

The School for The Work

*An Account
by
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Richard's blog richardlawrencecohen.blogspot.com

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I'm in Love!

With [this woman](#).

Byron Katie is an authentic homegrown American spiritual genius out of Barstow, California. Raised in ordinary circumstances, she became successful in real estate, married twice, and raised three kids. In her thirties she became severely depressed, a state that lasted ten years. She suffered from bouts of rage that terrified her children. Agoraphobia set in; she stayed in bed for weeks at a time, neglecting to wash or bathe, and eventually checked herself into a halfway house for alcoholics and people with eating disorders, the only facility her insurance company would pay for. At the clinic, her anger was so frightening to the other residents that she was placed in a separate attic room, where she slept on the floor because she felt unworthy of a bed. About two weeks later, she woke up one morning in a state of unalloyed clarity and joy. She felt that she was no longer herself and that she wasn't separate from anything in the universe. An "it," or perhaps a larger "I," was looking out through her eyes. And she understood that all suffering comes from thoughts.

Returning home shortly afterward, her state of joyous understanding endured. She reconciled with her astounded family. She spent a good deal of time in the nearby desert, sitting in the wind. Word of her awakening spread fast and people began coming to her with questions about their lives. When they told her of their perceived problems, she would ask, "Honey, is that true?" and lead them to see that their sufferings were built on misconceptions of what ought to be or of what was being done to them.

Over the next two years, she formalized her approach into a list of four questions, amazingly simple, :

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought?

The four questions are followed by a "turnaround" in which you reverse the terms of the thought and find at least three specific, genuine examples of how the turnaround is as true or truer than the initial thought. For example, "He's mean to me," might become "He's not mean to me," or, "I'm mean to him," or "I'm mean to myself." (It's important to find examples for each turnaround before you go to the next one.)

Writing down the answers and the turnaround, dwelling on them to see what emerges, is a profound meditation that leads one to uncover the projections, the blamings, and the fictions that one lives by. The approach is completely nonjudgmental: one doesn't try to eradicate the thought, one simply acknowledges it and, eventually, even comes to be grateful to it.

Katie calls this process of inquiry [The Work](#). One does it over and over again, on any issue in one's life, and it keeps generating joy and clarity. And from what I've read, the more one does it, the deeper and subtler one's insights become and the more automatically fruitful the process becomes. Apparently Katie lives at some level of impersonal unity with the cosmos where questions of identity, of life and death, hardly matter anymore. Most people, operating at a more mundane level, use The Work for its psychotherapeutic benefits, the changes it can create in their self-identified lives.

The approach is so simple, many people are suspicious of it. How can four rather obvious questions change misery into joy almost overnight? Can the change really last? Isn't there some sort of flim-flam, some guru effect, going on?

Well, Katie has a powerful personality, and I think that was responsible for both the depth of her crash and the height of her rebound. Her enthusiasm and personal presence -- which, while consistently loving, can also be tough and no-nonsense -- are major factors in her material success. But I also get the feeling that her material success is genuinely a side issue for her, that if she hadn't achieved it, she would still be asking those four questions to any individuals who sought her out, and to herself.

I'm convinced that the technique works, because I've tried it over the past few days. It's premature to say how deeply or permanently I've changed, and I don't know if I'm qualified to judge anyway. But I know I've gained insights into my unproductive mental habits, insights that might have taken me months or years to achieve in therapy, if ever.

And I know that I intended to keep up with The Work to see where it takes me. There are elements in it of cognitive therapy and elements that accord with Buddhist psychology, but Katie, arriving at these ideas on her own, has instinctively stripped away the clinical and cultural frills (or perhaps didn't have them to strip away in the first place) and presented only the core, the pith, the essence. The reason the Work is so ridiculously simple on the surface is that she's gotten rid of the decoration.

Katie's 2002 book, [*Loving What Is*](#), encapsulates the approach so fully that it is all the equipment you need to pursue The Work on your own. No teacher is called for. She says, "You are the teacher." You can also learn the gist of The Work for free through her website, which offers useful printouts and worksheets, a schedule of Katie's many public appearances, and offerings of intensive weekends and week-long programs, at which Katie herself presides. Busy nonstop, and having turned her simple questions into a highly successful commercial enterprise, Katie is remarkably available to answer queries and participate in periodic free conference calls.

In the world out there, The Work is classified under "Self-Help" and therefore crammed together with scores of other glitzy, self-

promotional techniques promising happiness to the anxious American middle class. Glitz and self-promotion aren't absent from Katie's business, but one senses an authenticity underneath: a pragmatic directness flowing from the joy of real knowledge. You can spend lots of money on The Work if you want to, but Katie is glad if you don't spend any.

When the student is ready, the teacher arrives, the saying goes, and if I'm not ready now, I don't know when I ever would be. And while I might say that the teacher is Katie, she would say it's me.

If there is anything problematic at all in your life -- a job, a relationship, a health issue, money, anything -- I suggest that you look up The Work.

I thank Dilys at [Good and Happy](#) for [posting about Byron Katie](#) so often that I finally had to check it out.



April 11, 2007

I'm Ready for My Closeup

Or to put it another way, I'm headed for Los Angeles. I'll be there ten days starting tomorrow --- I'll be back Monday April 23 (Shakespeare's birthday and deathday).

"What will you be doing in LA, Richard?" Well, not making a movie, I'll tell you that. I'm going to attend [Byron Katie's School for the Work](#), a nine-day intensive program that's a kind of psychological Outward Bound, from what I've heard. Nine days of concentrated emotional and interpersonal exercises developed by Katie as stimuli for transformative change, based on what she has learned through [her own transformation](#) out of despair into permanent joy.

I first wrote about Katie in [this post](#) last year, and whatever impact the post may have had on my readers, it had an overwhelming, astounding effect on me. You see, Katie learned about me through our mutual friend [Dilys at Good & Happy](#), one of my favorite blogs of yore. Unbeknownst to me, Dilys showed Katie my post and Katie was so moved that a few months afterward, her husband, the great translator [Stephen Mitchell](#), emailed me to invite me to the School as their guest. Something I had dreamed of saving up for had landed in my lap for free, out of the blue! It is the most wonderful act of generosity I have ever received. And it's typical of this enlightened person from whose magisterially simple self-questioning technique I continue to learn so much.

I hope to tell you lots about the School, but not during the nine days themselves. I'm going as a full participant, not an observer or commentator. To do otherwise would be to sabotage the experience by setting myself at a distance from it. I'm not taking my computer. Katie urges us to have as little contact with the outside world as possible during the School. I'll take my cell phone to call my kids, and that's it. (She also urges us to

eliminate alcohol, caffeine, and sugar from our diet two weeks before the School, which isn't a problem for me.) Ten days without a computer -- I wonder what that will be like. And nine days with a random roommate -- a diabolically instructive part of the School experience.

So this will be my last post until April 24, and during that time I won't be able to read your blogs either, or comment on them, a loss that grieves me more than a break from blogging for myself. In the meantime, blog well!



April 24, 2007

Writer Without a Story: Prologue

I had a fantasy of what it would be like at [The School for the Work of Byron Katie](#) (which, as I found later, should have been called The School for the Work of Richard Cohen). About a hundred people would gather in a large meeting room and spend the day doing worksheet exercises using [Katie's method](#), as well as exercises going beyond the worksheets to challenge our limits, a sort of emotional and interpersonal [Outward Bound](#). At the opening session Katie herself, the big guru, would give us a speech and after that most of our lessons would be given by the staff. We'd get a glimpse of Katie again now and then when she stopped by to give us a canned inspirational talk and make sure things were running smoothly.

Then the socializing! In the evenings I would hang out in the hotel bar, where, sneaking off for meat meals, I'd buy drinks for lustful, neurotic divorcees in my age range. One or more of them would come into focus as favorites of mine and we'd go to bed together, perhaps renting a separate room in order to eliminate the roommate problem. We would bare our souls by longingly telling every bit of personal information about ourselves. As a couple or in a group we'd explore Los Angeles by night and drive into the desert during free daytime hours. At school's end we would exchange contact information, but I'd be wary of getting entangled with my former bedmates. Either I wouldn't want to see them again and would have to fend off their emails and phone calls, or I'd want to turn my life over to one of them and would have to figure out how to persuade her to move to Austin.

This part of it was true: we gathered in a large meeting room and spent the day doing worksheet exercises using Katie's method, as well as exercises going beyond the worksheets to challenge our limits, a sort of emotional and interpersonal Outward Bound. And at the end we exchanged contact information. That's

it. That's how much of my fantasy life turned out to be real. Everything else was just a movie I produced to amuse myself. A feelgood movie, a feelbad movie -- who knows? Lots of talent went into it. Writing, acting, and directing all of professional quality.

Here's a more realistic treatment:

It was more like three hundred people, and Katie sat in front of us in an easy chair for, oh, about ten or eleven hours a day, tirelessly answering our questions, hearing our stories and self-questionings and sometimes telling us hers. (I'm not counting mealtimes, which Katie took in private and students took in a large white tent on the hotel grounds. Meals were part of the work too, so I'm estimating that the average school day was fifteen hours long.)

Katie did all the group teaching herself sitting in the same easy chair in the same casual position, answering innumerable questions and unstintingly sharing what she knows, except that she took one evening off near the end the week. And except that every one of us was both teacher and student at every moment. (More about Katie's apparent personality in a future installment.)

And the socializing? Well, most of what I saw and experienced was pairing up for after-hours work, students sitting in corners facilitating worksheets for each other, talking, crying, hugging, and in some instances screaming. Or sitting solitary, writing in notebooks and three-ring binders, staring into themselves, sipping the everpresent herbal tea, thinking, remembering, weeping.

I made dear friends I will either see again or not. I spent the entire time in love, breathing air saturated with it, the love of three hundred people who were all wildly, unpredictably, frighteningly different and all one lover loving itself. I met individual women, too, whom I embraced physically and mentally, and the thought of going to bed with any of them in

that time and place scarcely occurred to me. The act would have been a betrayal of them, of Katie, and of myself. My luck was better than that.

I never hung out in the bar. I didn't have a single alcoholic drink the whole time. (I've never had what's called a drinking problem -- I average one drink per day or less-- but somehow this seems like a significant detail.) I didn't taste meat for nine days (I'm a devout carnivore). I didn't spend a cent, in cash or credit, except for tipping the chambermaid and [buying some of Katie's materials](#) as gifts. I didn't pay attention to the news. I didn't touch a computer. I didn't read the novel I'd brought for downtime. I didn't even read it on the flight home.

Nor did I see LA, except for one outing that was very much part of the work. We were in the hotel the whole time, [an undistinguished, adequate, midlevel, airline-crew hotel](#) in walking distance of the airport. A beautiful neighborhood. It had everything we needed.

From what I observed, a culture of "didn'ts" held true for my classmates too. I saw one couple nuzzling after pairing up overnight, but I can't be sure they weren't spouses. I heard gay and straight people wryly joking about how good it would be to return to sex back home.

What could we possibly have been doing if not indulging our large and small vices, our one-size-fits-all vices, and sneaking off to kick away the day's constraints? We were kicking away the constraints all right, not of school but of the rest of life.

One of the mottos of The Work is, "Who would you be without your story?" That's what we were doing -- shedding our stories and, we hoped, not settling for a new story but instead doing without a story to whatever extent a human being can. Correction: not shedding our stories but simply looking at them, smiling to them, welcoming them as they came and went. Knowing that our stories are stories.

When I put it that way, a problem that's been worrying me disappears. What is a writer without a story? Can a writer enlighten himself out of a job, like a policeman in a crimeless society or a doctor in a disease-free future? If I have loosened my stories' grip on me, will it hurt me in my life's calling?

Well, I guess I'm writing something now. And let's face it, I'll always have some story or other. If I welcome them rather than pushing them away -- oh, what stories I could tell!

Indeed the phrase "writer without a story" has a double meaning for me. In addition to fearing that I'd lose my creativity if I became too sane, I've feared that I didn't have enough of a story to tell in the first place: that I hadn't lived enough to gather material to work my gifts on. That I was a writer without a subject, whose story was so ordinary and uneventful that few would want to hear it.

That story, too, deliquesces in the very act of writing this.

There are things that cannot be said except sentimentally. The fault is in the words, not the things.



April 25, 2007

Writer Without a Story: The Man-Woman Thing

A middle-aged man wearing a conference nametag walks through the lobby of a hotel, a grateful smile on his face, tears flowing unrestrainedly down his cheeks in full view of airline pilots, flight attendants, bellhops, concierge, and arriving guests. What does he think he's doing? What kind of New Age foolery have I gotten brainwashed into?

It could be that I've been working on my shame. Or my fear and terror. Or the accumulated pain of being a husband, an ex-husband, a father, a son, a brother. It doesn't matter what has unlocked my tears. It doesn't matter who I think I am or what particular hairpin turns and long straightaways have driven me here. I'm here, that's all, I'm letting the tears flow in plain sight for the first time in my life. You look at me. Are you disgusted, worried, embarrassed, amused? Good. That's what I want.

Let's say we've been working on the man-woman thing. A lesbian has stood up and said that for the first time in her life, after doing one of our exercises, she has felt trust in men, and she invites any man to walk up and embrace her. A stunning woman in expensive clothes and perfect makeup has stood and told us what it has meant for her to be unapproachable, to be dependent on the armor of her face. A young man has stood and told us that when he was a child he molested younger boys. A man with an earring and a prim voice has told us he knows we think him effeminate, and he's been thinking of himself that way all his life.

Or maybe sitting in morning meditation I felt hands clutching my arm and then a woman's forehead leaning between those hands, and I put my free arm around her and held her, eyes closed, for half an hour as she shook and cried, my arm cramping, and I knew I would have stayed there till my arm fell

off. And afterward she wrote me a letter and told me it was the first time in her life she understand what it felt like to be breathed by another human being.

Or I had sat on a lawn in the southern California springtime and shared worksheets with a woman who had been terribly hurt by a male relative as a preschooler, who told me that being with me was the first time she had ever felt free of her belief that men were shallow and harmful and untrustworthy, and then I'd watched as she stood in front of three hundred people and said so.

"It was like falling in love," I told my roommate, and he said, "I would drop the 'like.'" I didn't know her last name or where she lived or what she did for a living. It wouldn't have mattered if I hadn't known her first name, either, or if we'd never exchanged a word. We worked together for an hour or two and shared a special meal. We looked into each other's eyes and saw ourselves. Then we parted. And it didn't matter if we never saw each other again, never spoke again during the school, although we did. We had gone through the entire course of a relationship, from first meeting to inevitable ending, in two hours.

Those women helped me as much as I them. The lesbian taught me that I am not suspect. The stunning woman taught me that I do not have to be either covetous or intimidated. The woman who leaned on me taught me that I am everyone and I don't care who sees it. The woman I shared a meal with taught me that love arises and falls away and lasts forever at every moment.

And if I honor her and treasure her memory and wish her joy for all her life, how much more shall I do so for the woman who lived with me for sixteen years and bore my children and raised them with me and taught me and traveled with me and suffered from me, and who parted from me with the greatest honesty and kindness and wisdom?



April 29, 2007

Writer Without a Story: Who Is Byron Katie?

Funny question. I hear her replying, "The one holding this cup of tea right now," or, "Who knows?"

All I can tell you is who I heard and saw. At the beginning of each day's session, without any introduction, [Katie](#) walks in and sits in a large gray easy chair on the little stage. There is a folding screen behind her, a large vase of sunflowers, and a small table with a pitcher of hot herbal tea. She appears to be in her mid-60s, about five feet five (165 cm), with short silver hair worn in bangs, and makeup. Rectangular rimless glasses when she needs to read something. She dresses in soft, good-quality natural fabrics, often of purple or pink-beige, and favors large shawls. Her voice is clear, direct, accentless, becoming slightly scratchy if the day has worn on. She does not seem affected in any way.

The bangs give an impish quality that balances her quiet forcefulness and occasional sternness. She smiles and laughs at the same times you or I would, she can be spontaneously funny (she can also laugh at herself, as we saw during a graduation parody performed by the staff), and she's warm when greeting individuals or groups, but she's not a smiley-face; she has serious work for us and for herself. She speaks in well-thought-out sentences, some of which sound like things she has said often before (and in many cases are familiar from her books) and which she repeats because they are, for her, bedrock truths. At other times, she says things off the cuff that are startling in their aptness. She responds readily to every question and seems unconcerned whether her answers will please us or not.

Although she never raises her voice and is always a model of courtesy and empathy, at times I think I sense a bit of annoyance in her (this is a projection on my part -- because everything is) when people don't get it or when they don't follow the simple

directions in an exercise. She can be hairsplitting about the words she has said or the words she has heard a student say. In some sense that aspect of her is annoyance but not impatience: she will let you keep on not getting it. She can question a student sharply in exploring the student's self-justifying stories. She doesn't buy into victimology. She needs the truth.

"I'm not nice," she said at one point. "I love you."

Sometimes tears come to her eyes (I was sitting about twenty feet away) when discussing a student's pain or sharing pain from her own life. She is evidently exceptionally capable; it is difficult to imagine her at a loss when confronted with any question, person, or situation; yet when she needs time to think of a response she shows it, leaning forward in her chair, brow furrowed, lips tightened, beginning a word and then stopping it. This isn't hemming and hawing, it's an open display of a thought process. The furthest thing from floundering: confidence in one's working-through.

She reveals a surprising amount about her past, sometimes in brief asides and sometimes in full-length anecdotes. She is apparently willing to admit to any sin, any blemish – and she has revealed some doozies. During one session she told us, in detail, exactly how badly she had treated her daughter just before her (Katie's) 1986 awakening. Then she asked, "Roxann, honey, will you stand up, please?" Her daughter, we learned at that moment, was in the audience. And Katie asked Roxann if she would like to give her version of the incident, and Roxann did, and they discussed it candidly in front of 300 people.

Katie has also told us of times when, heeding her own truth, she behaved towards others in ways that are not conventionally nice. Her cousin called her up one night and told her he was pointing a pistol at his head and would pull the trigger if she didn't give him one good reason to stay alive. Katie thought and thought about it, the telephone silence growing. Finally she told him she couldn't think of a reason. Her cousin told her she was the first person he'd ever known in his life who was so fearlessly

honest. He dropped the gun, began to cry, and asked for her help. She helped him question what he was believing, and much later, before he died, he told her that he had never taken another drink after that night. For him, it was the truth that set him free. Of course, as Katie reminded us, he might have pulled the trigger. The Work doesn't give instructions and doesn't make everything magically sitcomlike.

During the school, news of the Virginia Tech massacre filtered in. Someone mentioned it in the group session and Katie asked what had happened. A student explained it in a sentence or two. Katie nodded a few times, taking it in, not altering her slight smile, as if to say, Yes, this is what happens. I'm not sure whether she had heard the news already or not.

She sends volunteers to do The Work with sufferers in trouble spots, such as New Orleans after Katrina. She has spent a lot of time bringing The Work to prisoners, meeting them in person, especially at San Quentin. (One of her prison students told her that he and his fellow Katie-ites have to very careful not to hug each other in the yard.) She makes clear that for her, the penultimate goal in spreading The Work is to end war. (What the ultimate goal is -- well, it's all my interpretation.) She says, "It's a peace movement." And the results leave you with something you can't easily describe or explain. You're left as something happier and kinder than the "you" you began with, and "it" begins to live out of that new you, as a visible kindness."

This brings up Katie's view of ethics, which differs from the conventional view in some ways and which is, as far as I can tell, thoroughly consistent and grounded in a sort of Buddhist sense of unattached compassion, an unblurred, unsentimental vision of peace. My own vision has not arrived there yet, and I would like to experience it.

She says she has not had a negative thought in twenty years: they're all positive. In other words, the negative ones are positive too.

What if your plane crashes on the way home from the School, she surmised. “What is the worst that could happen? On the way down, you’ll be thinking.”

Toughness is one of her most evident and surprising qualities, and in this respect I think her own legend and her promotional materials (and two of the three book jacket photos) don’t do her justice. There is a tendency to think of her as a savante naïf who came out of nowhere after a gratuitous [revelation in 1986](#), having received her method in one stroke like Moses on the mountaintop, as if God had pressed his thumbprint upon her forehead. And there’s a side of her that seems to fit that description. After her awakening, she had to relearn many of the simplest acts of everyday social living. Her daughter had to instruct her not to go outside in pajamas. One day she walked into an unlocked house in her neighborhood and sat there, silently smiling, while the puzzled occupants walked around her, stared at her, and finally escorted her out. She would wander into the desert for sustained periods, and when she left her house in the morning, carrying no money or identification, her husband Paul would stick a piece of paper with her address on it into her pocket.

And the claim that she was not versed in psychology or religion is believable to me. At the school, she was unfamiliar with the terms “OCD” and “seasonal affective disorder” when students mentioned them.

Nevertheless, she is clearly a person of high intelligence, supremely poised and competent, worldly and untarnished. She is involved moment by moment with the backstage running of her school and other operations, an enormously complex task which, although refined over the years, is always evolving. A staff member told me this morning that the exercise handouts we received during the sessions were being revised by Katie and her chief assistant, Lesley, in response to the ongoing work of the students, minutes before being photocopied.

She reminds me a bit of [G. K. Chesterton](#)'s fictional detective, [Father Brown](#), the unassuming little priest who has seen everything and knows all the sins of the human race and unties people's knots by telling them startling things that should have been obvious. Except that Katie is at the same time her own fallen parishioner. Unlike Father Brown -- or what we see of him, anyhow -- Katie has untied her own knots in the most painstaking way. She told us that after her big 1986 awakening everything remained the same except that she knew her suffering was caused entirely by her thoughts. After that, the release from suffering took a year of constant self-questioning. She likes to say, "I don't call it The Work for nothing." And she makes clear that she developed her method and carried on decades of work in pursuit of her own salvation.

Katie seems ceaselessly energetic yet effortlessly still. When she led our opening meditation each morning, her live image, projected onto two screens flanking her, appeared to be a still photograph -- and then, a couple of minutes later, she would slightly adjust her position.

Such stillness in a person who went from the Barstow real estate market to...to wherever she is. The staffers I questioned for further insights into her personality couldn't help me, except to say that she seems to be exactly who she seems to be at any moment, and to be totally that and nothing else. What must it feel like to be that? Or to be married to her? (Hi, [Stephen](#)!)

I hope I will have many years to learn more.



May 01, 2007

Writer Without a Story: Some Things He Heard

I've been out of [School](#) for as much time as I was in it -- and are you still high, Richard? Well, when I'm tempted to answer No, I start laughing to myself.

And will he keep at it, will he make this Work his center of gravity for the rest of his life? Well, I did some this morning.

And what did I learn, finally? How will I be changed? I don't know how I will be changed, and to say what I've learned would take much more than just an hour or two's blogging time. So I'll take advantage of the casualness and slapdashedness and forgivingness of this form and instead of reams of justified pages, throw some handfuls of confetti at you all.

Here are some things I heard Katie say during those days and evenings. No attempt to be systematic or complete. I'm choosing ones that strike me right now. Statements within quotation marks are verbatim from my instantaneous notes of Katie's spoken words. Statements not in quotation marks are my paraphrases, as close as I can make them to the original, sometimes with my brief explanations.

A caveat: the following are merely ideas, comments. They are part of what made the School experience so powerful, along with the communion both silent and spoken. They are not [The Work](#) itself. The Work is done in solitude or with a partner, preferably on a sheet of paper. It is a confrontation with oneself.

The whole thing can be summed up as: Who would you be without...? Without your belief, your thought, your story.

What story are you running inside your head? Name it with a brief, basic, what Katie calls “first generation,” title. Give it a picture. Watch it fade out of the scene. Thank it for sharing its whole life with you.

“How could things be separate without names?” The things we’re naming don’t care -- or maybe they do, but they let us, they don’t mind.

“In the moment you believed you were [your name], you were born. You became a believer.”

“Without identification, mind cannot be anything. Mind has to identify with something to exist.... It has to attach as something to be, or it’s nothing.” Body is the reflection, effect, or voice of mind.

“Mind needs drama to stay identified as you. And mind is not you.”

All the things you notice about others are hallucinations, projections.

“Do you believe everything you think?”

Everyone has moments of clarity. Seize it. Find the thought that sends you away from it, and inquire into that.

“Where did you get that identity? From your parents or you? Never say anyone gave you anything. I gave it to me, so I have the power to question it, to get back to where I came from.... And I don’t have to lose this imaginary world -- it’s just not real.”

“I love your world, it’s a beautiful world, but do I believe it?”

“I’m a believer -- until I’m not.”

“Mind is not an enemy.... We’ve been fighting the enemy within,

forever." The goal is for all our thoughts to be our friends. No enemy within.

"If you want to see an alien, look in the mirror."

"You don't feel at home -- of course. You're defending what cannot be defended -- and we kill over it."

Einstein said that the only important question is, Is the universe friendly? "It is. No exceptions." There is nothing that is not grace. Any thought that argues with the friendly universe is felt as stress.

The true nature of everything is not just kind, not just good, but amazingly, love. And that is the last story. Any thought that believes otherwise is signaled as a feeling -- all of which are names for fear.

"If you think it's hell and you're taking the cap off it, let it fly, be a volcano. It couldn't be worse than what you've been living -- and if it is, let's test it."

"Have the courage not to be a big person."

"It's all remembered for you, you don't have to be the rememberer, the knower."

"You're a teacher and there's nothing you can do about it." You have no choice: you teach what you believe and that's what you leave after you. "That's reincarnation."

"Evil is a confused mind. Nothing worse than that has ever happened or will happen or could happen."

"When our family dies we don't like it because they're the ones who know our stories."

Feel hate and notice how the only thing happening was that you weren't getting what you wanted. If you hate, who feels it? It's

not economical. Imagine that energy channeled into the opposite.

You cannot harm another human being in your opinion without self-hatred being the result. You don't know you're experiencing self-hatred because your mind is justifying it. And no justification can save you.

"No thought, no world." Thought comes first, though we identify feeling first because it justifies thought.

Rage is an accumulation of thoughts. "Defense is the first act of war."

"All problems are imagined and that's very difficult to hear. I invite you not to believe me but to test it out."

"If you died and went to hell, the worst that could happen would be that you believed your thoughts."

"How loud does God have to get before I hear it?... Who needs God when you have your opinion?"

"You think you're the thinker? Thoughts *appear*. It's a happening."

"No one's attached to people and things. We get the one we want and then we don't want them anymore."

"It hurts not to care. Why do I care? Because it hurts not to."

"We become nicer people when we don't have the job of saving people."

Thoughts of inadequacy are universal. We overcompensate to prove our adequacy, but we don't believe it. Shadows underlie the things we think we are. But light drives out shadows. Inquiry (The Work) breaks the habitual pattern of seeking images to prove adequacy.

“I don't have a belief' is the first belief.”

“No one has ever been in the wrong place.”

“When you are positive that life is so good it can't possibly get better, it has to.”

“Enjoy your suffering. It may be the last suffering you ever experience.”

On giving: If you can give and not get found out, you begin to let ME out.

Making amends is not for masochism but for discovery.

“Authentic is the most natural thing to be.”

“The one who's free is the teacher in the house. And the one who's in pain is the teacher in the house. Freedom or pain: what are you teaching?”

“‘The rapist scared me.’ Is that absolutely true? If you can't question that, why are you here?”

“I have never met a mind that was not suicidal.”

“Make friends with the ordinary. Can you love it from here wherever you are?”

Open up to what is going on beyond what we believe is going on.

“No story, no world. Is 'no world' good? Well, that would be up to you. It's nothing serious, I can promise you that.”

“Depression is the effect of believing our thoughts.”

Which is better, not to have a thought at all or to love every

thought you think? "Let God play.... Loving our thoughts is letting God play."

"If you love everything you think and there are no new stressful thoughts, what are you going to hear when we talk?... Love."

"Keep it very simple and remember ultimately nothing is true."

Answering the question, When the body dies, does the mind continue? "No, it's all you.... Don't even try to get it. Just bathe.... Don't believe. Just open. Just open or not."

We're working toward God awareness, God realization.

When you notice a feeling, inquire: What story is my body reacting to? As you experience a feeling, list the prior thoughts. Notice how the mind attacks others and then begins to attack you, using pictures and concepts.

"Notice how busy [mind] is identifying as the one sitting. Notice how it's only about that."

"Before there are words you understand, there is no you.... It was my mother's story and I believed it."

"You believed, so you can unbelieve. Because the only thing that happened was that you believed."

"A life of suffering is the life of a believer."

"The true seeker gets very still."

Definition of The Work: "It's a way to identify and question the thoughts that cause all the suffering in the world."

Mind is cause, body is effect. "Body and pain are only symbols that take us into The Work."

"'My body is aging' - is that true?"

“Images are all you have of what’s not.”

Feelings are like a temple bell that says, you’re asleep! Wake up!

“We wonder why we’re tired. Our work doesn’t tire us, our thoughts exhaust us.”

“In my experience there is nothing more exciting than peace.... It’s so underrated. It’s got a bum rap.”

“‘I am awake’ -- are you sure?... Do you have to take credit for everything? Is there no room left over for God?... What’s beautiful about creation is that it’s beautiful. If you were God...wouldn’t you want to see yourself?... If you wanted to make sure that you didn’t miss it, what would you be? Everything.”

“When you’re the only thing in the universe, it gets interesting.”

[In the next post, what I, individually, got out of the School.]



May 04, 2007

Writer Without a Story: The End of Something

A man and a woman, or whatever combination you like, are sitting sipping mochas in the sleekest café in town. A conversation is in progress:

“My mother – “

“My father –“

“My ex-husband – “

“My ex-wife – “

“My childhood – “

“That’s so weird! My childhood too!”

“And those people I work with – “

“I know what you mean.”

“This is so great! We’ve been sitting here for fifteen minutes and I feel like I know you.”

“I feel that too.”

This is known as making a connection. We sit knee to knee and validate each other’s stories. Each other’s myths, projections, illusions. And so we make a pact. We vow to love, honor, and cherish each other’s stories until we find a more rapt audience.

This is what I don’t want to do anymore. It’s particularly relevant for me at this point because I’m starting to date after a long marriage. Very fine people, too. I’m still playing the game,

loving to swap stories, and more than ever, loving to listen.

You can't banish your stories. We carry them – no, they carry us – through life. And maybe “I won't settle for guarding the stories” is an additional story. But you can at least notice.

Notice how you can love someone whose story doesn't fit yours. You can love them just for having a story, no matter what it is. And love them for starting to leave the story behind despite how long they've sheltered it. Together you might watch your stories pass through your minds, watch them jump from mind to mind, and smilingly wave to them as they move across the screen and into the wings.

What would a relationship look like if it wasn't based on the partners' validating each other's stories? Maybe two people listening closely to reality. Maybe deep silence.

One of the things I learned at the School was that I can love people without regard to how much I think they resemble or complement me. During partner work, I deliberately tried to find people I wouldn't have chosen at first sight, people much older or younger than me, people I considered too beautiful or too plain, gays and lesbians, and people I had disliked at first sight for one shallow reason or another. Not only did I in every case find them to be wonderfully interesting and to make as much connection with me as anyone else did, but in many cases I found that the less like mine their life experiences had been the more I warmed to their souls, and in a strange way, the more I identified with them. I was finding what was underneath and what was constant. (I should make clear that I'm not ordinarily an opposites-attract kind of person. The people I'm attracted to, either sexually or as friends, have been the ones I've felt were most like me.) They were me in other costumes.

There was a brief moment of remorse, even horror, in this: the remorse of seeing that all the things I disliked about others were projections of what I feared or disliked in myself. The horror of seeing that many of the people I had been friends with or fought

with throughout my life had been hallucinations. The remorse was quickly drowned by joy – a novel experience in itself.

Yes, to spout a cliché, I found my joy at the School. For the past three weeks I've been going around grinning to myself, smiling at strangers, saying the extra thank you, carrying on the conversation for an extra moment, and importantly, doing the thing I want to: doing what my first impulse tells me, not overriding it with a second impulse.

There are beautiful parts of yourself you've kept hidden all your life simply because other people, who were hiding things of their own, belittled yours. Or only because you imagined they did. It wasn't so bad for the things you knew you were hiding; they were a secret treasure, a glowing jewel in a cave, which you could retreat to and sit near for light and warmth. But some you hadn't known were there at all, till you stumbled over them in the dark.

As you find them, the insincerity leaves your voice. Maybe because deep in the cave, the things you stumble into hurt more.

I'm a writer. If I don't have stories, what can I write? If I don't want to sustain others' stories or my own, what characters can I write about? Who would I be if my writing weren't a theater for the drama of grandiosity versus shame: How good is it, is it good enough, will they accept it, it's great! I'm great!, it's too good for them, oh no I was fooling myself and it's terrible....

Those characters of mine: just projections of me, a decades-long exercise in self-therapy of the most inefficient sort. Had I ever really created a character or a story? What would happen if I renounced the ratchety, whining machinery of "creative writing," if I renounced characterization, the endless round of reincarnation of my culture's types? What if I just waited for something to arise from the dark well?

As Katie says, Who knows? But here: as my characters become more unlike me, they need me more. If I'm writing a disguised

version of myself, or a composite of two people I know, I'm not creating anything that doesn't already exist more fully in real life. But if I'm truly creating a character, someone entirely new, then that person only exists in me. I am his birthplace, his native soil; I'm the only one who can bring him to life. Whether he ever makes it into the outside world or not, he exists as long as he's in here. I watch him pass across the stage, and we wave, and he thanks me for the only life he'll ever have. And I thank him for helping me be more people than I ever knew.



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