



Thoughts on the Radical Acceptance of Everything: A New Perspective on the Nature of Good, Evil, the Soul, and Human Existence

by Laurence Letich We are almost always experiencing only a tiny, momentary part of ourselves, but we talk as if we are whole. We say things like, "I'm sad" or "I'm angry" or "I'm concerned," but in fact we know that at 8:00 in the morning we may look out the window and be sad that the rain has ruined our plans for a day at the beach, and at 11 be angry that someone we were to meet hasn't shown up yet, and a half-hour later be happy that he's arrived and apologized, and at 3:00 be concerned about the progress of a project. All these states of being are ephemeral—they last for a minute, an hour, a week, a month or in rare instances longer, but circumstances change and they change. Therefore, when we say, "I'm sad," we're just describing a very momentary state of our full being. It would be more accurate for us to say that the I that exists at 8:00 is sad. But even that wouldn't be completely accurate, for at that same moment, we may also be listening to the news on the radio, thinking about an upcoming vacation, and feeling hungry for breakfast. So who is this I within us—this I whom we don't talk about, but take for granted—who actually experiences all these states of being in succession, or even simultaneously, yet is not any one of them? Or what about when we say we feel "ambivalent" about something—say, a new, more responsible (and more demanding) job we've been offered. Don't we really experience a feeling like one part of us wants to take the job and another part of us doesn't? And doesn't it seem as though we keep shifting back and forth between two very complete and highly convincing parts of ourselves, sometimes in the very same minute? So who, exactly, is it who feels these two parts, remembers the one and then the other, and shuttles back and forth between them? Those who

meditate may recognize and call what I am writing about the "observing ego," that part of us which can observe and let go of all thoughts and feelings, a part which is bigger than all these parts and can transcend them all. In this paper I will call it the "central I." In its simplest sense, it is merely the organizing principle of the psyche. Everyone from the greatest geniuses to the biggest fools and from saints to serial killers has one. Yet we are even less aware of it than we are of our breathing or our hearts beating. It is so fundamental to our ability to experience existence, and at the same time so completely mundane, that it's practically invisible; we don't even realize it's there. But this "central I" can do much more than simply organize experience or observe all the fleeting thoughts and emotions and transcend them as maya (illusion). It can bring a special type of compassionate awareness and listening to the parts that leads them to the wholeness that they truly are attempting to achieve. The central I can, in a sense, sit down and "keep company" with each and every inner part, as you might keep company with a sad or angry or concerned friend, and by extending empathy, compassion, kindness, a welcoming acceptance and a "listening ear," actually bring healing and wholeness to the saddest, angriest, loneliest, or most lost and hate-filled parts within. This ability, which is a perfectly natural ability that is part of our shared biological human heritage, has great implications for what we understand of the nature of the soul, of good and evil, and of God. The ideas in this paper are outgrowths of the work and insights of two people, psychologist Eugene Gendlin, Ph.D., and my teacher and mentor of the past seven years, Ann Weiser Cornell, Ph.D., and to the psychological self-healing process called Focusing, which Gendlin discovered and Cornell has since expanded upon. Back in the late 1960s, Gendlin, then a student of Carl Rogers, Ph.D., the great pioneer in humanistic psychology, was doing research on why some people benefited greatly from therapy and others didn't. What he found was surprising. Success in therapy had little to do with what the therapist did, or how much the person emoted, or how sick or well they were before they started, or even how motivated they reported being at the outset. What mattered most was a certain process that successful patients seemed to do naturally and spontaneously, and unsuccessful patients did not. Sometime in the first two sessions, successful patients would stop what they were saying, slow the pace of

their words, look down or away from the therapist (or even close their eyes), and grope for some inner answer that seemed just outside the edge of their consciousness. When the answer came, there was a rightness and a resonance to it the therapy-patient could feel. It would bring a release of tension, a letting go of the breath, even sometimes an exhilaration. Many such moments over several or many therapy sessions seemed to result in inner healing. One of the most fascinating aspects of this introspective "groping" process was that successful patients didn't learn to do it from the therapist. Instead, it simply arose, as if the knowledge about how to listen to oneself effectively to heal was imprinted within, and only needed the right environment to emerge. Gendlin called this process "Focusing" and began to believe it could be taught to people outside of therapy, as a self-help therapeutic technique. Gendlin also asked himself just what this thing that successful clients groped for and found was. It wasn't simply a thought-an insight coming from the "head"-because "focusers" seemed to be experiencing sensations in their body, and because many analytical people who seemed to understand themselves and have insights into their behavior did not get better. Nor was it simply the experience of feelings and emotions, in the sense that we usually think of them, such as "I'm angry at my mother" or "I'm afraid of my boss." There were clearly a great number of people who could express plenty of strong emotions in therapy, but who didn't heal. Instead, Gendlin called what they were experiencing the "felt sense," because it seemed to be felt in the body, but it was also a sense; a more diffuse, organismic sensation than regular emotions. These felt senses would eventually lead to deep and often surprising cognitive understandings-but only if the person would pay attention to them in a patient, non-judgmental "listening" way. Also, there was a distinct, very slightly "distant" quality to a felt sense-you did not become a felt sense, you listened and paid attention to it. If you were totally immersed in an emotion-if you were totally sad or angry-you couldn't get the felt sense. As Gendlin put it, "If you want to know what the soup smells like, it's better not to stick your head in it." It was this special slightly distant quality, and this special relationship to the felt sense, that Cornell, a student of Gendlin's, began to realize, over 20 years of teaching and practicing Focusing, was at the very core of the Focusing healing process. Her work, called Inner

Relationship Focusing to distinguish it from the methods of Gendlin's work, focuses on forming a healing relationship of welcoming, listening and acceptance between the central I and the feelings, experiences and states of being we have that feel incomplete, hurting, and not whole. Thus, instead of saying, "I'm feeling sad," within the 20-60 minute Focusing session the Focuser is guided to experience that state as "part of me is sad," or "there's sadness there [inside]." Then the Focuser is guided to take time to "keep company" with that sad feeling and listen to it, as you might a sad friend, neither fixing it, rescuing it, cheering it up or arguing with it, but simply being its caring, compassionate companion. (Eventually novice Focusers learn how to maintain this Focusing stance either in Focusing sessions alone or with a friend who also knows Focusing.) Once the sadness, in this case, is distanced and "dis-identified" from the whole Self, treated as somehow separate yet related and associated with the whole, then the central I can become a caring, compassionate listener pretty easily. If it seemingly can't, then it's understood that what's happened is that there is another part that is saying, "No! I don't want to be compassionate to that sadness!" The solution then is for the I to turn its attention to the part that condemns the sadness and offer this part a friendly, welcoming ear.

Once a novice Focuser gets the hang of it, it is always possible to come to a place of compassionate acceptance (which is different from agreement or acquiescence) with his or her own inner experience, no matter how difficult, painful or "unacceptable" it may seem to be. While it could be argued that Focusers are simply learning a particular mental attitude or "stance" with which to observe their emotions, I would argue, based on my personal experience of this state of being as well as the experience of other Focusers, that the "stance" is a fundamental and intrinsic-possibly the most fundamental and intrinsic-aspect of this state of being. The central I is always capable of understanding and compassion. That is its true nature. It is an axiom of Focusing that nothing inside gets healed or changed when we argue with it, preach to it, punish it, set goals for it or do any of the other typical things done to "unacceptable" thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The only process that has a chance to heal or change them is to let them inwardly be, and for the central I to extend to them listening,

acceptance and empathy. Yet this process has been used, not just to listen to and heal "nice" feelings like sadness and guilt, but addictions and sexual compulsions, murderous rages-the inner parts people have that make them feel they can't trust their entire inner selves, that lead them to believe there really are parts of themselves that are wicked, prone to evil, "naturally" cruel and selfish, un-Godly, untrustworthy. Brought back into the light of compassion, into the family of the Self, these parts reveal themselves not as devils and monsters, but as protectors and guardians of the Self's very existence and integrity. Partly for this reason, Cornell sometimes describes her work as "the Radical Acceptance of Everything." Could it be true that there is no id, no fundamental Devil Within, no yetzer hara, or evil impulse, as the Talmud calls it? And if we don't have such a thing inside us, does that mean nobody does? Or do some people have it-and then who knows who they are, who decides? And if nobody has it, then isn't that the height of New Age softness and fuzziness, denying that evil and sin exists, glibly calling it "sickness" or "ignorance" and tritely claiming that "everything happens for a reason"? If there is no fundamental evil impulse, then what is the nature of evil? And where, of course, is God? **In the slumber of the "I" is the root of all suffering** But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves. First, see if you'd be willing to try a little experiment. Take some problem or difficulty in your life; something that's making you feel angry, sad, upset, troubled, scared. Bring the problem or feeling into your awareness enough so that you are clearly feeling it. But instead of saying, "I'm angry (or sad or scared)" about the problem, say to yourself, "A part of me is angry (etc.)...." (If it feels like a very big, difficult problem, you could say to yourself, "A big part of me is angry....") Then imagine sitting down next to this troubled part of you, and inwardly saying to it, "Hello. I hear that you're feeling angry" or whatever the feeling is, about the troublesome situation. If you can, see then if it says anything back in response. If you tried this exercise, the first thing you might feel is its strangeness. After all, we're rarely encouraged to talk to ourselves so blatantly! But if you were able to get over the thoughts about it being weird, "schizophrenic," or whatever, you might have noticed a sudden sense of inner distance between you and the troubled feelings, as well as between you and the problem causing them. You might have

experienced a little easing, a sense of relief or even of freedom. You might even have begun to hear more from the troubled part of you. It might have said back, "I'm not hurt, I'm angry" or "I'm not scared, I'm terrified," or it might have already begun offering new perspectives, even some possible solutions. Why did this improvement happen? Because, before you did the exercise, you "identified" with your problem. While you thought about it, "it" was "you"-the totality of you. As long as you didn't think about it, it disappeared from your consciousness, a state we call "dissociated," but while you thought about it, it took over. But by simply calling it a "part" of you, and then imagining yourself listening to this troubled part, you put the problem in its place, and gave your Central I, your Larger Self, room to apply its greater wisdom and understanding to the situation. You realized, not from the "head" but from your whole self, that "you" were larger than "it." On the other hand, maybe you didn't try this experiment. Or maybe you did, but you had a very strong reaction against trying it. You might have found yourself thinking, "What in the world are you talking about, saying a part of me is mad. I'm just mad, that's all! What's wrong with that?" There are two reasons you might have reacted that way. The first, as mentioned above, is simply the strangeness of the exercise to our culture. It's not something people normally do. But the second reason is that the part of you feeling mad is refusing to give up its central place in the psyche. It's afraid of giving up control. It doesn't know (because you've had no experience at this) that being seen as a part, with the central I in command, would lead it to greater wholeness. Therefore, it doesn't want to be seen as a part. It wants to be seen as the whole. Before we explore this further, let's step back a moment. When it comes to the relationship between the Central I and its parts, there are really only three basic "states of being" we human beings can experience.

The first state is where we spend the vast majority of time. Think back to this morning (let's say it's Friday). If you're like a lot of people, you spent an hour or so rushing around, getting ready for work, getting the kids ready for school, perhaps thinking about how glad you were that it's Friday, maybe worrying about something like the bills or a meeting coming up today. This is the normal state of being-a state where there are several parts all going on at once, managed, more or

less, by the central I. Hassled, exhilarated, worried and happy can all be experienced almost simultaneously, and the body can be doing one thing while the mind is doing another, yet all-in-all we feel basically "normal" and okay. In the second state, where we experience joy, ecstasy, or what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "Flow," there is no separation. The central I is the total experience, and there is no division into unconscious or semi-conscious parts. However, for reasons that will be explored later in this article, we cannot stay there. Such experiences show us what we're capable of, but they alone can't make us reach our potential.

The third state is when some part, or several parts, are in command, and the central I has lost or relinquished its ability to listen, heal and lead. In this state, unless the parts in control are getting for the moment exactly what they want, there is suffering. It is the slumber of the I that is at the root of all suffering. The central I has three functions. The first and most important is simply to be the organizer, accompanier and "connecting tissue" between all the parts. (In people with Multiple Personality Disorder, who have separate distinct personalities and can't remember what happens when they switch from one to the other, the Central I, for some reason, is no longer performing this function properly.) The second is to look both inward and outward. That is, to experience and process both inner realities and external realities and mediate between the two. The third is one which we very rarely allow it to do, and yet it's the one which offers us the most chance for healing. Since the Central I alone exists within us constantly over an entire lifetime, it holds within itself the entire knowledge of who we were, who we are, who we are becoming and who we can be. Because of this, it can do for us what good, loving parents of a small child do. Think of two really good, loving parents of, say, a six-year-old girl. First, they appreciate and accept her exactly as she is, knowing what she's capable of doing and being at the age of six, and understanding what she's still too immature to do or experience. Second, they hold in their memory the child she was at birth and two and four and five, which helps them to understand her in her totality and see how she's growing. Third, they're starting to form a picture, an ideal image of her potential, of what she can be at 18 or 20, which informs and guides them in decisions they make for her (like

providing her with music lessons or sending her to a special school). And finally, they also notice the ways she already is departing from that ideal-which shows them the ways they need to help her to ensure her best growth, not in a harsh, punishing way, but in a way that is consonant with their love of her and her loving herself. In short, they love and accept her for who she was, who she is, who she's becoming and who she can be, without ignoring or forgetting any of them. A tough juggling act! Yet that is exactly what the central I can do within us. **The Trap of Identification** But it often doesn't. Nor does it get the opportunity to do its other jobs as well as it could. We won't let it-because we humans, in our constant effort and yearning to achieve unity and wholeness, often make the mistake of creating a false unity by taking a part of ourselves and claiming that it is all of us, or so important that it is at the center of us. When we do that-act like some aspect of us, rather than the central I, is our center-we are identified with that part. There are a million ways to be identified. For example, in our day and age, it seems as though at least 90 percent of people, instead of listening to both inner and outer realities, are totally identified with external reality. For them, life is one long maze of doing, or attempting to do, the right things-going to school and getting the right marks to go to the right college to get into the right profession and then getting the right job and finding the right spouse and buying the right car and the right house and decorating it the right way. (Of course, among those who feel cut off or have been cut off by our society from doing the "right" things, this may express itself as doing the wrong things in order to get all the right things.) This of course, is the dominant message of our culture-that the answer to all of our problems is external-either doing something or buying something. By no means has this been all bad! Amazing things have been accomplished by all the external focus emphasized in the United States and other Western countries over the past 50 years. I personally am eternally grateful for all the externally-oriented engineers in the world, for I have neither the knowledge nor the aptitude to build a functional chair, much less a car or a plane or the computer this article is being written on. But there are limitations to identifying with external reality to the exclusion of inner reality. For one, people focused on external reality will hurt themselves and others by denying their own inner life and the inner lives of others, and by

insisting that internal feelings have no validity unless they're "justified" by objective reality. They might say, for example, "How can you be sad? I give you everything you ask for. Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about!" Also, as we all know, "Face reality!" is one of the most common catch-all commands people use on themselves and others to oversimplify reality and reject change. Ultimately, in the political sphere, it is their over-identification with external reality-their prodigiously intense focus on outer realities coupled with an inability to step away from them, or listen to their own inner world-that causes the sometimes shocking blind spots in many of our best modern-day politicians. The other extreme, rarer in this culture, are those who identify with inner reality almost to the exclusion of external reality. They may have rich inner lives, but they may struggle in relationships or have difficulty doing the things that need to be done to sustain and maintain their physical lives. They may hurt themselves and others by failing to make the distinction of recognizing the validity of their feelings as feelings, believing them instead to be totally accurate representations of objective reality. They would then discount other people's feelings and experiences as false if they don't exactly match their own. We all know people who are identified with their bodies. They can be very strong and very handsome or beautiful. They may be great dancers, full of a sense of humor and a joie de vivre others envy, and their sensuality and sexuality may seem more free-flowing, pleasurable and intense than other people's. Yet of course, a major danger here is that eventually the physical body's strength and outer beauty fades. We can identify with anything-with being rich or being poor or being someone devoted to helping the poor, with being "good" or being "bad," a victim or an abuser, an over-achiever or a basket case, a CEO or a janitor. We can be identified with being a good provider, a great mother, a caring, sensitive person, a "thinker" or a "feeler." We are identified when it feels like we are something, when we cannot put it outside us and say a part of us is that something.

Obviously we can and do identify with qualities and roles that are extremely good and noble. In this sense, identification is just a very strong type of focus, which helps us to accomplish our goals. We almost can't help but spend a large amount of time in identification. (Indeed, our strongest identifications are the ones we don't even notice-they're so much a part of us, they become part of the lens

through which we see the world, and therefore become invisible to our awareness.) But there are three reasons why it's necessary to step out of our identifications for periods of time. The first is that our parts lack the equanimity that our central I has. In a sense, they're always looking for confirmation outside themselves, and so lack stability and perspective. For example, someone overly identified with being a "caring, sensitive person" may try to avoid conflict at all cost. He might become seriously depressed after a long-overdue confrontation, even if the fight results in much-needed changes and a clearing of the air. The fight "proves" he's not as caring and sensitive as he thought he was—so what is he? A drop in income, a loss of a job, a son's middling grades or a daughter going to college can all cause suffering far in excess of any actual physical pain or threat to survival for ourselves or our loved ones, depending on our identifications. The second reason, related to the first, is that whenever we are identified with one part, we are dissociated from one or more other parts. This is not the same as dis-identification. Dis-identified, you recall, is when the I and the part are experienced as separate yet related—when the I can keep company with the part and treat it with compassionate, listening awareness. But dissociated is when a part of ourselves is denied, rejected, or even exiled, locked totally out of awareness, experienced as not-me. The caring, sensitive person may be extremely dissociated from his own feelings of anger. The more intensely we identify with one part of us, the more strongly we are dissociated from other parts, and the more parts there are from which we are dissociated. Finally, the parts, lacking the unifying time-sense of the central I, are basically static. They're committed to the future being nothing more than an extension of the past. The central I, however, is not locked in the past. It exists in the "spacious present," where a multitude of latent possibilities are already present as potentialities. From identification, we are constantly trying to make modifications that sometimes work, and more often don't. Only dis-identification allows for truly new syntheses to emerge. Sometimes we feel forced to identify with a part of us, as when a job demands all of our intention and concentration to the point where we almost can't remember any other aspect of our life. At such moments we could still say that the job is only a part of us, albeit a very big part. However, if the job has been so demanding that many other parts of the self have

been suppressed, it may feel as though the mere act of admitting the non-centrality of the job-self would lift the lid on all the other parts that have been locked out and held down, and we would begin to feel a deep despair. **The Captain and the crew** Inner Relationship Focusing works to break out of identification and to allow the Central I to emerge in its most healing aspect. In Inner Relationship Focusing, when there is not a specific issue to work on, we often begin by inviting our awareness to the central part of our bodies, especially to our throat, chest, stomach and abdomen. This is important, because the information needed to reach our most important Truths is not found in our heads, or even in our hearts. Rather, it is embodied-that is, encoded, in ways we do not yet understand, into the very cells and structures of our physical being. The throat, chest, stomach and abdomen seem for some reason to be the best places to look first. Important messages can sometimes appear first as a thought, or an emotion, or a visual image, but until they are also clearly sensed within the body, they are at least suspect.

With awareness focused on the central portion of our bodies, we notice whatever is there that is "calling for our attention." In a sense, we hold out a quiet invitation for something, we know not what, to come forward. At first it may be just a physical sensation-a tightness in the chest, a pain around the heart-and if paid attention to, it will begin to "open up," to have a meaning, an emotion and perhaps even a story behind it-the story of how we feel at work, say, or the state of our relationship with our spouse. As this happens, we gently invite ourselves to listen to it, and say inside, "I hear that made that you sad," or "I can see how that made you angry." Other parts may then speak-other parts that disagree, or fill in more of the story. But indeed, since every part has as its ultimate motivation the fulfillment of the whole, each part is welcomed and heard, until an inner resolution is reached. It is like the captain of a ship and his crew. Imagine that the captain, with complete honesty and sincerity, invites the crew to tell him what is really going on. At first, if the captain hasn't made such an offer before, it may take a long time for the crew to tell him anything. But perhaps one day (maybe when a crisis is brewing), one lowly crew member-the young apprentice of the boiler attendant-lets the captain know he has something to say. At first he

is frightened-he hems and haws, he stutters, he leaves for a minute or two and comes back-but seeing that the captain is patient and has not rejected him, he begins to talk. Both frightened and emboldened by this turn of events, he may begin by first complaining about the food and his terrible working conditions. But ultimately, he will tell his full story. And even though he may not say this aloud, the underlying message he wants the captain to understand is that even he, a boiler room apprentice who's never gone to school or learned to read, knows a lot about the ship and knows something about what it needs! As the young apprentice speaks, other crew members who know about the problem gather to tell what they know. Some are more frightened or angry than others. And they may completely disagree with one another. The ship's engineer and the first lieutenant, for instance, always have opposite opinions and have fought with each other for years. All the angers, fears, and internal squabbles must be heard and in the process straightened out (at least temporarily) so the important messages come through. But, interestingly, in the presence of an understanding captain none of the crew members want ultimately to get their way. What they want is to be heard, honored, respected and understood, and recognized that they want the best for the whole. Finally, when all have spoken and been heard, the captain reaches a resolution, one much better than any one crew member or a committee of the crew could have reached. Yet curiously, the captain doesn't usually announce the decision himself. Like the wisest and most skilled executives, he makes it seem as if the crew reached the decision on their own. Often he arranges it so that the resolution seems to come from the crew member who has been heard the least and given the least respect. Yet it's clear that the resolution could not have been reached without the captain listening to all the crew members, especially the least favored one, with clarity and compassion. Sometimes this process is easy-all it takes is to get the captain and the crew together in the proper relationship. Sometimes it's a lot harder. But there are times when it's much more difficult than that. One such time is in the case of a serious addiction or compulsion. **The Prisoner's Tale** For many people, there is a prisoner held in the ship's brig. Once a senior crew member, he was arrested on trumped-up charges while on duty a long time ago and has been locked away for longer than anyone can remember. So

desperate, hopeless and despairing is he over his situation that the only way he believes he can ever be free is by taking over the ship—locking up the captain, putting him in a closet, tying his hands and taping his mouth. When he succeeds in doing this, for a short time he feels a great sense of freedom and power. That is why people with addictions and serious compulsions feel a powerful sense of euphoria or clarity or mission—beginning not at the moment when they begin to drink, for example, (they may or may not feel good at that moment), but at the moment they "go over the edge" and know they are going to do it—which could be when they're in the liquor store. It's as if they've been "hijacked." Dimly they may still be aware of a voice inside telling them that what they're doing is hurtful and destructive to themselves and others, but at that moment they're flooded with powerful voices and feelings urging them on about the rightness of what they're doing. This is also why an addiction, or more obviously a compulsion, can have a bizarrely irrational quality, and leave those who are close to the compulsive person feeling so used and betrayed. Take the example of the well-loved small-town minister who turns out to have been embezzling money from the church for years. Everybody believes that he must have plotted it all along, that his goodness must have been an act. But he'll say that each time he did it he was not in his right mind, which is exactly true. What he won't say, because nobody would understand and most would be horrified to hear it, is that whenever he took the money out of the kitty and stuck it in his pocket, something inside him told him it was the right thing to do, and he wanted to do it. Each time the act is completed, he would neither be able to understand what propelled him to do it, nor reverse what he had done. Around the acts would grow a darker and darker wall of shame and secrecy, as that part of him would be hidden even from himself as quickly and completely as possible, until he is finally discovered. The prisoner once did an important job for the ship, and no one can fully replace him, leaving the entire ship's operation handicapped. That is why he escapes most often when there's stress, or when the job he once did is greatly needed. But once he's escaped, locked up the captain and taken over the ship, he can barely remember his old job. He surely can't navigate the ship—not without the captain. In fact, he's quite weak. All he can do is stay in control for the time he can, and try to tell the other crew members the truth of

what happened the day he was arrested and locked away. But there are too many crew members around who fear the destruction of the entire ship should the truth of the prisoner's tale be heard, so the prisoner speaks only in code-often in the choice of the drug or compulsion and the ritual surrounding it. Eventually the prisoner weakens and the other crew members lock him up again. Or, in some cases, slowly the prisoner becomes the dominant crew member-the hijacking is semi-permanent. But the prisoner, alone without the captain and controlling the other crew members through fear, is still living in a psychic prison. This is the awful paradox of any addiction or compulsion-that no matter how destructive or even abusive it is, at its heart it is powerfully life-giving and life-serving. It is more than an escape from psychic pain and a release from tension, although it is both of those as well. It is an attempt at wholeness and a misguided effort to save the psychological integrity and even the very life of the individual. Yet while the urge is life-serving, acting on the addiction or compulsion forecloses the possibility of healing, because the central I is not in control, and only the central I has the power to heal. The prisoner must be invited, first to speak of the life-serving rightness of his acts (without, of course letting him follow through), and then little by little, to speak his name and tell his story. It is a difficult journey, because the prisoner must first let go of the one thing he has-his "integrity" (like Milton's Satan, he'd rather "lead in Hell than follow in Heaven") and his illusory sense of control and power, leaving him terrified and powerless. The prisoner has come to believe that love does not exist. To accept and trust the gentleness of the I requires opening to the possibility, and then the certainty, that the cruel universe he has experienced is not ultimate reality-and that realization, that new perspective, is always painful. To give up control and believe against previous experience that one will be loved rather than destroyed, is possibly the most difficult and frightening task one can ever undertake. But what the prisoner does in extreme to separate from the Self we all do much of the time. It is part of the dance of the Universe, the two-sided nature of God. **The Gift of the Rebel's Choice** This two-sided nature is not, as is so commonly believed, a battle between Light and Darkness, or Goodness and Evil. It is not, in fact, a battle at all, but a constantly changing dynamic interaction, without which existence itself-Creation itself-

would not be possible. It is the interaction between expansion and coalescence. These go by other names: Separation and unity, or even thought and desire, Psyche and Eros, Shiva and Shakti. Both are needed. A universe of expansion alone would be nothing but infinite energy, radiating forever outward, interacting with nothing, impacting nothing, creating nothing. But a universe of coalescence alone would be exactly like the astronomical entity known as a black hole—a tiny dot of infinitely dense, infinitely heavy matter from which nothing, not even light, can escape. Since both of these must be present at every moment in dynamic interaction with one another for anything to exist, even at the subatomic level, we cannot "fall off" into worshiping one to the exclusion of the other. It seems more "spiritual" to worship unity, since the worldly do such a fine job of worshiping separation. But without separation, what meaning is there to unity? If everything were simply fused, there would be nothing to unite—and nothing new. God, in order to know and experience and develop Itself, had to break into parts that are separate from yet related to each other and It. And so do we. We cannot grow and develop if we stay in a position of total inner one-ness. An "older" part of us must stand outside and apart from our experience, observing, thinking, sensing and making adjustments, while "newer" parts test the waters and try new things. The more difficult the challenge, the more we are truly stretching beyond our limitations, the more new parts of ourselves are being born out of the great creativity of the central I. We can see this process develop in earliest childhood in the form of play. In play, children externalize their parts, and externalize their model of the world and manipulate it, teaching themselves the process of thinking about things, playing out the possibilities, the "what-ifs" that form our inner realities. As they grow older, they increasingly can symbolize this process without the aid of toys, playing out the scenarios inside their own minds until they reach the sophistication and complexity of adults. For young children, their play feels very real. For adults, life's realities are our "playground"—though we usually don't think of them that way!

One of the great paradoxes is that, despite the gentleness and compassion of the central I (or perhaps because of them), those who fully listen and surrender to the I, even for a week, are forever changed. They can never again completely forget what it means to be authentic to themselves. They may not live more fully authentic lives

for years, if ever, but now they know what they are doing, and they can never completely turn back to unconsciousness. Maybe this is why so few people are willing to take this step. To most people, knowing and listening to and following their own inner truth sounds great in theory, but seems about as realistic as quitting their jobs, dropping their children at the nearest Burger King, and hiking for a year through Nepal-and just as responsible. One reason for this is that most of us have been taught so well to distrust our selves, and to believe that we are "good" only to the extent that we control what is "bad" within us, that we fear listening within. All we know and trust is the familiar but limited homeostasis achieved between the endless inner attacks and remonstrances and the rebellious inner parts that wish we were "free." But there may be an even deeper reason than this for our failure to listen or become more authentic to our selves. If part of the nature of God is expansion or separation, could it be that some part of us doesn't want any part of this "central I" stuff-and that's part of the plan, too? How many of us feel like we've made something of a mess of our lives-with the wrong job, the wrong career, the wrong marriage, or an addiction? And how many of us feel that, even way back when we first chose this direction, we knew deep down we were doing the wrong thing? Is it possible that the purpose of our choice was to know more, learn more and become more, but-and here's the rub-we only gain the treasure from our journeys in the wilderness when we take up the challenge and embrace the enormous struggle of finding our way back? Maybe, just as, in order to grow, the child of even the best parents in the world must have experiences the parents don't know about, so we ourselves at different times in our lives must have experiences our central I doesn't "know" about, in order to know and become more. Good parents know their children must have those kinds of experiences. But good parents know their children can't stay out there too long or they'll get lost, so at a certain moment, if the child hasn't returned, they'll go and bring them home. With adults and the central I, the game is much trickier, and the stakes much higher, because an adult can get very lost, and is under no compunction to find his way home ever in his life. But the path home is always available (if sometimes very difficult), and the central I is nothing if not patient. It's ready at any moment to listen to the body and all the inner, forgotten and rejected parts, and offer the first possible step.

And the further the journey away, the more collected riches will be in store on the way back and at the homecoming (although there may also be great pain along the way). So it's not just that the prodigal son is always welcome home. Our prodigal sons (the ones within us) have to leave, for their own sake and ours, so that, if they ever do find their way home again, they are wiser and richer than if they had never left. And so then, of course, are we. In Judaism, this idea is embodied in the concept of t'shuvah, the practice of admitting one's sins before God done most intensively during the High Holy Days, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. T'shuvah literally means "return." In the words of Adin Steinsaltz,

Its significance goes far beyond the narrow meaning of contrition or regret over error. [It] is considered to be fundamental to the existence of the world....T'shuvah is a universal, primordial phenomenon...embedded in the root structure of the world.

T'shuvah is a manifestation of the divine within us. Through t'shuvah, we can extricate ourselves from the binding web of our lives, from the chain of causality that otherwise compels us to follow a path of no return.

And, as the great scholar Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, in his book Lights of T'shuvah, explains:

The pain felt in the initial inspiration to t'shuvah is due to the severance of the evil/[hurt] layers of the self, which cannot be mended as long as they are attached to and remain part of the person, causing deterioration of the whole spirit. Through t'shuvah they are severed from the basic essence of the self. Every severance, like surgery, causes some pain. This, however, is the most inward kind of pain, through which a person is liberated from servitude to the worst habits and most lowly inclinations, and their bitter aftereffects.

T'shuvah emerges from the depths of being, from such great depths that there the individual stands, not as a separate entity, but rather as a continuation of the vastness of universal existence. **That Who Hears** The central I-this consciousness that encompasses all our thoughts, memories and feelings, that can extend compassion to anything we experience and is more than anything we experience, is, therefore, the closest thing we human beings in this physical existence have to a Soul. Our soul is here, literally with us every single moment.

We simply haven't trusted it to lead us. Nor have we learned how it relates to the rest of us, or what it can do. Clearly this is what Jesus meant when he said, "The kingdom of God is among [within] you," for we are capable at almost every moment of stepping back, listening within, experiencing all our parts as parts and knowing that at our core we are free and not suffering. Yet it depends on dis-identification. I am convinced this is what the Buddha truly meant when he taught non-attachment-not the elimination or denial of desire, but the ability to dis-identify, to extend empathy to the parts of us that crave and desire personal things. This is what Jesus meant, before his words were distorted, when he said, "If thy hand or thy arm offend thee, cut them off." Jesus also said, "Where two or three of you are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst." The "two or three" are the parts and the I, and the Name (or Names) in this case are compassion, empathy, welcoming, acceptance, openness-grace. From this, we can begin to think about or consider God as That Which (or, perhaps more precisely, That Who) Can Listen To and Keep Company With All The Parts, everywhere. And since God contains within Itself all that was, is and can be, God also is what makes change-makes becoming-possible. Quite possibly, when we are praying, we are the part that is "calling for God's attention," just as earlier, in the description of Inner Relationship Focusing, we talked about locating a part inside us calling for our attention. During the Focusing experience, we realize that once in the presence of the central I, the parts really don't want their way. Nor do they want to be fixed, rescued, mollified or minimized, because that is denying them their growth and integrity, treating them as less than what they are. They want, bottom line, to be listened to without judgment, heard, honored, accepted, welcomed-and most of all, empathized with. They don't want the central I to be neutral and unaffected. They want it to "take in" their feelings without collapsing. They want to sense that they were understood and what they said mattered, no matter what the final outcome. In the same way, despite all the horrors and sufferings of our century, and despite the fact that throughout Man's history, cruelty and pain seem to be far more common than love and compassion, the growth of the human spirit, either within one individual or in all of humanity, would not be served if God tried to fix, change or rescue us. Nor may it be God's function and purpose. God's function may be to hear us, and to guide

us gently toward greater unity with the whole, and toward deeper empathy and compassion. When we really pray, we ourselves seek most of all the feeling that God hears us and welcomes everything we experience—even when we are filled with rage, or fear, or even disbelief in God. Perhaps faith, at its core, is first the belief and then the felt sense experience that something compassionate, benevolent and all-encompassing hears us and is affected by our prayers, and whispers back to us, "So that is what it is like for you. Yes, now I understand." When we experience that feeling that our prayers are being listened to, we feel healed, even though none of our circumstances have yet changed.

And perhaps, when we say that our prayers were "answered," it is because at that moment, we were the part whose need and request was the resolution most needed by the Whole—either the whole of us, or the larger Whole. When our prayers aren't answered, maybe it is because some other action or outcome is needed by the whole. If expansion and separation are part of the integral nature of God and Creation, and if we can accept as objective (not just psychological) reality the miracle of faith, which has allowed people to experience God's presence even in the darkest circumstances, then it is possible to imagine a loving and compassionate God without denying or minimizing the existence of tragedy or evil (nor overly emphasizing them), and without turning evil into something Humanity created against God's wishes. Yet we can only do this if we are willing to try to accept everything with compassion and what the Buddhists call "lovingkindness." In the work to heal what is separate, broken, unhealed and suffering around us, it's important to remember that we must welcome and accept the whole, even (or especially) those parts that we feel we can't. The truth is, we can't heal anything that we believe is irredeemably separate or in the dark. We can only try to overpower and suppress it. That may succeed for a while, and it may even be necessary at times. But not only will we lose the treasure hidden in the lost part when we do so, the suppression itself will take on the qualities of the very darkness it is meant to abate. The most eloquent words and the finest exhortations to the light will not change a single area of darkness one iota. Only acceptance of what is can begin to change reality. Only listening to the darkness, hearing its full

story without judgment, finding out what it's scared of, and ultimately learning what it wants for the whole-what gift or treasure it holds, albeit in a very distorted, even perverted form-can create the environment where change is possible. Oddly, to remain centered and most effective, we must be willing to stand at the middle point between two contradictory feelings-a full acceptance of what is, and an unswerving belief in and commitment to what should be. Those who work for justice and change, suffering the defeats and retrenchments that are so pandemic right now, can help themselves by providing tremendous amounts of gentleness and empathy to the parts of themselves that are so frustrated and hurt. Once those are well heard and comforted, they could then ask (gently) if there is anything they are not listening to. Is there something they are not allowing themselves to hear? Are they demonizing, dividing the world into "good" and "bad," excluding too much, not including enough of the whole? Is there some part-some truth-that may be being expressed, in a distorted form, by their opposition? If so, is there some way they can acknowledge it, hear it, and transmute it so that it works for the greater whole? And maybe (if all else doesn't seem to be working) it may be good to wonder what purpose might be served right now by the separation from wholeness, from God? If all these parts are listened to, and these questions asked, and these contradictions held, and it still feels as though the course of action taken feels right by the central I, then the activist can feel safe in trusting himself or herself in her path, knowing that he or she is doing soul work, the work of God on earth. In the end, all this leads to a widely used but rarely defined term-grace. Grace is the miracle that acceptance, kindness, empathy, and a compassion that is profoundly caring without being attached, can transmute the greatest hurts into the greatest treasures. It is grace when a woman's shameful addiction changes into a source of inner light and strength. It was grace when a vicious voice inside myself, one that condemned many of my best efforts, became transmuted into the voice of what I truly aspire to be. And it was grace when a number of years ago, after spending a day thinking that surely, the only rational answer to my failures was to swallow a bottle of pills, I was healed by a call to my best friend, who never once contradicted me or tried to make me feel better, but who simply was willing to listen to me say exactly how terrible I felt. With

compassionate presence, he "took in" what I was saying, offering no advice and saying very little until near the end, but by the time the phone call was over, though nothing in my life had changed, I could barely imagine that just an hour earlier, I had wanted to destroy myself. The last example is important, for not just this grace, but all the other graces mentioned above, came to a lesser or greater degree with the help and guidance of others. This is the last paradox: Though no one can heal anyone else, and no one can complete anyone else, and we have within us that which can heal us, we often need others to help us heal ourselves; to point the way and show us, among other things, what we are identified with and what parts of ourselves we do not see, and to help us feel safe enough to face our worst hurts and fears. It is part of God's greatest gift and grace to us that, in Its infinite and joyful quest to know and experience Itself more completely, It enjoins us to seek out, experience, listen to and know one other.