

## Breaking Out of One's Head (& Awakening to the World)

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### Abstract

Herein, I review the moment in my life when I awoke from the dream of self to find *being* as part of the living world. It was a sudden, momentous event that is difficult to explain since transcending the self ultimately requires transcending the language structures of which the self consists. Since *awakening to the world* took place beyond the enclosure of self-speech, it also took place outside our symbolic construction of time. It is strange to place this event and its aftermath as happening long ago in my lifetime, for it is forever present; it surrounds me *all the time* just as the world seems to do. This fact puts into question the reality of my daily journey from dawn to dusk with all the mundane tasks I must complete (like writing of that which cannot be captured in writing). My linear march to aging and death inexorably continues, yet it seems somehow unreal, the biggest joke of all. Still, I here review the events leading up to my time out of mind and then review the serious repercussions when I was drawn back into the ego-self only to find I did not have the conceptual tools or the maturity to understand what had happened.

### Call to Adventure

For the sake of structure (and because I owe so much of my psychological resurrection to the man's writings), I will break apart this story and analysis into sections that accord with Joseph Campbell's famous stages on the journey of the hero in his *Hero of a Thousand Faces* (1949/68). The hero's journey is not a line of time going from past to future, but a circle that begins with the *Call to Adventure*, continues with crossing the *Threshold* from normal (social) reality into one much more dangerous but ripe with possibility. The hero must go through *Tests*, facing dangers (both fears and temptations), and heroes often fail. Then there is the *Attainment* (whether apotheosis or discovering of the treasure, etc.), followed by the *Return* back across that Threshold during which dangers of a different sort threaten while the adventurer attempts to reintegrate himself with society and with the self-identity that the society has provided. For me, the whole circle is more like a twisting spiral, forever uncoiling from *and* recoiling toward an empty centre that can never really, in its essence, be recalled. Perhaps because it is always present.

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*The call* began in discontent, which was as much a sign of the times as inner restlessness. I'm going to tell this story straight, 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 doing all the things an 18 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, and I played on the high school football team as the fullback and jokingly called myself "The King" even though my touchdowns were few indeed. Not sure why, but the joke spread and soon the other students were greeting me with, "Hi King," in the hallways. Perhaps it spread because I hung out at a tough pizza joint on the north side of town called The King's Inn. From there, our gang would raid the south side and get into memorable brawls, or we would defend our territory should any southsiders dare to enter the Inn. I had a *rep*, but I was mostly well liked because I liked to fight loudmouth bullies but was not one myself. 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.

But I still felt restless. I yearned for adventure, to be sure, but also somehow felt that what the world was offering me had no real importance. Desire for conquest or fame was not the real me either. Fucking and fighting were ends of their own and a good way to laugh in the face of adult society. That put me in with a crowd who were in the non-academic stream or already out of school in the world of work. I did 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 human adventure. 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 longhaired 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 hash with him. I loved intoxication, so I was excited at trying a new way to achieve it. It was far the ordinary pot with its seeds and twigs that was being smoked at that time. It was Red Lebanese hashish, pressed and sent in an envelope to Jake from his Hari-Krishna sister now living in East Germany. We skipped school and smoked up in a little pipe made with a pen barrel stuck in thread spool. A broken pencil blocked the other end of the spool, and a needle-perforated tin foil pushed into the hole Jake had dug into the centre of the spool served as the pipe bowl. I learned quickly and the effect was very fast. This was not like drinking at all! The room tilted and the world seemed to be made of chuckles. I felt giddy and went with it while more experienced Jake went on about playing music and tasting apples. 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 graduated to headshop hookahs with almond extract flavouring the water and had hooked up with other heads around town. I was graduating high school and had finally discovered what the hippies and the burgeoning counter-culture were talking about: there was another way to be conscious! This way was open, laid-back, absorbed in the experience of the senses, especially music and psychedelic images. We 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. Mistrust of the establishment 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 my old friends, but I also entered university and hesitated to step fully into the new conformism of the hippy ethos, as I saw it. Within months of entering university, I had new friends, a new way of dressing, had given up all sports, never got drunk and violent, but was continuing to mess up my academic career by smoking the weed and experimenting with soft-core psychedelics.

### **Threshold**

The lure of ... *something* had me in thrall. I can look back now and call it higher consciousness, and there's no doubt truth in that, but what, exactly, we were after at the time was not exactly clear. 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. 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 that 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, 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. In some people, this developed into a form of paranoia that interfered with the good vibes of the love generation. But, no matter, I had crossed the threshold.

I did lot various psychedelics and a lot of *weird things happened* to me and to others, sometimes simultaneously, but, in retrospect, it was never *out of this world*, just weird. My high school friend, "Jarot" (from both football and the King's Inn) and the little Japanese-Canadian girl that always seemed to follow him around with moony eyes, "Setcha", joined our group of high-flying explorers. At the end of the first school year in April, everyone I knew seemed to go somewhere out of town; there were a lot of hippy meccas like San Francisco, or, in western Canada, Vancouver or Nelson, drawing people to them. The highways were crowded with hitchhikers, and Jake and I made our way amongst them to the big city of Calgary. There I quickly screwed up a 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. "Tell she's got big boobs," someone whispered to me, "She

really likes that.” So I told her, she giggled a lot, and then sort of followed me around after that. As we all slouched quietly around the living room listening to the latest sounds, I saw her watching me, so looked boldly back at her through my everpresent red shades. The vibe we exchanged as we looked at each other was stirring, to say the least. I had big can of apple juice on my lap and made of use of it by staring intently right at the girl 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 that may have been ectoplasmic sexual intercourse, if you’ll forgive 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, going deeply red and moaning, moving her body lasciviously. I felt myself growing tense and nearing orgasm when I noticed that several people, including her boyfriend, were wide-eyed, watching the invisible exchange between us. I felt like a thief, so I 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.”

Confused and guilty, I left the back of the house and went up on the hill outside that seemed to overlook the whole city. Weird as the exchange had been, my slow awakening awe at the city laid out before 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 below me. For the first time, I felt a tingling above me, like a doorway in the air beginning to open. I felt a blissful anticipation, then a thought: “Dare I go through?” and the doorway seemed to withdraw and close. I did not go through and I was feeling sad yet hyper-aware as I walked back to the house through the neighbourhood. A police car pulled up and asked me to get in. I grew tense but not frightened when they asked me what I was doing on the hill. I told them – in sad, trembling tones – that I was looking for work in the city and had just been looking over the city wondering about my future. They nodded sympathetically and spoke encouraging words and dropped me off at the house. The car drove off as I went inside and was greeted like some sort of hero. The police car had apparently freaked everyone out to the core of their trembling souls, and they were deeply relieved 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* sense that I had experienced. I told 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 later 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 a friend’s girl, despite the opportunity.

Later, I returned to my small city home and Dad informed me he had found me a job in the Northwest Territories as a deckhand. It seems a Department of Transport 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 D.O.T. boat that put in buoys and light towers and kept the shipping lanes open for commercial transport on the Great Slave 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 big, cold lake and put aboard *The Dumit*, a government transport boat. I was excited by this new adventure, 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 got me drunk would not speak up for me and I could not apologize to the old Scots skipper, who hinted if I did I could keep my job. We were deep down the Slave River at that time, and it took nearly a month to get back to Hay River, so I had a lot of time to think about it. 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, whom, I had heard, were living in cheap cabins in the forest by the Strait of Georgia on Vancouver Island. My 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. I could not help but notice that, during the past year in the pot haze of university, I had not been so eager or vigorous. Then, with the callousness of youth, I left Ellen behind and caught a ride in a crowded little car with a group of acquaintances 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, Setcha, and Jake were there in one cabin. Bill and Jay, two American draft-dodging dealers, occupied the cabin nearby but were temporarily 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 warm greetings and hugs, they dug out their bag of weed, which was nice, after the months in the north country, but nothing compared with hashish. I sensed some minor tension between Jake and Jarot that neither had with me, and I noticed how sexy Setcha looked in her skimpy outfits. Jarot, however, hardly paid her any attention. We smoked up, felt great, but soon ran out. 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 some 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. 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 seemed 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 all set up a bonfire on the beach that night. Jake and Jarot talked passed each in quiet disagreement about *our* direction. Jarot confided in me what pain it was to have Setcha around. Jake confided in me how hot he thought she was. Across the fire, I misunderstood Setcha's inward gaze, thinking she was looking at me with sexual challenge. I tried to lie down with her, touching her. 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 we cut into little squares, one for each of us, and we tripped out in our cabins. One thing happened on that trip, but it was evidence of the rising tide against the gates of the normal *me*. We dropped the blotters, time went by, and 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, Jarot looking around nervously, and Setcha trying to hum and move to some rhythm only she could hear. I felt edgy: there was a thought 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 into myself, but it would not be denied: As clearly as anything I've ever seen in my life, the obvious was revealed to me and I felt the trapdoor of light open above me: "We're animals!" I burst out with relief. Everyone looked at me in confusion. "Don't you see? We're animals, here in this room, on this floor, we're animals!"

"Yeah? So what?" Jarot said. My revelation was obviously not as profound to my fellow tripsters. "Is that a bad thing?" Setcha asked. "We know that already," Jake said, then as his mental antenna opened up, he added, "Don't we?" Jake and Setcha looked vaguely hurt and Jarot confused, so they all three returned to their mundane, inwardly focussed preoccupations. I was very excited and felt like a tractor-beam was pulling me up toward that invisible trap-door. "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 about to 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 tried, "like, like it's beckoning, and I really want

to go through!" "Why doncha?" Jarot asked. Was there a hint of malicious curiosity in his eyes? "What's on the other side?" asked Setcha. "What's stopped you?" Jake. "I dunno. I'm afraid..." I managed, but even saying that word, *fear*, 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 lose my mind, or die." There, I had said it. I named the guardian fears on either side of the doorway, both to do with 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 looking away. Setcha 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 the two of us: the world seemed to be looking in on us. "Watch," I said, and turned away and the world immediately turned away too. "Do you see?" "Wow," he said (an expletive heard often in those days). Perhaps at that point, I needed more energy, 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.

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 private campground and I had to pay off the irate owner to prevent him from calling the RCMP. Bill and Jay arrived back from U.S.A. (the country whose draft they were dodging) with a kilo of marijuana wedged between their radiator and the grill, as well 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 micrograms of lysergic acid dia-something or other in each hit<sup>1</sup>. First thing tomorrow." Setcha and the chicks the Americans brought immediately began to plan dinner, as though tomorrow was some sort of special gathering, like a hoedown.

## Attainment

"Attainment" is all wrong, for what happened on the trip was not really *attained*, that is, it is 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. *Awakening* might be better term, and 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, hopefully, with something of a suspenseful

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<sup>1</sup> The microgam ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) levels were never confirmed, of course, but 1000  $\mu\text{g}$  is *very* high. See the Erowid site [http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/lsd/lsd\\_dose.shtml](http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/lsd/lsd_dose.shtml), in which anything over 400  $\mu\text{g}$  is *heavy*.

plot. However, here the narrator exits so 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 narrative since narrative is made of time as we know it? Both time and narrative have a beginning, middle, and end, and both contain events that cause further events and so on creating a linear unfolding as time progresses. Words will simply fall short (as others in this issue have several times stated), 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 (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. I settled into a spot with a view. I thought a bit but then my thoughts 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, imagining the surface was already wrinkling and cracking. I began to shake, just holding on. This went on for quite some time without anybody noticing. My terror slowly subsided and was replaced by utter abjection, a deep feeling of hopelessness crept upward into 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. “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 have entered 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 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 the tingling sparkles of light, like tiny sparks – more felt than seen – formed an invisible whirlpool right over my head. I felt, not *myself*, 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. My thoughts transformed from concepts into feelings (for that's what they really were) and every feeling spun itself around a core to which it was attached, like the ribbons around a maypole wrapping themselves into extinction. 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 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 spasm of release I, the consciousness that was me, was jerked *out of my head*.

This was sudden, this was dramatic, and it was definitely what Wolfson (2011, in this issue, p. 982) calls the *Transformational Transcendent Singular Event* (TTSE). Later when trying to write about it, I called, in the dramatic lingo of the times, "The Cosmic Hammer." 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 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, everything was alit and alive. It was the most extraordinary and possibly the most wonderful moment of life. I saw Jake and his eyes, too, were shining with joy. But one second later, the training of social life intervened.

Jake and I recognized each other and in joy we opened our arms and stepped toward each other for a soul embrace. But, Jake, a shy young man 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 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?" he asked and his face fell. "What does it matter? We're here!" I cried. I could see he was afraid that hugging another man in such a state implied homosexuality, but all such terms meant nothing to me at moment. "It doesn't matter what it means!" 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, but, in retrospect, there a slight diminishment to the intensity, but the wind blew through a bush full of quivering blossoms and called me away.

I cannot describe the next hour or two, or however long we measure eternity, but I simply wandered about part of everything around me. This is not a metaphor: I felt myself merging 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 went by. Especially memorable was the wind. It blew with laughter wherever I looked and then 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 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.

According to an expert in mysticism, Ken Wilber (2001, etc.), I experienced a lower level of mystical experience, the sense of atonement (at-one-ment) or unity with Nature, which is found to be alive and responsive. I really don't know about this, but I have been something of a pantheist ever since, even though I sometimes need reminding. The whole thing is not an object of knowledge to me, just a turning point.

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." "What? What?" he asked, seemingly unable to grasp the meaning of my 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. Our rapport was broken and, at this point, communication was impossible.

We walked back down the path to the cabins and were met by Setcha. I saw and felt a warm glow of affection rise in me. "Hi," she said, and I took her hand. She was pleased and as natural as could be we walked hand-in-hand while she talked something about the cabbage rolls being ready. Once we got there I found 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. 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 they had to get through 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. Later, though, after dark, Setcha began a long, long talk about her dissatisfaction or frustration with something or other 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, "Well, maybe." She left.

Jake appeared again, even more haggard than before. 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." 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. We went back to our cabin. Later, Setcha and Jake came in all bedraggled. We later learned Jake had told his terrible secret to Setcha, so they had found a place in the woods and managed, with some difficulty, to do something about it.

## The Return

Perhaps I should call this penultimate section, *The Revenge of Ego*, for that is inevitably what occurred and continued for several years. Reintegration into society and my social self turned out to be disintegration. It is not pleasant tale.

It took time for the objective self (the ego-self) to reveal its antagonism, 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 philosophy courses, eventually changing my major. 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 in 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, and perhaps how to return to that state. I did not realize that thought cannot think passed itself. “No one can jump over his own shadow,” as the enigmatic Heidegger (1987, p. 199) expressed it. I am still trying, however.

On the dark side, I began to feel self-conscious in a whole new way. Since I have claimed all human consciousness is self-consciousness, I suppose I became self-conscious of my self-consciousness. I felt different from others. All their chatter and concerns suddenly seemed so mundane to me. I had no interest in partying, except to escape. Most strangely, I began to feel uncomfortable smoking marijuana. Unlike before, around others I watched myself, and pot just made the consciousness of self more debilitating. Alone when I smoked, thoughts arose that did not seem to come from me. I don’t mean they were *voices*; I just found myself dwelling darkly that now I was changed, unlike anyone else, perhaps I was crazy, and how could I love *everyone*? I found when I talked, stoned or sober, that most people did not understand me. 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 young man I had been was gone. In his place was nervous guy who spent most his time reading or looking into himself. My posture even changed. I felt, to say it outright, *guilty*.

I began to abandon my friendships, preferring to vegetate in the basement of my mother’s apartment in which 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, I 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 was me thinking, how come I could not shut them off at will? I accused myself of weakness in coming back to society, and I accused myself of insanity that I ever dared 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 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 a creative 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. The doctor misdiagnosed me and sent to a dermatologist who, after some research, discovered I had lichen planus, a non-communicable itchy inflammation with cause and cure both unknown, apparently related to a mistake of the immune system. I still have it, but it is now under control with corticosteroids. Was this self-loathing?

Exhausted and feeling that I was about to go over the edge, I finally got my doctor to 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 began by escaping the establishment and, it seemed, much of enculturation. "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 exactly right, but what else could I do?

My first session with Dr. Irlam lasted all of 15 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. 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 they had the pharmaceuticals and, if need, 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 prescription for some sort of antipsychotic drug that came in a very big pill and told me take about five every day, and that I should "expect to be sleepy, at first." Sleep sounded soooo good. When I left after my 15 minute diagnosis, I asked him what they called what I had. "Schizophrenia," he said, 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 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. I was caught in a trap.

By the next summer, after two years in university, Dr. Irlam, who occasionally talked to me just to make conversation, decided my therapy was not progressing fast enough and he recommended electroshock therapy. I would not agree, but my father and one of my *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. I resisted but I had no will. I was assured it was not like the electroconvulsive therapy depicted in the movies, but a much more gentle current. In short, I went through it, making friends with a quite few girls who doing group therapy for “suicidal impulses”, everyone one of them an abandoned young mother. I found my sense of humour appeared again and I made them feel good about things. The therapist encouraged me to keep coming after my 10 days was up. Ellen and I even managed to make out behind the white curtains around my bed once. Jarot and I drank wine in the chapel and laughed about life. Each time 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.

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 courseload, so I could complete my degree, but I never could have managed if Ellen had not read chapters aloud to me then used the shorthand she was taking in business school to record my dictated essays that I would later type up into presentable form. 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. 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 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 knew there was still some great mystery out there for me to pursue. 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 post-baccalaureate 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, in Düsseldorf, Germany, the three of us went separate ways. One guy went to Spain, Jake to East Germany, 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 reading Greek mythology in grade seven, 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, so I left for Edmonton,

Alberta's capital. Strangely, Setcha and I took up with each other and went through a short, disastrous marriage. I never much bothered with marijuana or psychedelics again, though other recreational pharmaceutical held temporary appeal for me when I was younger. But, by then, I was on my career path, such as it was, confined to teaching (I have no other skills), first in high schools then in universities. The irony never escapes me: How can I teach when I still have so very much to learn?

### Aftermath

No, this is not one of Joseph Campbell's stages on the journey of hero. The hero's journey ended for me long ago, and I am no longer the hero of this life story. This is me looking back on a life that was unfolding in vigorous but predictable ways until it was inalterably changed by a series of events that took me to a profound awakening. I am unable to forget it and don't wish to, but I have long ago *moved on*, as they say. I am now living the two lessons I learned from the crash of the cosmic hammer that broke me temporarily free from my self-prison.

One is that the world and everything in it is alive, though our interaction with it has by now mostly been relegated to the unconscious. The other is that the ego is a prison. We need the self to negotiate through this world, but to be egocentric is the greatest sin against life we can commit. The self, i.e., self-consciousness, can be decentered and we can be aware, at least some of the time, from the primordial core that we really are, and which is more *of the world* than of our selves or even of our culture. If you said I was an animist, I'd say, fine, okay by me. Whatever might be ultimate reality, it is not out there (beyond this world), or in here (say, in string theory or quantum gravity), or in the source or origins (now in the past), or in the future (cultural utopianism or the afterlife). It's right here, right now. The barrier is consciousness itself, and I see consciousness as self-consciousness, constructed and imposed by the symbolic interaction of cultural systems. Of course, without learning intersubjective selfhood, we would still be animals, not good, but still is sometimes devoutly to be wished.

I never could quite accept the absolute finality of cultural difference found in postmodernism since I see the same light in others, no matter who they were. In fact, the light and life is not just in people — it permeates the boundary between self and other, period. *I am thou*, and thou art *everything* I can sense as well as the whole panorama of forces I can only intuit. I *know* we mainly live in a dream, probably our necessary conditioning, and that there is another awakening possible. I had the sense during those magic hours that I had awakened the dream; the experience was, to use a clichéd phrase that occurred to me then, a dream come true (very different than being awake within a dream). It was reality and I knew I had awakened from the dream of self in the same way we awaken in the morning and know we are no longer asleep. Now, in the mornings, I feel the weight of self come upon me with the first blinking of my mind; sometimes I remember that there is another awakening beyond that enclosure, except that it is not "there" but *here, now, always*. For the

time being, however, I must follow the dictates of my socialized self, slip into my habit routines, and *get things done*.

There are many things in our cultural world (our lived reality) that dictate against awakening beyond self to discover that one is a living aspect of an interrelating living world. Jung called transcending the self *awakening to the Self*, a new centre of awareness that is really our original centre; as the doorway to the collective unconscious, surely Jung capitalized Self to avoid using the more connotative word *soul*. It's a nice word, almost forbidden, and that adds to its attraction. Note that we awaken (or can awaken) to soul, not *me to my soul* or *you to your soul*. Soul is the soul of the world, the *anima mundi* that church authorities in previous times tried to obliterate by burning to death those who swore by it. But denial of the world soul goes very far back into prehistory, I believe, back to when shamans or prophets became priests and kings to dictate exactly how the sacred would be dealt with. Awareness in the moment amongst untamed forces held its peril. Fear and insecurity turned us into followers. To make us feel safe from life, we believed in the power of those who led us. To make us feel safe from death, we developed formalized belief systems that promised eternal reward for obedience. To make us believe that we loved and were loved, we became faithful patriots and parents. Anyone who wanted more was a danger to the community and an apostate.

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 awareness the moment of crisis has released is quickly dissipated. Creative action we seem to encourage, but every culture has developed ways to guide those impulses down socially acceptable channels. Love, however — not romantic love but the unhindered energy of universal love that I felt sear through me like that animated 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 religion 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 cultivated roles that in subtle ways specify generic appropriateness. If one dares transgress such roles, one had better have the ready support group or at least the mindful conceptualizations at hand to help soul to re-integrate 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 in this issue:

Such a forced breaking of the veil, though, often leaves the experiencer shattered and in some ways dysfunctional if the mental thought patterns that might allow 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. (2011, p. 976)

Clearly, in my youth, I did not know how to live with what I had found or, perhaps, who I had found I was. I can call what happened the revenge of ego, but, given time I might have learned to embrace such awareness and become integrated with it. I do not deny it today, but I am unable to return to it. I am an exile every second of my life. I can blame myself but, since I must live, I generally live with gusto. Some of the blame, however, must go to my social system or culture.

Peace and love are wonderful to live, but they have by now become social embarrassments to discuss in public. It has been a long time since the generational movement of peace and love collapsed or became transmogrified into the indulgences of the “me generation”. In retrospect, it seems that many women did not want to be truly liberated from their social roles and that many men were unwilling to embrace either peace or love since they felt them to be somehow effeminate. In short, we fear unbridled love as an inexcusable weakness. 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 an incredibly open mind 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 to 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 backwards. Today I know: *The walls of ego are made of fear.*

Yet my long return to functioning selfhood has left its mark, as well. Compensation is probably the most easily understandable psychological function of consciousness. I am probably regarded as stubbornly macho. I keep my tender heart mostly hidden and, even though I’m just passed 60, I still lift weights, can be aggressive to anyone who is aggressive to me or threatening to others, I still appreciate female beauty more than I should, and I sometimes catch myself swearing like a seaman — none of which are behaviours commonly seen in socially acceptable university professors.

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 (1964), such transcendence takes back *into* the world, not beyond it. It is indeed the “discovery or the excavation of a long lost treasure” (p. 179). 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 amidst the light of the anima mundi, we have to enter a dark night of the soul. Our assumptions about nature, world, love, and being may have to die before we can be reborn, that is, reawakened to being. For me, this is the dream that needs to come true for all humanity, for all life, and it is not impossible that it is destiny.



## In a Dark Time

*A steady storm of correspondences!*  
 A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
 And in broad day the midnight come again!  
 a man goes far to find out what he is—  
 Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
 All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
 My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
 Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which *I* is I?  
 A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
 The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
 And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

(Theodore Roethke, 1964)

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