true for all humanity, for all life, and it is likely to happen since dynamic Being, not conflicted selves, is the Reality we cannot contain forever—unless we choose self-destruction, of course.

