

“Existing Divided, Living Whole”

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“Jack Pines...are not lumber trees [and they] won’t win many beauty contests either.” Writes Douglas Wood in *Fawn Island*. “But to me this valiant old tree, solitary on its own rocky point, is as beautiful as a living thing can be...In the calligraphy of its shape against the sky is written strength of character and perseverance, survival of wind, drought, cold, heat, disease...In its silence it speaks of...wholeness...an integrity that comes from being what you are.”

But being what we are isn’t as easy for us human beings as it seems to be for the rest of nature. Our minds and expectations and relationships complicate what appears to be instinctive in the non-human animal world and the world of plants and mountains. T.S. Eliot writes, “Poetry may make us...a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves.”

Jonathon had made it. He was a partner in the investment firm, was making nearly a million dollars a year, was thought of by his co-workers as the “go-to guy”. He came in early and left the office late, never leaving anything that could be finished unfinished. He was respected, admired and maybe even feared a little.

Rebecca loved being a housewife and mother. She was up before the sun most days even in the summer time, made sure the house was spotless and the kids were fed, dressed and off to school or camp with time to spare. She belonged to the PTA, was a driver for meals on wheels and chaired her church’s craft fair each year.

Samantha always got a thrill when she got what she wanted. It never bothered her that others went without so that she could have, all that mattered was she got what she

wanted. She had the perfect job, lived in the greatest apartment and had no responsibilities except to herself. She traveled the world, ate in the best restaurants, wore the most beautiful clothes and went to all the hottest parties with all the hottest people.

Fred was a passionate guy. Passionate about saving the environment, protecting endangered species, feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. He volunteered nearly every weekend at the soup kitchen across town, the animal rescue shelter two towns over and passed out flyers at subway stops with information about global warming. He marched on Washington at least three times a year carrying banners that called for justice.

All these people appear to be living the lives they want. Each one has found something that gives their lives pleasure and meaning. Maybe they would even say that they are happy. But are they? Are they living full lives?

What we don't see is what goes on in their heads, in their hearts, in their souls. We look at people whose lives are clearly going better than ours and attribute that to their skills and abilities. That somehow they have got it together. But do they?

Jonathon, the investment firm partner, suffers regular anxiety attacks and high blood pressure. He goes to the office early and stays late not out of ambition or drive, but because he is afraid. He is afraid that if he doesn't offer 110% all the time he will be found out as a fraud. Jonathon believes he's gotten where he is by sheer luck and the persistence to cover all the bases so no one knows how little he really knows, no matter his many actual accomplishments and credentials.

Rebecca, the mom and housewife, wrestles with severe depression. She is desperate to care for everyone around her so well and completely that they don't notice

what a bad person she fears she is. She is afraid that the sadness she lives with will consume her if she stops being “Super Mom”.

Samantha, the traveling saleswoman, never stops attempting to satisfy herself with belongings and parties and trips so that she never has to notice that she is profoundly alone. That she is afraid of people, afraid of not being liked, of not fitting in.

Fred who is trying desperately to save the world single-handed doesn't stop saving others to realize that he is afraid that all his efforts, noble though they may be, won't change much. He is afraid that if he were not always working to help others that he would be considered narcissistic and selfish.

The trouble is that these four people are living lives of fear and lives governed by pain of the past or in anticipation of suffering in the future. So aren't we all in some way or another. We all carry wounds with us throughout our living, they may be of abuse or disappointment, injury or illness. And every time we don't follow that small voice inside, that we dismiss our intuition, that we disregard our own selves as worthy and beloved we are living out whatever our particular fears may be.

Parker Palmer writes of such living in his book *A Hidden Wholeness*. He writes that most of us live divided lives. That we do not live in a manner that reflects our true selves, our authentic beings, but rather live the roles our experiences and relationships have demanded. But Palmer believes that we cannot keep up this denial of self forever without consequences. He says that over time we are bound to feel as though something is missing, something is lacking, and something is not quite right in our lives.

“Midway on life's journey,” writes Dante in his *Divine Comedy*,

“I found myself

In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
About those woods is hard – so tangled and rough

And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
And yet, to treat the good I found there as well

I'll tell what I saw..."

Maybe you have been to such a place in your life, maybe you are just now coming upon it or maybe you will come to it sometime in the future. It appears to be inevitable that the right road shall be lost to us at some moment in our living. Dante's journey begins in the wilderness with wild creatures that threaten his very existence and leads him through the many levels of Hell into Purgatory and finally into the glorious city of Heaven where for a moment he looks upon the light of God. Our journeys may not be so cosmic, but in the moments of our lives that we come face to face with our fears, discovering that we have lost our way it may very well be hell that we enter and heaven we hope to reach.

No matter what sets us off the right road we seek to find it again. But what we are really seeking is wholeness. A sense that we are living rightly, that we live authentically and true to who we are and wish to become. The problem is that wholeness and right living have been idealized to such a degree that to achieve them is nigh impossible and unlikely.

“Our generation is in the grip of a hunger for experience, and of a desire to live at a deeper level.” writes André Louf in *The Cistercian Way*, “In order to appease this, believer (and here he is referring to Christianity) and unbeliever alike have sought new spiritual techniques and new life-styles. In many respects this situation is promising. Those who believe in nothing beyond what they can see often have a deep and painful feeling that the world in which they live condemns them, despite material progress, to exist on the surface of things. They feel that unless they can find something deeper, they will be forever doomed to a life that is superficial.

“But those who believe in the things of the spirit are also haunted by the same search.”

The arena of spirituality and religion has created a business out of the process of discovering one’s true self. You can find any number of books and audio CDs and seminars to help you find your true self in 7 easy-to-follow steps. We are offered an image of a contented, almost angelic, radiant self. One who is untouched and unbothered by such lowly things as paying bills or cleaning house. The image perpetuated is one of a magic spell that comes over us and instantaneously transforms us into someone completely different than who we are now and this new self is our TRUE self with a capital ‘T’.

It is not as easy as simply wishing to be other than we are. The struggle to know ourselves deeply and live as that person is complicated and messy and sometimes even painful. To hold ourselves in comparison to this image of perfection is as much of a lie as believing that tending to only one aspect of our lives will bring us happiness. Perfection is a false ideal if we believe it to be the existing of a self without faults or flaw, free from wrongdoing or the ability to make mistakes. Perfection really is the state of being in

which we are most ourselves... “us,” only more so. The journey to wholeness is one not of self-fulfillment, but self-realization; an opening of the soul rather than the creating of something entirely new.

We have also idealized those whose vocations are that of a spiritual life. Religious leaders and persons we deem Holy are seen as above humanity. The idea that those who choose religious life as a means to living a life of wholeness, especially those who are leaders of religious organizations like the Dalai Lama or the Pope, are somehow removed from the rest of us. In some ways that is true, but it is not as though they become less human. It is not as if in becoming our whole selves we transcend our humanity. On the contrary, in becoming our whole selves we become more closely and deeply human. “The road to the sacred leads through the secular,” writes Abraham Heschel. The road to our divinity and our wholeness leads through our embodied being. We must not deny our natural existence in order to become our essential selves.

There is a Buddhist story that tells of a student struggling with his meditation practice and believing himself to be failing at it. He goes to his master and asks, “What am I doing wrong?”

“You are trying to create anew what needs cleaning.” Answers the master.

“I don’t understand!” responds the student with exasperation.

“You see,” the master replies, “the human soul is like that of a lit lamp, though one with years of dust having settled upon it. So much dust in fact that the light is not perceptible. It is not the task to create a new lamp, but to carefully clean the lamp that already exists so that its light becomes visible.”

Our task is not to create new selves, but realize and uncover the selves we are already. We don’t become something new in actualizing our true selves, but rather

something more. "...We reach for integration," continues Palmer, "by reordering our onstage [public] lives around our backstage [private] values and beliefs...I want my inner truth to be the plumb line for the choices I make about my life – about the work I do and how I do it, about the relationships I enter into and how I conduct them." This is what is involved in living as a whole self. Allowing that which is innermost us, to guide and to influence that which is known and visible to all.

There is an activity that I have seen used at countless gatherings where we are supposed to become more acquainted with ourselves. You are given an ordinary brown paper lunch bag and the task is to use the provided materials, usually magazines and newspapers, and decorate the outside of the brown bag with images and words that best describe your public persona. Then you are to comb the magazines once again to find images and words that best represent your private self, the parts of you that you keep hidden from others. These you are meant to place on the inside of the bag. Once all this is done the group shares what is on the outside of the bag. Never I have I seen this exercise done where anyone was invited to share anything of what went on the inside of one's bag - perpetuating that all things inner are to remain private and secluded. Of course there are pieces of our lives and identities that should not be shared openly except with those whom we trust, but are there not elements of those inner selves that are safe to share, that the risk isn't too great? I would hope so.

Palmer suggests another technique, another analogy instead, A Möbius strip. It is a form in which the inner plane twists to become the outer and at the same point the outer plane becomes the inner. Take a ribbon, bring the two ends together, twist one end a half turn and attach the ends to each other. If you were to trace what seems to be the outside of the ribbon you would soon discover that the outside of the ribbon has seamlessly

become the inside and then again becomes the outside as you continue to move along it. Palmer contends that we are living on the Möbius strip whether we realize it or not, “We are constantly engaged in a seamless exchange between whatever is ‘out there’ and whatever is ‘in here’...”

The struggle is to find a balance and a peace with the journey along the Möbius strip; to understand what of our inner being is connecting with the world and what of the world is in turn affecting our inner selves. In the balance we learn to live our authentic selves, to not be afraid of the inner life, to finally penetrate to the parts of ourselves that we have long evaded and allow those elements of self to engage with the outer world. The task of living an undivided life is to honor our souls, attend to all of our being and to, as T.S. Eliot writes, “not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”